

Practice Reflection

Working with Chinese social work students: Useful concepts and support strategies

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ABSTRACT

Preparation of students for their first field placement in social work is a complex task and is potentially daunting for students. Chinese social work students raised outside New Zealand face additional challenges. Two key areas of challenge are understanding nuanced social expectations and expressions, and making sense of context.

This article draws on academic and practice knowledge, a recent thesis, and several years of experience working with Chinese students as university field education coordinators to address these challenges. We examine our current understandings and share responses crafted to support Chinese students, especially those newly arrived to New Zealand. We offer a specific strategy that involves setting up a self-support group to assist Chinese social work students to achieve their placement learning goals. By sharing this practice reflection we invite readers to consider the additional learning needs that Chinese students face and encourage further enquiry into opportunities that may be crafted in response.

Keywords: *Chinese students; Social work practice; Field work education; Self-support group*

INTRODUCTION

Field placement is a key learning component in the social work practice-based profession. “It is almost universally accepted within social work education that placements are of central importance in synthesising what is taught in university (Parker, 2006 cited in Domakin, 2014, p. 718). Field placement provides students with opportunities to observe agency practitioners, transfer their theoretical knowledge into practice, and experience the application of social work. It is workplace learning that allows students to enrich their understanding of their profession and to foster beginning competency (Davys & Beddoe, 2010). However, field placement can be quite daunting for most students and preparing them, especially for their first placement, is a complex task. “Building a successful placement experience requires thoughtful and attentive planning” (Cleak & Wilson, 2013, p. 25). In order to prepare our social work students well, the Practice Learning Team at the School of Counselling, Human Services and Social Work in the University of Auckland (2017) have a pre-requisite field placement course to coach them in developing their social work skills before they go out on field placement – where they can further learn about themselves, understand their future professional roles and, ultimately, realise the goal of becoming capable and competent beginning social work practitioners.

Over several years of teaching, we have observed that some students find developing practice skills more challenging than others. We have also noticed that, in particular, Chinese social work students struggle in some areas. Most of our Chinese social work students are newly arrived from Mainland China. The growing prosperity of Mainland China but the limited capacity of Chinese universities and the “perception of Western universities as powerful and prestigious” (Edwards & Ran, 2009, p. 186) have motivated Chinese students to look at overseas opportunities. They undertake significant travel to New Zealand because they perceive New Zealand tertiary education can offer them a comparable advantage over many other countries. However, they have grown up in a country that has many significant differences from New Zealand. These differences have posed difficulties when students study social work in Aotearoa New Zealand. The following challenges have been identified through our coaching and mentoring.

CHALLENGES FOR CHINESE STUDENTS WITHIN SKILLS PREPARATION

We have observed that most Chinese social work students initially struggle to demonstrate some basic communication skills. When practising interview skills, Chinese students appear to spend less time in initial rapport-building, but focusing more on establishing client “problems.” At the exploration stage, they tend to over-use closed questions, eliciting some facts and information (like a checklist) without gaining a holistic understanding of clients’ experiences and concerns. Many Chinese social work students struggle in emotionally responsive work such as “reaching for feelings” and “tuning in to emotions” as frequently pointed out by the assessors.

We agree that social workers need to be able to explain why decision are made in theoretical and legislatively evidenced way, we also strongly believe the heart of social work is about recognising and using emotions competently and knowledgeably (Weld & Appleton, 2008, p. 16).

This obvious lack of emotional attunement means these Chinese students are unable to demonstrate their capacity to engage with the client in an empathetic manner in relation to the client's anxieties and fears.

During the intervention stage of interviewing practice, Chinese students frequently feel that they must provide an answer to the client, often telling clients what they need to do, rather than exploring the client's priorities, resources, options and motivation for change. Many Chinese social work students hold a strong cultural imperative and belief that they must give a clear direction to the client about what to do next, or they, as social workers, are not working efficiently and effectively. They assert that it is unethical practice not to tell the clients honestly when they, as practitioners, know the answer to the problems. Chinese students, like many other beginning social work students, often express frustration and confusion when challenged to change their approach from *fixing the problem* to *empowering the client*.

In the preparatory skills class, we observe that Chinese social work students often appear to unintentionally misinterpret or ignore clients' body language. Some facial expressions and nuances of hand and body movement implicitly understood by those born in New Zealand can appear meaningless to our Chinese social work students. This is especially true for those international Chinese students who are quite new to New Zealand. They often cannot recognise significant cues from clients. The opportunities to enquire deeper and more broadly into their experience are missed, whereas New Zealand-born students can quickly pick up and respond to these unspoken messages more appropriately. Furthermore, we observe that Chinese students often end their conversation having completed the main tasks, and move into a transitioning phase without taking time to check client's emotional state and to assess whether it is safe for the client to leave.

