BECOMING COMPETENT INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL WORKERS: LEARNING JOURNEYS OF INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL WORK FIELD PLACEMENTS (ISWFP) FROM HONG KONG STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

With globalization, discussion concerning international social work increases. Educators are initiating an international perspective into professional curricula (Healy, 1986; Pettys et al., 2005). ISWFP allow students to learn about the implications of culture and widen their horizons for local practice and work in other countries (Boyle et al., 1999; Pawar et al., 2004; Webber, 2005). This study explores the learning process and derives essential ISWFP elements which contribute towards the development of competent international social worker. Five core dimensions namely values, skills, knowledge, personal qualities and culture are identified through a Grounded Theory Approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Theoretical sampling was adopted to recruit eight social workers who graduated from three different universities in Hong Kong and had participated in ISWFP and semi-structured interviews were conducted. Countries provided for ISWFP include China, Canada, Japan and the United Kingdom. Major findings were that students had positive learning experiences which supported them in becoming competent international social workers from three perspectives. Firstly, participants’ worldviews and understanding of human and culture diversity were broadened. They became more aware of their own cultural heritage and this developed their cultural competence in working with people from different cultures. Secondly, participants reflected on and learnt to perceive the value domain, such as social justice and equality which are the roots of social work. These gains had made ongoing impact on their current practice. Thirdly, participants expressed an increase in personal qualities domain, such as reflectivity and maturity. These findings can contribute to the design, teaching and learning experiences to be planned in ISWFP.

Keywords: international social work field placement, competent international social worker, cultural competence, grounded theory

1. Introduction

An era of globalization, interconnectedness and interdependence affects many aspects of human life. Issues arising from an economic tsunami, or from an infectious disease such as SARS, cannot be solved by one state or one country alone. To tackle such changes, social workers are coming to believe that they may need to develop their global role to that of “global citizen”.

According to Healy (2001) the development of international social work can
be traced back to 1928, when Egalantyne Jebb from London delivered a paper at the First International Conference of Social Work. Stressing the “professional responsibility of social work educators”, Healy refers to a statement made in 1965 supporting the rationale for introducing international content into social work education. Since 1996, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) in the USA have placed a major emphasis on social work practice informed by cultural competence. One of the content areas for inclusion within an international curriculum is that of field education (Boyle, Nackerud, & Kilpatrick, 1999; Reisch & Rohde, 2000).

In view of this, international placements are seen to provide a potential platform for students to widen their horizons as to the implications of culture for both local practice and work in other countries (Boyle et al., 1999; Pawar et al., 2004; Webber, 2005). Many social work programs in western countries, such as the USA, the UK, Canada, and Australia, have implemented international placements for over twenty years (Noble, 2003; Pettys et al., 2005). In sum, globalization is creating an impact on social work and the role of social workers and there may now be a need for education in social work which incorporates international perspectives.

2. Social Work Education in Hong Kong

Western countries have influenced the development of social work education in Hong Kong since the 1950s. Gingerich et al. (1999) stressed design of competency-based curricula since the 1980s. In Hong Kong, most social work programs have adopted the competency-based model with the mission of training social work students as competent social workers.

Social work education in Hong Kong increasingly stresses an international perspective. At present five universities provide International Social Work Field Placements (ISWFP) of two differing types. The first type takes place in developed countries such as Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom which have a longer history of professional social work services than Hong Kong. The second type is in Mainland China where the development of social services is relatively behind that of Hong Kong. Some social work programs have highlighted that students benefit from such exposure and that an ISWFP contributes to personal and professional growth.

The University of Hong Kong first provided social work field placements in China and overseas countries in 1986 and 1997 respectively. At present, it is estimated that more than 500 students from five universities in Hong Kong have participated in an ISWFP.

