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

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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, fieldwork, neo-liberal welfare, critical reflective learning.

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I. INTRODUCTION

THIS paper critically examines the role of social work agencies in enhancing critical reflective learning of social work students in fieldwork in Hong Kong. The discussions are based on a qualitative research conducted by the author, in which in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 social workers, including frontline practitioners and mid-level managers, from five major social work settings where fieldwork placements were provided. The research emanates from two important observations in fieldwork education both internationally and locally in Hong Kong. First, fieldwork is one of the most important and integral components in social work education, but the role of the agency in enhancing students' learning in fieldwork is largely unexplored. Secondly, in the midst of heated debates about competence-based and critical reflective practice in social work education, it is not known at least in the context of Hong Kong as to whether fieldwork agencies enhance or undermine students' learning of critical reflective practices.

The paper begins with a highlight of the importance and problems of fieldwork education in Hong Kong, followed by a brief conceptual but current discussion of competence-based versus critical reflective practice in social work. The research design and methodology will be introduced, followed by key findings of the research and discussions and recommendations for future improvements.

II. FIELDWORK LEARNING IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

A. Fieldwork as an Integral Component of Social Work Education

Defined by Hamilton and Else, fieldwork is a specially designed learning experience which takes place in agency settings where students learn to become independent social workers [1]. The term 'fieldwork' is sometimes used interchangeably with other related terms, such as field practicum, field practice and practice learning in social work literature. For consistency sake, the term fieldwork will be used throughout this paper. In countries where there is a relatively long history of social work education, fieldwork is a required component in all accredited social work programmes. In Hong Kong, fieldwork is also regarded as a necessary component for an educational programme to be qualified for social workers registration [2]. The Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB), which is the statutory body empowered with the authority to accredit social work programmes in Hong Kong,

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requires that qualifying social work degree programmes should include in the curriculum a minimum of 800 hours (700 hours for sub-degree programmes) of direct fieldwork, plus 100 hours placement preparation or related learning activities to prepare students for fieldwork learning. In the global context, the International Association of School of Social Work (IASSW) together with the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), have formulated 'Global Standards for the Education and Training of the Social Work Profession' [3], in which it is stipulated that social work programme curricula should have clear plans for the organisation, implementation and evaluation of theory and field education components. Furthermore fieldwork education should be sufficient in duration and complexity of tasks and learning opportunities to ensure that students are well prepared for professional practice. All these show that fieldwork is an essential element of social work education. However, a review of the literature suggests that there are different meanings and emphasis with regard to the use of fieldwork. This will be discussed in the following sections.

B. The Meanings of Fieldwork: Competence vs. Reflection

There are two major perspectives concerning the meanings of fieldwork. The first perspective stresses the importance of fieldwork as a site for students to acquire professional and technical competence. This is related to the notion of the competence-based approach to social work education. The second perspective sees fieldwork as both a venue and a learning process for students to reflect upon knowledge and practice reality and to develop critical reflective practice in social work.

Notwithstanding the differences between these two fieldwork approaches, there are a number of common understandings about fieldwork in social work education. First, fieldwork is referred to as an essential part of the social work curriculum, where students are placed in social work agencies for a defined period of time [4]. Second, it is seen as a process of preparing social work students for the realities of front-line practice [5]. Third, supervised practice learning is recognised internationally as a fundamental, vital and indispensable component of social work education and has been so since its formulation as an academic discipline [6]. Accordingly, social work students tend to identify fieldwork as the most valuable and memorable part of their study and this experience seems to have an enduring impact on their professional development [7]-[9].

C. Fieldwork as Acquisition of Competence

Based on the notion of competence-based learning, fieldwork is seen as a 'real world situation' where social work students are 'socialised' with the role and function of an agency worker and acquire the necessary practice competence. This can be exemplified by the work of Kaseke who sees fieldwork as 'an instrument of socialisation' for the students to learn the future role of social work [10]. This perspective tends to stress the acquisition of technical knowledge and skills in social work practice and implicitly implies a one-directional learning