CULTURAL COMPLEXITIES AND CONTEXT

The experience of Chinese student social workers is familiar to one of the authors. As a migrant from China, Jinling Lin has similar experiences and knows that some of the presenting problems are closely related to the cultural environment that Chinese students have been brought up in. Pondering what exactly contributed to these problems motivated Jinling Lin to conduct her research, "The experience of Mainland Chinese students in pursuing a social work qualification from New Zealand tertiary institutions" (Lin, 2015). In this research five Chinese social work students, five Chinese social work graduates and five New Zealand social work lecturers from different tertiary institutions were interviewed. This enabled the research to obtain a broad view and diverse perspectives about Chinese social work students' learning experiences.

The outcomes from this research highlighted a typical belief that Chinese students' insufficient English language fluency is the main obstacle to a successful social work field placement. The research findings further suggest that there are many other obstacles which, when combined, lead to Chinese students experiencing learning difficulties. These obstacles include a lack of knowledge of Western concepts of social work; a lack of knowledge about generally accepted customs and rules in the context of New Zealand society and culture; a superficial knowledge about New Zealand social systems and local communities; a limited

knowledge about local history and local culture including Māori and Pacific culture; and very limited contextual knowledge about New Zealand's social issues. In addition, Chinese social work students lack knowledge about specific practice settings such as child welfare and mental health (Lin, 2015). As a result, their understanding relating to these areas can be quite superficial.

Findings from Lin (2015) highlight that the different focus in education and perceptions of what is considered to be educational achievement between China and Aotearoa New Zealand make a huge contribution to Chinese students' difficult learning experiences. The expectations of social work education in New Zealand require much attention to increasing students' practical ability to work with people while, in China, tertiary education focuses mainly on academic achievement. Chinese students in this study indicated that when coming into a social work programme, they would devote their entire study time to gaining abstract theoretical knowledge about the subject. They sincerely believe this will lead to becoming a suitably qualified social worker. Unfortunately this does not fully match the expectations of social work programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand where an integrated framework based on approaches that promote bi-cultural, relational, empowerment, and anti-oppressive practice and more are required by Aotearoa New Zealand Social Workers Registration Board to meet the 10 core competencies.

There is no question that Chinese students may have good insight about migrants' issues, especially the issues relating to Chinese communities. However, they appear to have problems working with local people and with people of other ethnicities in many areas. With the important skills of how to recognise a client's situation and respond to cultural nuances missing, it is hard for them to fully engage with the clients and demonstrate responsiveness. As a result we are worried that these students are unable to complete a quality psychosocial assessment or to identify and deliver appropriate services to the client. This apprehension is further compounded, in our view, by challenges for students in understanding the contextual complexities of practice. The concern for Chinese social work students is not just a matter of procedural interview skills; it is an issue of their ability to conduct a culturally insightful interview to meet professional standards of social work practice.

Not surprisingly, we find a large proportion of Chinese social work students fail the "live role plays" where students' readiness for field placement is assessed. The Chinese students who fail these tests feel shocked and humiliated at the negative assessment result and are frustrated at the problem areas pointed out by their assessors. Whilst we can (and do) empathise with these Chinese social work students, we also understand that it can be a risk to the organisation and clients if students are not fully prepared (especially contextually) when they embark upon their first placement. The Social Workers Registration Board requires all social workers to be competent to practise social work with different ethnic and cultural groups in New Zealand (SWRB, 2016a). We endorse SWRB's requirement and support our social work students to "demonstrate sufficient self-awareness and is able to critically reflect on own personal values, cultures, knowledge and beliefs to manage the influences of personal biases when practising" (SWRB, 2016, p.10).

SUPPORT STRATEGIES

The Practice Learning team at the University of Auckland have developed particular support strategies in order to respond to these special challenges faced by Chinese social work students. Firstly, coming from a similar Chinese background and with New Zealand social work experience, Professional Teaching Fellow Jinling Lin has insight into the challenges and disadvantages confronting Chinese social work students compared with local students. She offers one-on-one coaching to Chinese social work students. The coaching focuses on identifying the “gaps” and exploring the nuances between what is commonly accepted in Chinese culture and different expectations of a professional social worker in Aotearoa New Zealand. The different customs, protocols and views that impact their practice are identified. The coaching helps to raise Chinese students’ self-awareness and critical reflection about how their assessment and practice may be informed, but can also be limited, by their own cultural knowledge. To ensure safe practice, the understanding of cultural contexts of clients’ behaviour and the need to consult and to include cross-cultural perspectives are explored. Practical scenarios are provided for students to work on; how to balance between adopting a directive or facilitative approach during the interview and the need to understand and take client’s cultural preferences into consideration are discussed and practised. The conversation also emphasises exploring encountered dilemmas between what students think they know should be done by the client and the requirements for a social worker in Aotearoa New Zealand to work in an empowerment, client-led model of practice.

