

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

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### **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 requirement of the 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

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### **Introduction**

This paper explores research findings drawn from a study of international social work student placements funded by a British Council PM12 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; and to build a sustainable international network of student/staff exchanges and research collaboration, in line with BU's strategic aim to enhance internationalisation of the curriculum. 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 fallacies of homogenisation of diverse groups, our interpretation of cultural competence in this study conformed to the ability to transfer learning to new settings where negotiation of difference would need to be engaged with; particularly in relation to differences that might challenge the actor's prevailing assumptions. Thus, 'cultural competence' was chosen as a crucial concept underpinning the study, owing to its positive emphasis on human understanding as the link between preconceived ideas of cultural

difference and practice encounters with such that fostered greater awareness and appreciation among students' of difference and diversity.

In this joint UK-Malaysia study a wealth of raw data were gleaned from students' reported experiences and perceptions. Some particularly interesting findings were drawn from certain practice settings, particularly those involving vulnerable children and families, in terms of 'vulnerability' signifying unmet or poorly met needs. In this paper, therefore, we examine research findings drawn from data pertaining to student responses to practice settings offering services to children living in residential settings or accessing other types of welfare provision in the community.

### **Interrogating international placements**

International mobility opportunities for undergraduate students have long been viewed as an attractive feature for aspiring educational programmes. Despite problems in accommodating these in the packed UK social work curriculum, international placements remain popular among students generally. This is particularly the case for students living in more affluent countries where the professional base of social work is also more firmly established (Panos *et al.*, 2004; Wehbi, 2009).

Social work mobility in the UK, however, is not a recent feature or a direct manifestation of globalisation, but has a long historical precedence due to the influences of colonialism, where welfare paradigms may be viewed as having formed an arm of the Imperial machinery, along with the militia and administration of crown possessions (Ashencaen Crabtree, 2012). This uni-directional transference has by no

means been confined to the UK alone, but has been overtaken for some decades by that of the USA (Szto *et al.*, 2012), giving rise to Midgeley's (1981) seminal critique of the cultural colonialism of social work.

Alongside this, the vectors of globalisation have given new impetus to the perceived value of international social work, which has received greater prominence of late through the new Global Agenda for Social Work (IFSW, 2012) and the attempts to create a new, encompassing international definition for social work (IFSW, 2000/2013).

Correspondingly placements with the potential to expose students to these influences are of great importance (Hugman, 2010; Huegler, *et al.*, 2012; Lyons *et al.*, 2006), although now partially undermined in England by the newly developed Professional Capabilities Framework (The College of Social Work, 2012) that appears perhaps unwittingly to banish international social work considerations to the periphery.

Nonetheless, the challenges for UK social work lie in being able to deliver effective and credible services within multicultural, multi-faith societies of plural and emerging identities. This explicitly requires close professional engagement with diverse service user groups, and thus, despite myopic and contradictory stances in England, a professional education that will adequately equip novitiates for such encounters remains vital (Ashencaen Crabtree *et al.*, 2008; Furness and Gilligan, 2010).

The paradoxes of globalisation in terms of an assumed nexus of creeping homogeneity has also generated resistance across the globe in the form of demands for political, national or ethnic devolution and an assertion of a right to claim a unique

and separatist group identity. Accordingly, influences deemed as Anglocentric or, more widely, as 'Westernised', may be rejected or reshaped and appropriated (Parker, 2013). Thus social work models conforming to these overarching identities have often morphed into indigenous models or given way altogether to authenticised models of social work that owe little to social work models of the Global North (Hugman, 2010; Ling, 2007).

Yet, social identities reflect value and differential power positions that require critique and offer arguments carrying obvious concerns for social work in terms of anti-oppressive practice (Gilin and Young, 2009) and cultural competence (Laird, 2008). Additionally, global problems relating to human migration and trafficking (Hugman, 2010), global terrorism, climate change, global recession; and political and civil conflict implicate social work, that is itself struggling to find a universal definition and identity (Parker and Ashencaen Crabtree, 2013). The contested notion of the universality of social work, given its great diversity of practices and local responses, has stimulated the notion of plural social work professions (Lyons *et al.*, 2006). Equally the idea of universal social work values has been critiqued as merely another form of ethnocentric professionalised hegemony (Hugman, 2010; Orit Nuttmann, 2011; Razack, 2009).