3. Learning Theories of Field Placements

Goldstein (2001, p.21), stated that “learning is a process involving a particular environment and a particular purpose”. He further elaborated four interrelated dimensions of learning: the learner, the learning content, the learning context, and the purpose of learning. Putting theory into practice is considered an integral part of social work training during any fieldwork practicum. “A fieldwork practicum is basically a kind of experiential learning, and it is essentially a developmental process” (Chui, 2005, p.46).

In the literature discussing learning from international fieldwork practice, central themes relate to culture, cultural sensitivity, and cultural competence. Most
studies support the notion that when social work students are exposed to cross-cultural experiences they develop cultural competence. When considering how competencies might be acquired, the learning model most frequently cited is Kolb’s Experiential Learning Model (1984). Kolb’s model (1984) aligns with Brookfield’s concept of Critical Thinking (1987) which is relevant to understanding the acquisition of competency from field practice in different cultural backgrounds and the process of transforming social work students into competent social workers.

Goldstein (2001) discussed Experiential Learning as a foundation for critical analysis and discourse. It is a higher order of professional thinking that can be called critical reflection and analysis, and concerns both an external problem and the inner moral beliefs and ideologies of the learners. Experiential learning focuses on the learner’s involvement during the process while critical thinking facilitates him/her to learn step-by-step through reasoning, which is essential for the integration of experience and the consolidation of knowledge.

4. Characteristics of the Experiential Learning Model

Kolb (1984, p.96) defined Experiential Learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience”. In other words, experience is the vehicle for acquiring real knowledge. He suggested that learning is a continuous process grounded in experience, which involves transactions between the person and the environment. The learning cycle consists of four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Thus, learning experience and knowledge formation are an on-going circular process.

The learning process begins with a concrete experience, a real-life event, or problem that brings out one’s curiosity causing questions which illuminate concepts, principles, or generalizations. Within the reflective observation stage, questions guide the ongoing process of learning. Reconceptualization of reality at this stage can help to unfold in many ways beyond the mere presentation of deductive information. During the stage of abstract conceptualization, concepts or theories are integrated into the mind of the learner creating new knowledge. The learner is required to synthesize and apply what has been learned in the last stage, a process of active experimentation. Although the processes of learning are presented here in a logical sequence, in real-life learning can be initiated at any stage. This model is student focused and emphasizes the importance of learning from direct experience through a reflective process has been widely adopted in social work education in various places, such as the USA (Estes, 2004) and Hong Kong (Fan, et al., 2005).

5. Characteristics of Critical Thinking

In general, it is assumed that critical thinking and learning are interrelated, but different theories of critical thinking may lead to different perspectives towards learning. Mason (2001) summarized the views on this subject from some leading education theorists as skills of critical reasoning; a disposition in the sense of a critical attitude or a moral orientation; and substantial knowledge of the concepts in critical thinking or of a particular discipline. In addition, Brookfield (1987) further elaborated the development of critical thinking into five steps which include both knowledge and skills elements: trigger event, appraisal, exploration, development of alternative perspectives, and integration.

For the purpose of this study Brookfield’s (1987) five steps of developing
critical thinking were adopted. In the first step, the “trigger event”, an individual experiences anxiety in his/her context. This anxiety can be a positive or negative trigger; a satisfactory or a painful experience. A person’s unique character has to be taken into consideration as this may affect perception and experience of the trigger event. In the second step, “problem definition or appraisal”, an individual has to explore the underlying issues of the problem that was initiated by the trigger. Contextual analysis using knowledge to understand the problem or situation is important. Given some basic understanding of the problem the individual will proceed to step 3, “experimentation or exploration”. This stage requires advanced knowledge and the ability to identify all possible information and examine relevant information. At step 4, “development of alternatives”, the individual will propose alternative explanatory models or generate various hypotheses. This may be described as the stage of “creative thinking”. The final step, “integration”, sees the protagonist gaining a more thorough understanding of the situation, both internally and externally, i.e. of himself or herself and the incoming information. Thus, critical thinking, analysis, and discourse are needed to advance the learner’s experience and knowledge.