Individual coaching is helpful in raising awareness of the differences. We are mindful, however, that Chinese social work students share similar life circumstances and challenges, and therefore can develop their own skills and abilities to manage their life and study by forming a support group. As recommended by the research participants “it will be wonderful to have a platform... where we can share our experiences, where the students like me talk about what happened in my study, what happened in my life...” (Lin, 2015 p. 69). In September 2015, the Chinese social work self-support group “Nest” was launched at the University of Auckland Epsom Campus. More than 50 guests from the academic community and Chinese social work community came to offer support. This group provides students with a place to go after class and an opportunity to resolve their confusion on study and practice-related topics. Nest also provides emotional support especially for those who experience loneliness and isolation and students who “have nobody to go to during their first year” (Lin, 2015, p. 69).

As a group, the members of Nest enjoy each other’s company, however, like many groups, they started experiencing ups and downs that threatened the sustainability of the group. To support the group, Jinling facilitated further meetings, where they re-clarified their purpose and mission. Members discussed how the group could develop into a healthy and supportive one to benefit all Chinese social work students. They agreed on how the individual members should behave in order to enhance group cohesion; how to monitor the group’s activities; and how to assess the group’s achievements. The student members of Nest identified factors that would enable the group to develop in a clear, honest and supportive way; and the roles the leader or facilitator of the group needed to take. This approach to a reconsolidation of group goals and strategies has proved effective, as it made explicit reference to the problems the group were experiencing but it did “...not

reinforce possible splits in the group, nor does it locate the difficulty in a particular person or persons” (Lindsay & Orton, 2014, p.123). With ground rules and responsibilities re-confirmed, the group started functioning again and has continued its growth.

Nest has arranged many supportive activities. Practitioners from different sectors have been invited to talk about social work practice in their agency and in Aotearoa New Zealand. This has enabled Chinese students to further their social work theoretical knowledge into the context of Aotearoa New Zealand. Several workshops have been arranged to help Chinese social work students identify their knowledge gaps and address problems. They have been encouraged to attend diverse professional training to broaden their views. They have visited social work agencies and communities to enhance their practical understanding of local social issues. They have been introduced to social networking where they connect themselves to local people and wider communities. Through these connections, some Chinese students have found relevant volunteer roles or part-time jobs, thus providing them with an opportunity to better experience and understand the subjects they are undertaking.

Within Nest, those who have failed the pre-field placement role-play are encouraged to practise with Chinese social work students who have had a placement experience, and with those now successfully engaged in social work practice in the field. This support from field educator staff and members of Nest has been experienced by Chinese social work students as very helpful and after several weeks’ practice the majority are able to pass their role-play assessments. As a university team, we ensure we select agencies for placement where the field educator can continue to provide the student with needed coaching and supervision. Follow-up visits from the university team to the agency also focus on increasing Chinese students’ awareness of differences in their perceptions and understandings and of the standards of social work practice required in Aotearoa New Zealand. Chinese students are encouraged to be reflective and to critically analyse issues with their field supervisor, to explore how theoretical knowledge may be critiqued and applied in practice.

Whilst continuous support is necessary, it is equally important to encourage Chinese students to move gradually into leadership roles. Currently, Nest select their own leader or co-leader and that person is responsible for identifying group development. They meet regularly and the meeting is facilitated by a different member each time, so that everyone can have the opportunity to practise their leadership and facilitation skills. There are four things that are used to assess group progress. Firstly, the group identifies and sets a plan and goals for the year ahead. Secondly, the leader or co-leaders trace the goals through the minutes to follow up with tasks and keep track of who is responsible for what. Thirdly, one member from the group will take photos or minutes to record their activities. Lastly, after each event, Nest members, either verbally or in writing reflect on their own learning as measured against their goals. Nest, as a strategy for supporting Chinese students, is in its infancy and feedback from students indicates it is a helpful resource.

CONCLUSION

Chinese new settlers are a growing population in New Zealand and more Chinese choose to study social work as a profession. The growing demand for qualified social workers

within China but the limited capacity of Chinese universities pushes Chinese students to study social work overseas. Chinese students inevitably encounter many unexpected challenges during social work study. This practice reflection has shared some of our teaching and learning experiences, identified issues and offered strategies to support Chinese social work students. We invite readers to consider the additional learning needs that Chinese students face and encourage further enquiry into opportunities that may be created to meet these challenges. We sincerely hope this article can initiate a platform for future discussions in this area.

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