In this vein, further arguments are raised in consideration of nation states that have experienced past colonialism, which need to be viewed in a postcolonial context (Razack 2009; Hugman, 2010). This is a particularly important point in view of the higher traffic of students from the Global North seeking placements in the countries of the Global South (Heron, 2006)) than the reverse. The uni-directional aspects relating to student mobility are likely to owe much to socio-economic differentials

across world regions (Ashencaen Crabtree *et al.*, 2012)

Nonetheless, despite these contentions, international placements are considered to carry undeniable potential in enhancing practitioner capabilities and competences (Abram *et al.*, 2005; Barlow *et al.*, 2010; Faurchild *et al.*; Gilin and Young, 2009; Tesoriero, 2006). Fostering the capacity of social workers in the recognition of difference and diversity becomes, in itself, an essential, almost reified, requirement for practice (Laird, 2008). However, such awareness must not rest upon an anti-racist consciousness alone (Bhatti-Sinclair 2011), for difference and diversity seen not only across groups but also within groups. Additional caveats relate to a reactionary and inverse demonisation of perceived Anglocentric social work models, which may be viewed in the Global North as therefore necessarily inferior to indigenous or authenticised models (Hyoung and Hwa-ok, 2010; Parker, 2013).

Despite the uniquely powerful potential of international placements in cultivating student learning towards cultural competence, this transformation may not necessarily take place, judging from the research literature reporting on a variety of perspectives, including student reflections (Martone and Munoz, 2009; Parker *et al.*, 2012), academic educators (Barlow, 2010) and practice coordinators (Pawar *et al.*, 2004). Accordingly, Heron (2006) advises that vigilance should be to the fore in encouraging students to closely examine their knowledge and assumptions in pre- and post-placement. While Wehbi (2009) in turn argues that the motives of students seeking to undertake international placements should be subject to interrogation with a view to deconstructing hegemonies of power, postcolonialism and difference.

## **The study**

### Context

Commencing in 2009 three successive annual cohorts of students were recruited to participate in this study of student learning in unfamiliar cultural contexts. Candidates were selected based on rigorous criteria testing general aptitude and motivation in reference to a genuine interest in international social work/development issues, along with a proven ability to cope with unfamiliar and challenging practice situations from life experiences. Sufficient good health, mental and physical (self-reported), to cope with the expected rigours of the placement in an unfamiliar cultural context, along with good academic standing (tutor-reported), were also required.

The placements offered by Malaysian partner universities were located in either Penang, peninsula Malaysia or in the Kuching area of Sarawak, East Malaysia. Although a smaller number of placements were available to the BU students, compared to local students, owing to language barriers or a lack of agency staff able or willing to supervise British students, placements were varied. Every effort was made to offer the students placements in their area of interest. Consequently, placements included: children's services (community-based residential or non-residential settings), mental health services, learning or physical disability rehabilitation agencies dealing with adults or children, an innovative HIV/AIDS outreach service and elderly care services. The majority of agencies were non-government organisations or charities, often with religious affiliations.

Due primarily to timetabling issues and the associated requests of the BU Practice Learning team, cohorts varied in being drawn from primarily final-year students in the

first year; to a subsequent cohort of second-year students; with first-year students being recruited in the final cohort. In each cohort there was a gender mix, although in line with the dominant patterns of enrolment in UK social work programmes, male students were in the minority (Parker and Ashencaen Crabtree, 2012). Equally the age range of students also varied, where both mature students, ranging in age from mid-twenties to forties, were successfully recruited onto the programmes, along with younger students. Most recruited students self-identified as White British, with only a handful of Black or Asian students applying for the opportunity: although the selection success rate for African students was high due to their direct experience and knowledge of international social work, particularly in developing countries.

Unfortunately, for the majority of the latter, passport and visa problems prevented them from being admitted into Malaysia to undertake their placement. This resulted in placement arrangements being aborted, often under traumatic circumstances for those particular students.