process, in which agency practice is assumed as a 'given reality' and students are supposed to learn and adopt the practice of the fieldwork agency. The meaning of fieldwork, in this view, is skewed towards the enhancement of practice competence and the acquisition of practice skills for agency functioning. The 'socialisation theory' of fieldwork resembles the structural-functional view of society, which on one hand assumes the stabilising function of social work and on the other, emphasises the need for social workers to reproduce the status quo. In this sense, social work agencies, which subscribe to competence-based practice, tend to help individuals, groups and communities to adapt to the stable functioning of society by providing services, setting limits and improving individual and family capacities. Not only do social work agencies help socialise individuals and families with the overall functioning of society, they also socialise social work students to perform a stabilising function by learning the necessary roles, values, as well as the skills of a future social worker. In the context of ageing, Townsend [11] coined this as 'acquiescent functionalism', in which he criticised the ways in which possibilities for change were undermined, while social realities are assumed necessary. Thus, the central meaning of fieldwork in the competence-based approach is to socialise students with the existing norms, values and practices of the agency and to routinise social work practice.

D. Fieldwork as Critical Reflective Learning

The second perspective in understanding fieldwork is related to the notion of critical reflective practice in social work education. Briefly, this perspective of fieldwork can be summarised by the work of George [12], who suggested in the North American context that fieldwork does not only provide the lived experience that is important to students in arousing interests, giving meaning to classroom theory and allowing them to test their career commitment, it is more of an indispensable method of teaching when knowing, understanding, doing and reflecting are seen as essential steps in the learning process. In other words, fieldwork is a venue for two-way learning. It is not merely that students learn to practice in a 'real world' agency setting where they have to acquire the 'competence' to become a social worker, it also acts as a platform where students reflect upon the knowledge acquired in the classroom, which includes theory, skills and the values of social work. This in turn, promotes deeper understanding of the knowledge and assists students in making sense of it in the practice situation. This is a kind of 'contextual knowing', having continuous reflection, examination and expansion of their knowledge and practice in different situations and settings [13]. Thus, fieldwork can also be understood as a two-way learning process whereby knowledge and practice are mutually integrated and generated through a synthesis of classroom learning and fieldwork practice.

Critical reflective learning in fieldwork can also take place when students observe and critically appreciate social work roles in the agency. This requires students to rethink, and to some extent, challenge what social workers do in the agency setting and its value underpinnings. This also requires students

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to question and reconsider the limits of social work agencies in delivering services within the current welfare climate, how it is constructed and how it affects the welfare of the service users. In addition, it is possible for students to learn how agency resources, rules and administrative procedures may support or limit service delivery and how social workers deal with the limitations, conflicts, risks and the possible value dilemmas in practice situations [14]-[16]. With an encouraging learning environment and appropriate support, fieldwork can also be a setting where students can learn to critically reflect upon social work values and value conflict in practice situations, rather than only adopting them as a given. In this sense, the meaning of fieldwork is not simply to 'socialise' students to fit into the given social realities and to learn the survival 'know-how', it can be regarded as an active environment for promoting critical reflection and a learning site for promoting change.

E. The Educational and Organisational Dimensions of Fieldwork in Hong Kong

There are two main approaches with regard to the organisation of fieldwork arrangements in Hong Kong. Firstly, there is the university-led approach where the institution takes the initiative to approach the agencies for student placements. The university sets out fieldwork requirements and the mode of supervision, and seeks support and agreement from the agency. The agency, in return, usually plays a supportive role, though negotiations are always possible. The second is the agency-led approach in which the role of the fieldwork agency is more active. Usually agencies approach the universities to suggest offering placement opportunities for students. In these cases, learning opportunities and work tasks are mainly designed by the agency. There are clear expectations from the agency as to what is to be offered and what students are expected to do during the placement period. One typical example can be seen in fieldwork in statutory settings where services are mandatory and the use of statutory power is involved in the working process.

In Hong Kong, a mixed-mode is usually adopted where neither the university nor the agency has complete control of how fieldwork is to be conducted and practiced. However, it looks increasingly apparent that the traditional commanding role of the university in designing, supervising and monitoring fieldwork is changing, and the agencies, both statutory and non-governmental, have gradually increased their participation and control in the negotiation of fieldwork arrangements. This is manifested in agencies becoming more selective in offering placements to training institutes, setting conditions for the training institutes in selecting suitable students for particular placements, and in some rare cases directly interviewing students to determine whether placement opportunities are granted. The increasing participation and control of the agency in social work education in general, and fieldwork in particular, is multifaceted. Firstly, there is a rapid increase in social work programmes in Hong Kong [17], which leads to a significant increase in the demand for fieldwork placement. Keen competition for placements gives agencies space to be more selective. Secondly, on the professional side, there are growing

