



A sociological examination of international placement learning by British social work students in children's services in Malaysia

Sara Ashencaen Crabtree¹
Jonathan Parker²
Azlinda Azman³
Faizah Mas'ud⁴

Abstract

This paper discusses research findings into a study of UK student learning on international social work placements in Malaysia in collaboration with two Malaysian universities: Universiti Sains Malaysia and Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. The discussion focuses on those placements taking place in children's services: residential care and community-based support programmes. The aim of the study was to explore how social work students adapt to unfamiliar learning situations in new cultural contexts with the goal of increasing cultural competence. Data were drawn from formal but anonymised student learning exercises as a non-assessed requirement of this particular placement. Findings indicated a wide range of responses towards social work practice with vulnerable children in the Malaysian context in terms of student constructions of care and abuse. Subject to an analytical schema, the collision or adaptation of otherwise normative professional and personal values are examined in detail.

Keywords

Social work, international placements, student learning

¹ Centre for Social Work, Sociology & Social Policy, School of Health and Social Care at Bournemouth University, United Kingdom, scrabtree@bournemouth.ac.uk

² Centre for Social Work, Sociology & Social Policy, School of Health and Social Care at Bournemouth University, United Kingdom

³ Universiti Sains Malaysia

⁴ Faculty of Social Sciences, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS)

Introduction

This paper explores research findings drawn from a study of international social work student placements funded by a British Council PMI2 grant promoting UK student mobility. The grant enabled a three-year study to be conducted focusing on student learning processes in Malaysian placement settings in collaboration between Bournemouth University (BU), a British higher educational institution (HEI), and two Malaysian partner HEIs: Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) in Penang, and Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), East Malaysia.

The research explored how students adapt to unfamiliar learning situations in new cultural contexts working within the broad parameters of international social work in local international settings. The goals of the project were to increase cultural competence among UK social work students, in line with BU's strategic aim to enhance internationalisation of the curriculum. Internationalisation in higher education represents a *zeitgeist* that is complex and contested. For the purposes of our research we understood it in terms of developing graduates who were competent in understanding and critiquing global and cultural issues and were globally mobile. We hoped to assist this through our second aim to build a sustainable international network of student/staff exchanges and research collaboration.

Raw data were gathered by the students in the role of research participants, through the use of daily learning logs (diaries) and a critical incident analysis (Parker, 2010). Such experiences created the opportunity for transformatory engagement with the new practice setting and service user/client groups through a process of disequilibrium and liminality (Parker et al., 2012). For the purposes of this paper, we move away from a closer consideration of the epiphanic and liminal, to focus on key narratives conveying students' experiences of dissonance and disengagement based on encounters that were perceived to challenge the UK students' understanding of social work norms governing articulated values and practice.

The rich ethnic, cultural and religious diversity of a nation like Malaysia, with its complex tapestry of post-colonial, indigenous and authenticised welfare provision (Hugman, 2010, Ling, 2007), offers the ideal context in which to explore the processes by which students from the Global North transfer their professional knowledge and skills to new situations, predominantly in the Global South, in the acquisition of cultural and intercultural competencies. The knowledge and skill could be seen as *habitus* or lasting dispositions derived from and having an impact on experiences and practices (Bourdieu, 1996). In the UK social work education implicitly hinges upon anti-oppressive practice (AOP) (Bartoli, 2013). Consequently, AOP as a social work concept is insufficiently interrogated about the implicit, and potentially ethnocentric, assumptions implicated within it, and is instead assumed to be an unquestionable social work 'given' (Parker, 2007).

In contrast to AOP, 'cultural competence', while regarded as an important component of social work, has been subject to critique on the grounds of the essentialising of heterogeneous groups (Laird, 2008). Bearing in mind caveats against the