Comparison across cohorts in terms of year-groups and how these factors may have influenced responses, as well as group dynamics, was not part of the initial research design. Instead the quality and depth in reflective exploration of self, and the texture of data emerging from the study, was viewed as essential to a comparative analysis of student narratives. Student responses to circumstances, events, encounters and formal learning opportunities were both indicative of their background and characteristics, as well as challenging to identified beliefs, values and identities - and thereby potentially transformatory (Parker *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, because the number of local agencies that could be recruited for the placements was comparatively few, this permitted a comparison to be made of student responses in particular practice settings.

It was extremely interesting therefore to see the diverse constructions of meaning and interpretation students individually brought to bear upon the same NGO and its perceived practices. The same supervisor might variously be regarded as conscientious and skilled in one account, or controlling and malign in another. While the type of service users an NGO worked with often influenced student perceptions deeply, with the greatest number of starkly contrasting, and often highly emotive, accounts emerging from services dealing with children, particularly underprivileged or 'Looked After' children (this latter phrase refers to children in the UK who are formally cared for other than by their biological parents, such as in residential services).

The formal foundation of this UK-Malaysia study crucially built on pre-existing relationships with the two participating Malaysian universities by the lead author initially, in order to develop a platform for research collaboration. This point is worth emphasising as the intensive nature of developing international social work placements is viewed as a pedagogic ideal in the discipline, but is very difficult to achieve and time-consuming to organise, owing to the requirement of qualifying degrees in meeting stringent professional requirements (often parochial in focus) resulting in a congested and inflexible curriculum. The issues of power differentials, particularly apparent in the uni-directional nature of such international placements, and the demonstrable acquisition of demonstrable cultural competence were added problematics to those of a logistical nature.

### **The research component**

Data were gathered on the learning experiences of the participating students in the form of a daily log and critical incident analysis. Both are underpinned by the use of reflective learning, which is a very familiar, almost stereotypic, concept in practice learning (Ruch, 2002), where pedagogically it forms another largely unquestioned 'good' in social work education, along with AOP (Green Lister and Crisp 2007; Parker 2010). That said, reflective learning has been problematised owing to its loose definition, which can lack rigour for assessment purposes (Parker, 2010; Eraut, 1995; Ixer, 1999, 2003). Here, however, its strong potential as a tool for gathering perceptions of experiences was used in the students' data gathering exercises.

The reflective log was used to report reactions to daily events and encounters, addressing the cultural context in which incidents took place, together with cognitive, emotional and belief issues. The log was used in a manner similar to diary research and had the advantage of cross-comparative possibilities (Alaszewski, 2006). While the critical incident analysis is a more formal exercise and limited to a word count, the daily log could be as extensive, creative and as personal as students wished to make them.

Critical incident analysis is an established tool in professional education (Fook and Askeland, 2007; Parker 2010), where it is used to excavate assumptions underpinning actions, to interrogate them and develop alternative actions. By these means the veiled or unquestioned is made explicit towards issues relating to an assumed universality of social work values and practices, power relations and structural factors, such as oppression in practice (Suarez, 2008) or ethnic identity (Montalvo, 1999). In summary, both exercises served to produce a rich record of individual data.

It was determined that the data from reflective logs and critical incident analyses could both stand on their own as individual narratives and as a whole. As such the researchers decided against content analysis and structured documentary analysis. Instead, data drawn from student accounts<sup>1</sup> were examined in terms of a thematic analysis in which raw data was subject to coding at multiple levels, themes extracted and tested against the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This allowed the whole data set to be employed whilst maintaining the credibility of individual accounts.

The ethical constraints of the study involved gathering informed consent, as far as that is ever possible within qualitative research, from student participants, who were given assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. Additionally, it was reiterated that their involvement would not influence course assessments at the time of the placement or subsequently.

Whilst students provided consent, informed as far as possible by prior explanation and preparation by engaging in the placement opportunity, they were able, of course, to temper their daily diaries, logs and critical incident. Students were aware of the research and what was to happen to the data, and given the data we received it does not seem to have adversely impeded comment, or led to social desirability responding.

## **Research findings**

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations from student accounts have been edited for literary correctness only.

In this paper we focus solely on some accounts from eight female students placed in Malaysian children's services, both residential and day services. Selected student accounts reporting significant disjunctions between student assumptions of social work practice norms and contexts, and their encounters, with often startlingly different ontologies and interpretations in the new practice setting, are subject to comparative analysis.