It is possible to consider the framework for understanding the learning process of social work students who participated in international field placements and are now practicing social workers in three time-defined phases: 1) The Beginning Phase – this concerns the learner, the personal self of the social work student; 2) The International Field Placement Phase – this concerns learning in different contexts and through different processes; and 3) The Professional Competency Phase - becoming a Competent Social Worker. Integrated Learning Process of ISWFP (Figure 1) illustrates the processes of learning to become a competent international social worker.
Figure 1: Integrated Learning Process of ISWFP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Work Student (Hong Kong Context)</th>
<th>China / Overseas Countries (Non-local Context)</th>
<th>Competent International Social Worker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Local culture (Dominant Chinese Culture)</td>
<td>1. Experience of critical incidents</td>
<td>1. Values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Personal background and values</td>
<td>2. Define problems with knowledge</td>
<td>2. Skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Social work education (Curriculum and local field placement)</td>
<td>3. Reflections from a variety of perspectives</td>
<td>3. Knowledge</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5. Integration and consolidation</td>
<td>5. Cultural Competence</td>
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<td></td>
<td>6. Practice in a new situation</td>
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Social work students who participated in an ISWFP had a high level of motivation for learning and are therefore believed to play an active role. “Experience of critical incidents” during the first phase highlight specific incidents that trigger students. Cultural differences between overseas countries and Hong Kong may lead to various types of positive or negative experiences. A greater challenge to personal disposition or beliefs will lead to a stronger trigger. Such incidents may form a good start motivating students towards cultural awareness and sensitivity. Following a critical event students are motivated to explore the second phase: “Define Problems with Knowledge”. A student who is not confident in understanding a situation, or faces a personal dilemma, may search for knowledge and skills from both macro and micro perspectives to analyze more about the overseas setting. In order to distinguish bias from fact, in phase 3 students are encouraged to “Reflections from a variety of perspectives” using both general and specific knowledge from the situation. They try to form all possible principles or perspectives based on their experience and reflection with the support from knowledge of the specific discipline, such as culture and social work. To make creative solutions possible, when the student has gained a certain level of knowledge and can understand problems from different perspectives, he/she has to strengthen rational decision making processes at phase 4, “Generalization concerning alternatives”. The supervisor’s cultural background and teaching methods may help the student become a lateral thinker. Armed with possible solutions the student has still to enter phase 5, “Integration and consolidation” allowing the student’s new experience to lead to a new perspective of reasoning where knowledge building includes cognitive, emotional, behavioral, moral, and cultural elements. The last phase, “Practice in a new situation”, further examines what the student has learned and tried to put into practice in a new context. The new context may directly refer to the other field practicum or may have an impact on the student’s practice as a social worker. The cycle continues and this new practice will constitute a trigger for experiencing further critical incidents.

In the context of an ISWFP, the integrated processes described above delineate how students integrate their learning through their new experiences supported by rational thinking in order to consolidate their knowledge and practice in new contexts.

7. A Competent International Social Worker

How is it that an ISWFP has come to be considered as one of the means for achieving the objective of equipping students from Hong Kong to become competent international social workers? “A global perspective with cultural practice wisdom” may imply that a competent international social worker should have the cultural sensitivity to understand the issues of that context well while viewing the issues from an international perspective. For the practice level, the social worker is able to reflect on his/her own culture and be capable of serving the service users who share the same or different cultures.

For the purposes of this study, the five core domains of a competent international social worker are: values, knowledge, skills, personal qualities, and cultural competence. For the dimension concerning values, two types of values are highlighted in the National Association of Social Workers’ Code of Ethics: personal values and guidelines for professional values. Social work values focus on “a commitment to human welfare, social justice, and individual dignity (Cox & Pawar, 2006, p.41). Secondly, with regard to knowledge, a wide range of information must be studied to provide an eclectic knowledge base. This should include ecological perspectives on life, social sciences, economics, and research, since these subjects help social workers gain a thorough understanding of the basis of human social problems. Practice theories are useful for social workers to devise intervention goals and strategies. Third, a competent social worker must have a wide range of skills. These include assessment and intervention techniques for application within micro,
mezzo and macro systems. Three levels of practice, with cases, groups, and communities, are commonly undertaken in social work. Fourth, there are several personal qualities or characteristics of a social worker, such as, genuineness, independence, and commitment. Self-reflection is important to further enhance knowledge and practice competence and to be more critical in doing and thinking. Fifth, Lum’s (1999) proposed model of competence includes four levels of social work competency. These are: cultural awareness, knowledge acquisition, skill development, and inductive learning.

