

Enhancing Critical Reflective Practice in Fieldwork Education: An Exploratory Study of the Role of Social Work Agencies in the Welfare Context of Hong Kong

Authors : Yee-May Chan

Abstract : In recent decades, it is observed that social work agencies have participated actively, and thus, have gradually been more influential in social work education in Hong Kong. The neo-liberal welfare ideologies and changing funding mode have transformed the landscape in social work practice and have also had a major influence on the fieldwork environment in Hong Kong. The aim of this research is to explore the educational role of social work agencies and examine in particular whether they are able to enhance or hinder critical reflective learning in fieldwork. In-depth interviews with 15 frontline social workers and managers in different social work agencies were conducted to collect their views and experience in helping social work students in fieldwork. The overall findings revealed that under the current social welfare context most social workers consider that the most important role of social work agencies in fieldwork is to help students prepare to fit-in the practice requirements and work within agencies' boundary. The fit-for-purpose and down-to-earth view of fieldwork practice is seen as prevalent among most social workers. This narrow perception of agency's role seems to be more favourable to competence-based approaches. In contrast, though critical reflection has been seen as important in addressing the changing needs of service users, the role of enhancing critical reflective learning has not been clearly expected or understood by most agency workers. The notion of critical reflection, if considered, has been narrowly perceived in fieldwork learning. The findings suggest that the importance of critical reflection is found to be subordinate to that of practice competence. The lack of critical reflection in the field is somehow embedded in the competence-based social work practice. In general, social work students' critical reflection has not been adequately supported or enhanced in fieldwork agencies, nor critical reflective practice has been encouraged in fieldwork process. To address this situation, the role of social work agencies in fieldwork should be re-examined. To maximise critical reflective learning in the field, critical reflection as an avowed objective in fieldwork learning should be clearly stated. Concrete suggestions are made to help fieldwork agencies become more prepared to critical reflective learning. It is expected that the research can help social work communities to reflect upon the current realities of fieldwork context and to identify ways to strengthen agencies' capacities to enhance critical reflective learning and practice of social work students.

Keywords : competence-based social work, critical reflective learning, fieldwork agencies, neo-liberal welfare

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