The background to student choice of placement is that social work with children is a popular statutory placement for students in the UK. Research literature shows that this is often not an area of social work that is regarded as hospitable to qualified male social workers, due in part to entrenched, normative views of gender and care-giving, but also in regards to prejudice meted out towards men generically as potential abusers of vulnerable women and children (Scourfield 2001; Parker and Ashencaen Crabtree, 2012). In line with these pervasive views in social work, in this study it was solely female students who chose such placements in Malaysia. Ironically, however, in the wider context of professional social work in the UK, because the diversity of such work has been narrowed and engulfed by a highly politicised Child Protection against abuse agenda, it is viewed by qualified social workers as deeply stressful, as well as professionally risky for individual social workers in view of the so-called 'media witch hunts' caused by adverse publicity of a tiny number of notorious child death cases (Pritchard *et al.*, 2013). In consequence, and in contrast to student choices, it is also a deeply unattractive area of social work with the result that human resources in the UK are extremely stretched (Cauvain, 2010).

In Malaysia, in common with most countries offering social work education, child abuse is acknowledged and, although scant literature on the topic is in the public domain, there is relevant legislation to guide social work practice in this area, along with practice knowledge (Aziza, 2012; Sham Kasim *et al.*, 1995). Furthermore, a concern for the impact of poverty (Azman *et al.*, 2010), localised/indigenised models of child care and associated services (Aziza, 2012), and a national focus prioritising education (Ong, 2005) has not elevated child protection concerns to the pitch of national anxiety occurring in the UK (Fureidi & Bristow 2010).

Students' expressed motivation for choosing placements in children's services in Malaysia tended to revolve around a wish to develop a cross-cultural, comparative understanding of child protection issues and associated family work. Some students wished to be placed in agencies offering rehabilitative services to children with disabilities, but these have not been included in the discussion in this paper. Instead we have chosen to focus upon the narratives of those students placed in agencies offering services to children from underprivileged or abused backgrounds, and/or orphans, either factually or *de facto* in being deprived of a responsible guardian among their kin.

The following research findings are grouped around key themes developed from the analysis and are discussed throughout. A range of binary oppositions are evident within the different student narratives from which the themes are drawn, showing bi-directional assumptions of power (for and against received social work axiologies) within the mind-sets and practices of those students. These are critiqued.

## **Research findings**

### Reflecting on diversity

The following two extracts offer contrasting student reflections to the contested encounter with the new forms multiculturalism offered by the Malaysian context in terms of both 'race'/ethnicity and religion.

(SL) 'On my placement today I saw something which gave me concern. The children and community I was working in was mainly Muslim and Chinese and the Agency is a Christian one. This I found difficult anyway as I found it difficult to adjust my thinking to the fine line of not imposing my Western values on such a mixed blurred set of religious values which were all present during my time there.'

The implicit assumption by SL is that denominational charity signifies the imposition of religious hegemony, whilst also implicitly identifying a homogenised 'other' in the community. BZ's extract instead perceives ethnic harmony at work.

(BZ) 'It is so multicultural here and they all rub along so well [compared] to England where so many cultures avoid each other, argue or fight [and] only a minority seem totally accepting. It's a shame.'

### Demonstrating 'values': integrity or incongruity

The majority of students found the contrast between children's services in the UK and Malaysia to be both stark and frequently shocking. An automatic response found by

those students was to fall back upon the known and familiar professional responses, however incongruous in the new cultural setting. 'CH's' account refers to a small, charitable, community service for needy children in a notoriously underprivileged residential quarter of town.

(CH) 'To me this was a real culture shock and I was amazed how much impact my work as a contact supervisor had on me and my need to 'risk assess'. I was already analysing the building for potential hazards and access to the building in regard to their abusers entering it and putting the children at risk. I realised that in no way was the work here going to be anything like Child Protection in the UK. There was no policy to follow and no guidance in place.'

However, adherence to UK professional values were also viewed as both sustaining as well as restricting in terms of adjustment to the new context.

(JL) 'I found adapting my western style of social work and also my professional values to a culture that does not have these expectations demanding. My values supported me and helped me remain focused on the task in hand. However, I was aware that my professional values also made my job harder as they set restrictions upon me that the Malay culture does not seem to adhere to.'