Most designs for implementation and evaluation of social work education also refer to the first four core domains of a competent social worker. Recently, under the impact of globalization, the cultural domain is viewed as increasingly important for international social work. In this study, the cultural domain has been explored to see whether and how culture plays a role in building a competent social worker. Based on the previous literature on culture and the competent social worker, the competent international social worker could be described as a social worker who shows enhanced acquired knowledge, has developed a range of practice options, consolidated professional attitudes, increased self-understanding and mature personality, increased cultural sensitivity and the ability to work well in both local and international contexts. With these conceptual tools for understanding a competent international social worker, this research embarks on studying the learning process of a social work student on the path to becoming a competent international social worker.

8. Methodology

8.1 Informed by the Grounded Theory Approach
The study was based on qualitative methodology, an approach characterized by openness and flexibility which “permits us to explore diversities in cultural and personal beliefs, values, ideas, and experiences” (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995, p.90). In addition, this research was informed by the Grounded Theory Approach originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and later enriched and modified by many subsequent researchers. By drawing on major concepts from learning theories and together with cultural competency models for social workers, this study formulates a conceptual framework for understanding how social workers become competent through international field placements.

8.2 Data Collection Process and Analysis
Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) demonstrated that grounded theory procedures can be systematic. In order to generate theory through an inductive emergent approach founders have proposed the following major strategies: 1) theoretical sampling, 2) step-wise data collection, 3) constant comparison analysis method, and 4) writing the theory.

Creswell (2007) noted that theoretical sampling forms a kind of data collection for grounded theory research. The researcher selected a sample of individuals to study based on certain contributions to the development of the theory. Three types of interviewees are social work graduates, field placement supervisors and coordinators. The student-centered focus of learning in this study drew the researcher to contact social work graduates for the first stage of interviewing.

The focus of this paper is on the learning experiences of eight graduates from three different universities in Hong Kong. They were interviewed between 2011 and 2012. Each had participated in a field placement in China or overseas in partial fulfillment for a social work program. Three were enrolled in a Master of Social Work Program, three in a Bachelor of Social Work Program and two in an Associate Degree in Social Work. Each ISWFP lasted approximately ten weeks during the summer. Three students completed their ISWFP in China, three in Canada, one in the United Kingdom and one in Japan. At the time of interview, all had become registered social workers. One is working in Singapore while seven are practicing
The researcher followed an interview guide and conducted semi-structured interviews ranging in length from 1.5 to 2 hours. For the graduates, the focus was to understand the learning process they had undergone as a result of an international field placement they had taken in the role of student worker and their perceptions as to the domains of a competent international social worker. Two clerical team members undertook transcription in two stages to ensure quality and accuracy. The researcher was then responsible for final checking and for all coding and categorization processes using NVivo (Version 9).

The analysis of data proceeded in stages. The researcher analyzed the scripts line by line. Using open coding and axial codings, the data were presented using a coding paradigm in which the researcher identified a central phenomenon and wrote a “story line” connecting categories. For example, during open coding of learning elements, these were grouped into sub-categories of phases of learning, which further moved up into a 6-phase circular process of integrated learning.

Through the constant comparative analysis method, incidents were compared against other incidents during the interview and in the analysis. For instance, a theme about the influence of Chinese culture on social work practice was brought up by the first interviewee who was born in China. This was then used as a factor for consistent comparison. Interviewees born in China were probed directly and indirectly about their experiences and understanding of social work as learnt from Hong Kong and in international contexts. As a substantive concept, the cultural competence domain was formulated as a preliminary sub-category.