The following account illustrates student anxieties towards being separated from UK-normative protocols and procedures in the new setting. Here a student describes how

she gingerly participates in a special treat for children in a local residential home: a swimming trip in the rainforest.

(NC) ‘It wasn’t exactly what I thought though - we actually went into the jungle and swam in a river with a very hot spring. I was concerned though that the children are not risk assessed, the children do have to wear their seatbelts in the van, no RA (residential assistant) for them swimming in the water, nothing! Is this OK and acceptable or am I just thinking of it from my professional value base!? Immerse myself in the culture... but safely!’

#### Encountering the institution

Dissonance was also noted in the narratives in terms of a disjunction between initial impressions of what appeared to be an environment reminiscent of Goffman’s (1991) ‘total institution’ (with all the disempowering nuances and implications associated with that circumstance) and the discovery of unexpected merits:

(RT) ‘We went to an orphanage this afternoon. I wasn’t sure what to expect, as I have never been to an orphanage before. When I arrived there were lots and lots of children, aged between 5 and 16, girls and boys. From the outside the home looked very institutionalised, as there were big, iron gates and metal poles on the windows to stop children from getting out. However, when I went into the home I was able to speak to some of the children and saw how happy they were. It was so overwhelming! There were 48 children in the orphanage and they all spoke very good English. There was one girl who I spoke to who

was 12-years-old. She told me that she wants to go to England to study medicine and become a doctor. What a goal!

The perception of comparative scarce resources and overcrowding in children's residential care were overtly compared with the relatively privileged resourcing of services in the UK, not previously seen by students as in any way ample. In some narratives what struck observers with poignancy was the uncomplaining and cheerful attitudes and behaviour of most Malaysian children in care settings.

(BZ) 'A lot of the children had brothers and sisters here as well; and the main reason for being at the orphanage was because their parents could no longer manage them, and financial implications also. I thought about how different the residential homes are in England and the ones I had visited had on average 5 children in each home. The overwhelming feeling I got made me want to stay and spend time with the children and donate money to the home. Some of the children were playing with rubbish and things like sticks and stones and I thought how lucky I was to have toys to play with when I was younger.'

However, while children's general behaviour was regularly praised in the accounts, the services and staff running them were very infrequently viewed as having been in any way instrumental in creating such positive outcomes. Instead, the deficits of care were commented on disapprovingly as not conforming to an overall awareness of prevailing UK agendas concerning abuse and risk, a topic we shall return to.

(HS) 'We got showed around the orphanage and it was all looking very good until we were shown the boys' bedrooms – 10 boys in one room, 5 in 1 bed! This made me feel terrible. I thought the sleeping conditions were awful. The lady that was the manager told us quite gently about the sleeping arrangement. I wish I had explained that we don't do this in England because of abuse.'

### The construction of child abuse

The very high profile given to issues of child abuse and professional safeguarding in the UK in conjunction with student exposure to serious poverty and deprivation among child service user in Malaysia, resulted in a strong focus on this issue in student narratives. Perceptions of abusive (or otherwise 'wrong') practices towards children were given in response to encounters with difference in relation to child-rearing practices.

(LM) 'I obviously became very upset when I saw the student [child in residential care holiday provision] being smacked as I had never witnessed this before. I thought that maybe this was a reason why the children were so well behaved at the camp because there was such strict discipline in place. I have worked on children's camps in England and America before and the majority of children showed challenging behaviour. The staff at these camps were unable to enforce physical discipline which may have been one of the reasons why the children misbehaved at times.'

This account assumes shared values with the reader towards a condemnation of corporal punishment where here it is portrayed as obviously wrong. It is interesting to note that a level of visceral discomfort quickly emerges through the student's reflective and experiential cross-cultural comparison of discipline of children where the perceived 'incorrect' disciplinary tactic (corporal punishment) produces desirable outcomes (obedience) – and in the West, apparently, the reverse.

The following narrative offers a troubled account from a student where the risk of abuse in the home environment of children service users is not viewed as mitigated by services in a charitable agency of offering non-residential care of local, underprivileged children. Instead the religious constructions and enactments of the agency are viewed as offering an almost equal risk of child abuse.