The researcher will conclude by writing up the integrated learning process at a substantive-level, explaining the phenomenon experienced by social workers whose professional education had included a China/overseas practicum experience. At this initial stage of the study, the proposed 6-phase of circular learning process (Figure 1) referring to both the Experiential Learning Model and Critical Thinking development has been adopted as a framework for understanding learning from the experience of something new, through the enhancement of cognitive understanding, and on to the generation of alternatives to practice in a new situation. Again, this early stage of study tentatively considers the formation of the five core domains: values, skills, knowledge, personal qualities and cultural competence which contribute to a competent international social worker.

9. Findings

9.1 Integrated Learning within an ISWFP
9.1.1 The Pre-placement Stage

The most frequent reason given for choosing an ISWFP is that students would like to experience something different from Hong Kong. On the one hand they would like to gain new experiences but they would like these linked in some way with their personal backgrounds. For example, two interviewees, B and F, were born in China and may have tended to choose a placement in China in order to “contribute to” social service development in their motherland. Interviewees A and C had had study experiences in Vancouver and Japan respectively, they sought to return to places with which they were familiar. All interviewees showed a high level of motivation for participating in an ISWFP and this formed a core foundation for each of their learning processes.
9.1.2 Experiences of Critical Incidents
Several types of critical incident caused interviewees to experience “adaptive anxiety”. Shulman (2004) considers these as positive factors in student learning. Interviewee D felt insecure when she learnt she would be placed in a homestay environment with people from various backgrounds. She recalled that,

The man (a dark skinned person) had not behaved in any way inappropriately towards me … but I automatically associated him with violent behaviors. After a few days I reflected that my stereotyped reaction might have been built up through media depictions. I hadn’t been prepared to meet people of color instead of white people when I first came to Canada. D – Placement in Vancouver

All interviewees shared that new experiences which were different from their understanding and experiences from Hong Kong, served as starting points to trigger thinking more about themselves, their knowledge and the roles of the social worker.

9.1.3 Define Problems with Knowledge
Students undertaking a field placement in a new environment found that knowledge from both macro and micro levels was useful for understanding new situations. Interviewee G stated that he gained a deeper understanding about the values of both welfare systems when he worked in an agency which was a joint venture between an NGO in Hong Kong and a government department in China. He recalled that,

I don’t have any cultural adjustment problems with daily practice. However I found that some of the government officials of the neighbourhood service provisions act as a kind of “political means” which helped them to show off their good job. … They were very bureaucratic. I found it difficult to tune in to this top-down and dominating culture. In making a comparison, Hong Kong is still “services oriented” while China was “administrative oriented”. This draws me to read, to explore and to understand the rationales of welfare systems between China and Hong Kong. G – Placement in China

9.1.4 Reflections from a Variety of Perspectives
Interviewees typically mentioned that one of the privileges of taking an ISWFP was that they learnt a lot from people from various cultures and that these interactions helped breakthrough their linear type of thinking and they could be more reflective and creative. Among these fieldwork supervisors played especially important roles by helping students reflect from a variety of perspectives. Interviewee A who was having a placement in Canada discussed the impact of supervision from two supervisors with different cultural backgrounds, one a Hong Kong immigrant and one Canadian-Chinese, both taught her specific types of thinking methods and skills which impressed her very much. She shared that,

I watched a Middle Eastern woman who brought a little girl to join the English group in our Centre. She scolded the little girl calling her a dummy and even threatened her. I observed that the little girl was very upset and I worried that she was not treated well at home. … From my gut feelings, I tended to stop her directly. Fortunately, my supervisors searched out relevant information and discussed the situation with me from various perspectives, the child protection law in Canada, the traditional cultural practices of service users, and the intervention skills of social workers. …This helped me to think more about culture and the roles of social workers under the influence of Canadian culture. A – Placement in Canada
9.1.5 Generalization Concerning Alternatives
Interviewees agreed that when in a different cultural context it was important for them to have a rational decision making process when seeking possible solutions instead of taking things for granted. B had originally believed that women in China have a traditional mindset towards marriage and gender, thus it was very challenging for him, a male worker, to lead a single mother’s group. He shared that,

Group members who were single mothers came with an open mind. They welcomed single fathers into the group and accepted a group member’s boyfriend who sat in on a group session. Such attitudes were totally new to me. … What I had learned about group work had emphasized confidentiality, similarity of membership, gender identification of the worker and members, but all these characteristics came to be perceived differently from this group of single mothers. First, I really questioned myself about my knowledge and experience. Then, I tend to think rationally about the alternative solutions. Finally, I accept that the group might work out fine if members came to a consensus. I just had to learn to open up myself in that context. B – Placement in China

9.1.6 Integration and Consolidation
Interviewees commonly expressed the notion of having “more space” within an ISWFP, in both a physical sense and at a personal level, and that this helped them gain better integration and consolidation of experiences and knowledge. Interviewee F who worked in a residential setting for wandering children, most of the orphans without family care, shared that,

On a site visit to a wilderness camp, as I lay gazing at the stars my thoughts turned more and more to myself and my relationships with family members. The environment in China provided a space for reflection which was different from my busy city life in Hong Kong. Following this I wrote my first letter and sent home photos, which I had never done before. I explicitly expressed care for my father, who was serious and stubborn, and asked him “to eat more rice”. I still keep these documents and treasure that moment of reflection. … I believe these experiences have made me more conscious of exploring family issues in my case work interventions with the young people I now work with. F – Placement in China

Interviewee F showed how a cognitive question “What is a family?” started a process of reflection which consolidated both emotional and behavioral elements of his understanding of the importance of family.

9.1.7 Practice in a New Situation
All interviewees agreed that their learning from their ISWFP did not end at their final evaluation assessment. Seeds had been sown which blossomed throughout their on-going learning process. During practice through placements and at work, given the right environment, these learning elements still sparkle for them. Interviewee C’s knowledge transfer came out very naturally. He stated that he gained important perspectives towards working with people with HIV, the same target group with whom he now works,

I believe I now know more about casework intervention – how to pace with a service user and be a companion. I reflected on the notion that pacing time with the service user is more important than efficiency, as highlighted in HK social services. … I also learnt how to balance social work elements and fun. I observed that social work in HK is overly conscious of social work elements, I interpreted this positively as something people can change. In Japan I had been impressed that people could think of various funny things when approaching potential targets. Thus, I’m now thinking of how these two approaches can be mixed
As concerns “Person in the situation”, when social work students are exposed to a context offering different types of cultures, the stimulating learning environment allows them to experience various types of critical incidents. Thus, six phases form a circular process of learning – an on-going integrated learning process which contributes to the development of a competent international social worker.

9.2 Contributions to the Formation of a Competent International Social Worker

The five major domains of a competent social worker can be defined as: values, skills, knowledge, personal qualities, and cultural competence. Students with experience from an ISWFP integrated such learning journeys into the foundation for becoming a competent international social worker. Interviewees currently employed as a social worker stated that, when in similar contexts, with similar service users or challenges to their values, some of their learning from their ISWFP might sparkle within their work setting. Thus, to a certain extent, the ISWFP contributed to their becoming a competent international social worker. Within the short duration of an ISWFP, interviewees stated that the greatest extent of learning centered on the domains of cultural competence, social work values and personal qualities.