(CH) 'When I was putting a game away in the office, one of the workers was studying a page on the Internet. I could not help but see it was about 'the mark of the Beast' and showed some very graphic pictures. I was amazed that someone could do this in an area accessible to the children. The Christian side of [Agency X] appears to be obsessed with evil spirits and the devil and I still have not seen any information about the love of God.'

The student grapples with both the undisguised deprivation and domestic abuse of children in a poorly resourced community service. Interestingly, however, (and as a committed Christian herself, as we learn) she fails to explore a possible hypothesis: whether the apparent prevalent staff anxieties in respect of the demonic are generated as a reaction to the suffering of children, together with the possible individual need

among staff to find a causation or meaning for this within a recognised, Abrahamic religious schema (Ashencaen Crabtree *et al.*, 2008).

In the following accounts of practices within the agency/residential setting, allusions to abusive malpractices and dubious attitudes by staff are further offered.

(NC) ‘What stands out for me is how institutionalised the children [are] and how scared they are of [Supervisor X] and a couple of other members of staff, but there is also a certain uncomfortable feeling about how the children address the staff. [Supervisor X] is considered to be the children’s mother and the staff are referred to as aunts and uncles!! One of the children asked me was I their aunty and I immediately stated that I was not and they should call me by my first name. In the UK this terminology would be frowned upon and I think would possibly raise some questions. It sits very uncomfortably with me!’

This prurient observation laden with suspicions regarding a perceived invalid consanguinity between staff and children carries an element of comedy, but also raises serious consternation regarding the unquestioning, heavy-handed application of current British social work ideology governing speech and practice. Polite, familial terms, such as ‘aunty’ are commonly used in Malaysia (as well as in traditional English society) and denote both an acknowledgement of status differentials, but also that of an implied responsibility in an informal but socially sanctioned relationship, by a responsible, caring adult towards a known child.

The issue of courtesy in familial titles is explored further in contrasting account, where this practice is instead interpreted as emotional generosity and respectful affection, on the part of children.

(HS) ‘Today I was working at the camp. I was really anxious about the language barrier. I felt the children might disrespect me because I did not know Malay. I felt I might not be able to contribute and participate....I soon realised that most of the children spoke good English....These children were so respectful and open. The children would call me ‘aunty’, ‘teacher’, ‘sister’ and not [student’s name]. I asked my supervisor why and she said they are brought up to be this formal and said it is disrespectful to call adults by their first name and they must use a title.’

Ambivalence by participating students towards the emphasis given to education in children’s services was noted in the following accounts.

(NC) ‘It reminds me of a cattle market!! Children being shipped out on a school rota system. The children also start their day extremely early, 5.45 [a.m.], to get those children attending school in the morning to school for 7 am?? The children here are also not allowed to watch TV during the school week, which they seem to accept well. They accept it though because they do not know any different. [A] stark feature of the children’s home is that although there are 56 children resident there, I don’t see many of them in any one area unless it is mealtime and even this is done in a shift pattern. Even playing together appears to be a strictly regulated past time. I appreciate that

such a large children's home would need to be structured in some way, but the children are constantly doing their daily chores or they are studying and it is the studying which plays such a huge part in their lives.'

(CH) 'Many children are keen to show us their reading skills. However I am hoping that those that do genuinely want to read have the opportunity to build on their skills. Resources are so very limited...I wonder if what we are doing with these children is simply tokenism...The children already have tuition several times a week after school and my personal feelings are that they already have enough learning. I can see for many emotional issues are not being met and I feel that quality time with them such as nail painting, games and just talking would be far more beneficial to them.'

The emphasis on the importance of study is culturally valued in many Asian societies and also conforms to Malaysian government policy towards achieving full development status nationally by 2020 (Ong, 2005). The implications of this policy for underprivileged groups in Malaysia is that in a society that operates with a mixture of Minimal State and Confucian principles (Ashencaen Crabtree 1999), education, rather than Welfare State provision, is the most likely route out of a continued cycle of poverty down generations. Set in wider social and specific service context, although the students' concerns for children's well-being, in terms of recreation and leisure, conform to social work values, the suggestions for more passive and arguably, anti-educational activities, such as television watching and varnishing nails, seem incongruous.

Equality of provision as a social work 'good'.

Social work in the UK is subject to competing tensions in relation to increasing instrumentalism and bureaucratisation in a neo-liberal welfare context, as opposed to a politicised agenda of promoting service user empowerment, and combatting oppression through social work commitment to AOP (Dominelli, 2002; Parker and Doel, 2013). AOP has in turn subsumed earlier social work liberation ideologies, such as anti-racism and anti-discriminatory practice in being an overarching conceptual framework, which promotes the levelling out of any hierarchies of oppressions based on claims of the greater impact of discrimination falling on particular oppressed groups (Ashencaen Crabtree *et al.*, 2008). The force of AOP ideology, however, is such that social work students are inculcated into an acceptance of this concept from the beginning of their qualifying programmes and must offer suitable evidence of their awareness of it in their assignments.

A criticism (but equally a potential asset) of AOP is that being primarily ideological it is not clear how this should be translated into social work practice (Parker, 2007).

Accordingly, AOP may be open to wide variation of interpretation in practice settings. Thus, student participants in this study often struggled with how to apply AOP as an assumed culturally transferable, social work 'given' to the new practice context in Malaysia. The following narrative from a student powerfully conveys this concern:

(CH) 'I was concerned to be told by our group facilitator [that] one of the tasks she wanted me to do with identify who amongst the children were the

most able, so that more time could be spent with them to help their education. This really went against all I believed in, as I really felt that not just the most able but *all* of these children should be given a chance. My values were being questioned and I felt in a moral dilemma. I did not know whether to do as I had been asked or to challenge the agency over it. I can understand that the agency cannot help every child due to a lack of resources, staff and time but is it fair to favour a more academically able child over another?'

In the face of an acute shortage of resources, the unpalatable fact remains that if AOP is enacted as equality of provision, according to student's principles, this would deprive every child service user at the agency of the chance of obtaining additional educational opportunities. The *wrongness* of insufficient resources doled out unequally, is removed, in this construction: if all are equally deprived, regardless of individual ability. This paradox remains unrecognised by the student.

A more striking case is offered in this next narrative where a student encounters a small child who has been informally and temporarily 'fostered' for two years by one of the agency staff, following an earlier refusal to provide services to the child's family.

(SL) 'On first meeting with the child I was more shocked by the happy little girl who stood in front of me in such contrast to the other children in the agency. The child was well nourished, well clothed and seemed well educated. This was in direct contrast to the other children within the agency who often only ate one meal a day provided by the agency and who were often clothed,

deloused and washed by the agency as part of the agency's programme. This child was also by far the cutest little person you could possibly meet.'

This student then begins to reflect on the 'unsavoury' aspect of the arrangement, questioning 'whether the needs of this child were actually top priority or whether the needs of XX [staff member] were put first'. Later she writes of her shocked disapproval upon discovering that the child, after two years of being fostered, would soon be returned to the family of origin to be replaced by another underprivileged child identified as in need of this kind of 'head start' in life. Again an assumption of paradoxical contention pervades the student's ratiocination.

Aside from the very different contemporary, cultural constructions relating to fostering between the two countries, it is interesting to note that an unhealthy pathology, rather than altruism, is assumed to be the underlying motive for the arrangement. Yet where resources are badly stretched, but the need for help overt (and often overwhelming), some form of 'triage' is often adopted.

This pivots on the idea that a middle ranking of need is targeted primarily for the greatest assistance, on the grounds that those in lesser need are more likely to recover their equilibrium without help. While those in greater need will be less able to benefit from those scant/available resources that can be directed towards them at cost to others in need. Consequently it is those in the middle group of need who are most likely to benefit from available resources. It is probably along these pragmatic and unvarnished lines of reasoning that such fostering arrangements may take place.

Triage, however, is clearly open to the charge of being an oppressive practice, where an omission to apply such discriminations in resource allocation (regardless of effectiveness) is less likely to be criticised in being reframed as an example of AOP practiced as egalitarianism.

### **Concluding discussion**

To reiterate, the aim of the study was to explore student-learning processes in new and unfamiliar contexts. To this end, student experiences of being placed in agency settings in Malaysia provided a rich source of data that raised numerous implications for social work practice and education in terms of working with difference and diversity.