9.2.1 Cultural Competence

Interviewees who serve people from different cultures in their present workplace expressed the belief that they tend to have a higher level of cultural sensitivity as a result of their experiences from overseas placement. Thus, it appears they are in the process of cultural awareness, knowledge acquisition, and skill development in attaining cultural competence (Lum, 1999). Interviewees stated that their reflection and cultural sensitivity depended on the influence of personal cultural background and cultural exposure. Moreover, their linguistic skill in speaking both the language of the service users and the official language of the country was found to be an important tool for becoming culturally sensitive and practicing in a culturally competent manner. Interviewee D who had placement in Canada shared a similar cultural background to that of elderly Chinese people living in a western country. D learnt to act as a “bridge”, bringing the elderly people of Chinese heritage together with younger English speaking people. She shared that,

At an intergenerational program, one young Canadian said “they (the old people) are going to die”. I interrupted and said “You cannot say that” because talking about death is taboo for most elderly Chinese people. The youth replied that “They are really going to die”. As a student worker of Chinese origin, I was very careful not to translate exactly the same wording to the elderly Chinese service users and reframed that phrases. I faced the dilemma between what is culture and what is fact. Sensitivity in cultural practice helped me to take up the role of moderator and avoid conflicts by facilitating the need to express “facts” in a more culturally acceptable way. D – Placement in Canada

9.2.2 The Domain of Values

Interviewees observed that their learning concerning social work values came mainly through experiences arising during service delivery, observing the attitudes of fellow workers, and learning about the rationale of a new social welfare system. Interviewee E, who works with a marginalized group in housing services in Hong Kong remarked that,

I might have forgotten many factual events but not the core values which I experienced. I still keep this sheet “Code of Ethics of the British Association of
Social Workers” on my work desk as a reminder, especially when I’m miserable, on what I’m doing? These values were deeply rooted into my heart. The five key principles: human dignity and worth, social justice, service which can create a fairer society, and integrity with competence. To me, good attitudes are the core element for a competent social worker. E – Placement in UK

9.2.3 Personal Qualities
Interviewees learnt more about their personal qualities from experiences in a new cultural context. This process of self-understanding could lead them to realize their own culture, commitment and passion for social services. Also, interviewees stated that they experienced independence both in their daily life and within their fieldwork practicum. Learning to observe their personal qualities also enhanced the professional growth of interviewees. Interviewee H stated that,

I experienced working more independently in a new place. Working in Canada, a multi-cultural country, increased my sense of appreciation and acceptance. I saw a very beautiful picture - people from different cultures joint together in my mass program. This further strengthened my commitment to social services. H – Placement in Canada

10. Discussion

10.1 Implications for an international social work field placement
This article has been an attempt to propose six phases of integrated learning in order to understand the processes of learning which take place during an overseas field placement. Taken together, these phases could form an integrated learning process combining Experiential Learning Approach and theory of Critical Thinking which could apply to social work students in Mainland China and overseas field placements. Various cultural backgrounds create situations in which critical incidents happen naturally. Starting from experiences which create anxiety, each student progresses towards integration of cognitive thinking concerning knowledge and analysis, incorporates emotional responses through personal reflection, and redefines appropriateness of practice with increased cultural sensitivity.

10.2 Implications for social work education
Incorporating an international social work field placement is only one of the practicum designs which aim to widen the international perspective which students can gain from social work curriculum. During analysis of interviewee texts discussion recurred of five major domains, cultural competence, values, personal qualities, knowledge and skills. Viewed within a sequence of learning processes it is apparent that each domain contains implications for the development of competent international social workers. The educational benefits outlined suggest that exposure to an international context may come to be considered as an essential component in social work training.

11. Conclusion and Recommendation

Contextual learning takes place when a student encounters a different culture and this helps to widen a social work student’s world views. It is proposed that within an ISWFP a circular learning approach integrates learning and develops the foundation from which students progress to become competent international social workers in ensuing professional life.

Future study will explore views from supervisors who play roles as teachers, supporters and assessors, and from fieldwork coordinators who are administrators and liaison people on fieldwork issues. Viewpoints of both are needed as such work will add to a
comprehensive understanding of integrated learning and teaching processes. It will also be important to study how knowledge is transferred from fieldwork to workplace. Details and turning points within the learning process can be investigated through a longitudinal study of the entire ISWFP, and finally it will be important to determine how various domains contribute to the development of a competent international social worker.

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