Analysis of student accounts indicated that pre-placement, despite a stated professed commitment to international social work and a claims of general aptitude, once actually placed in the new context, students found it very difficult to ‘bracket off’ their established assumptions of professional norms inculcated in their professional education in Britain. Instead it appeared that encountering actual differences in the new context could, and often did, propel students to fall back on familiar normative ‘givens’ in a largely unquestioned reactionary and sometimes ‘Manichean’ response drawing on received conceptions of AOP. Accordingly, the learning opportunity provided by encounters with the new were frequently resisted and established norms reasserted in a simplistic, binary attitude of good or right practices versus bad or wrong ones. These binary oppositions reflect some of the assumptions of students associated with their perceptions of ‘correct’ social work practices, and thereby approved axiological positions. These raise questions for global models of social

work as a homogeneity reflecting to a greater extent Lyons *et al.* (2006) position on social work pluralities. They also exert a constraining effect on international exchange, practice and educational placements, requiring the primacy of critical reflexivity. Future research could beneficially draw on rigorous diary analysis (Alaszewski, 2006).

There appeared to be a collision of values where inculcated British social work values, as they are currently taught, were found by students to be either unrecognised, contradicted or reframed by indigenous practice priorities. The incongruity of initial student assumptions concerning a universality of values based on western social work codes was directly challenged on placement. These experiences drew a variety of responses from students ranging from a recognition of the restricted and/or distorted worth of received values in the new context, to a tribal reaffirmation of loyalty to originally held values. Deconstructing this further presents a West/East, Global North/Global South opposition where both points could be held as the 'good' or the 'bad'. Questions raised for our understanding of social work education in respect of cultural competence and respect for difference and diversity concern how these positions become embodied within students and what experiences can ensure reflexivity in relation to them.

Values, moreover, underpin action, and thus professional practices were also subject to critique by students. Apparently in the struggle to understand the new environment and their own role, and position therein, students experienced a process of liminality; and drew inferences of the values of others based on observed practices (Parker *et al.*, 2012). Thus, depending on how well students achieved or maintained a level of

personal and emotional equilibrium, largely based on individual tolerance for disorientation and ambiguity, they were able to engage with or resist perceived threats or opportunities raised by the challenges posed by the new setting.

Unfortunately, the inhibitions of being foreign guests in a host placement away from the security of the familiar did not enable students easily to explore these issues openly with Malaysian colleagues and supervisors. Hence students resorted to sharing these perceptions with their British student peers who were themselves grappling with similar challenges and thus likely to mirror these concerns, and sometimes to reinforce rather than reflexively grapple with them. Some students used their research diaries to record their feelings in increasing detail, and sometimes to the extent of excluding other experiences or factual information. It was noted that among certain students apparently struggling more acutely with the challenges confronted, these records often became increasingly self-referential and occasionally even appeared quite paranoid, rather than reaching a more objectified, self-reflexive stance as methodologically conceived. Accordingly, either strategy tended to make it likely that original assumptions and misconceptions would be reinforced.

Finally, in terms of UK social work education the improved preparation of students, especially in terms of developing capacity for critical reflexivity in thought and practice, wishing to undertake international placements would seem to be required, based on findings of this study. Yet, in a follow-up study of international student placements many of our social work students evaluated their international placement in Malaysia as constituting the most enlightening and important experience of their degree (Authors, forthcoming) and one that was pivotal to their current understanding

of AOP and global social work issues. Furthermore, for a few the professional and personal connections made with their placement agency was maintained and deepened over the years. Notwithstanding such gratifying reports from post-placement students, and allowing for temporal distance effects, it would nevertheless seem that the current UK curriculum may not adequately equip students for international social work opportunities. This is likely to be owing in part to the increasingly insular and instrumental approach to social work currently dominating the social work agenda in the UK, where global social work concerns are marginalised. AOP, once a highly politicised concept, is in danger of being diluted into a clichéd short-hand phrase, signifying an uncritiqued adherence to ‘correct’ social work values and attitudes. Accordingly, it is term that can also be used to stifle a more nuanced and critical understanding of how social workers might address the sensitivities of diversity and difference material to multicultural societies.

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