concerns about the practice competence of social workers. Hence, the agencies are more eager to participate in fieldwork with a hope to monitor the quality of training of future social workers. Thirdly and most importantly, neo-liberal ideas of welfare and the theory of new managerialism [18], [19] have penetrated deeply into social welfare provision in Hong Kong. The longstanding partnership between the Government, which funds social work provisions, and the non-governmental agencies, which are the actual providers of social work services, has been totally transformed by the new funding formula, Lump Sum Grant Subvention scheme (LSG), which has been in operation since the year 2000. Under these circumstances, the capability of fieldwork to train social workers who are competent to practice within the new welfare climate has become a crucial concern.

The organisation of fieldwork has created important implications for fieldwork education. The increasing participation of social work agencies in fieldwork matters may likely impact on what students should do, how students should learn, and to a considerable extent, how students' performances are to be evaluated. For example, practice competence as reflected in the ability of students to observe and practice according to agency procedures, rules and policies is being emphasized; and also the skills of students in handling clients in accordance with the defined boundaries of the agency are seen as of primary importance. In this way, critical reflection is narrowly defined as the ability to propose new service ideas and programmes within the managerial mind-set and to meet funding requirements, while critical examination of the limits of existing welfare policy and practices and actions for change will be regarded as 'oppositional', 'not constructive or unhelpful' or 'unrealistic'. Such critical reflection is likely to be excluded from the criteria of evaluating practice competence.

F. Problems of Fieldwork in Hong Kong Social Work Education

Neo-liberal welfare policies have had a profound impact on fieldwork education in Hong Kong. Firstly, the priority of social work concerns for the agency has shifted from the meeting needs of the clients to meeting the quantitative service targets set by the Government under the LSG scheme. The emphasis of managerial practices in social work has also become increasingly reliant on procedures and routines, rather than professional judgement. Munro [20] suggests that this problem signifies the dominance of social work under a bureaucratic-instrumental style bias and an over-reliance on procedural and controlling forms of practice within managerialism. This has resulted, as observed by Munro [21], in professional judgment being undermined and discouraged alternatives in meeting the users' needs. When critical reflection is not encouraged, it is likely that opportunities for student learning in the field will be reduced.

The second problem is related to funding cuts in social welfare services and the difficulties it causes for fieldwork [22]. In Hong Kong, funding cuts, or a change of funding mode, have resulted in the promotion of managerialism in welfare agencies where service efficiency, which means using less social

workers and less money to do more work, is supreme. The Funding and Service Agreement (FSA) between the Government and NGOs set quantitative output indicators for agencies to follow. The drive to meet output indicators, which means continued survival of the agency, may also gradually override the consideration of social work values where client's interests should be top priority.

Thirdly, there are problems relating to the partnership between the university and the agencies where students are placed for fieldwork practice. As pointed out above, the participation of agencies in fieldwork matters has been strengthened over the past decade or so, and the involvement of agencies in accrediting social work programmes has been 'institutionalised' by the SWRB. As Shardlow et al. have reminded us, employer involvement in social work education should not be taken-for-granted as desirable or not, as 'it is in part an ideological matter: a question of belief about the role of the employer and therefore of the desirable extent of employer engagement with social work education' [23]. The question in Hong Kong is not the presence of a weak partnership, but rather how, and the extent to which, the institutionalisation of agency participation over the past decade shapes the direction of social work education, especially in fieldwork learning.

The last, yet probably the most important problem to consider, is what students learn in the field and how learning takes place in the agency environment. It is important to recognise that placing students in an agency for fieldwork is not purely a straight forward one-way process where students can automatically benefit from the practice experience. While there is potential for learning to practice, there is also potential for frustrations where students find classroom knowledge and social work values incompatible with the practice culture of the agency. There are also situations where potential conflicts exist between educational ideals and practice concerns. To this point, as observed by Globerman and Bogo, the culture of the agency, or the degree to which it is a learning environment, may be more significant in the provision of placements than individual supervisor's motivation [24].

III. COMPETENCE-BASED AND CRITICAL REFLECTIVE SOCIAL WORK

A. Competence-Based Approach to Social Work Education

Competence-based social work training is, in the past two decades, introduced in the overall assessment framework of social work education and training continuum in different parts of the world [25]-[27]. As such, the emphasis on competencies has shifted the focus of professional social work education from programme design and teaching and learning processes to outcomes [28]. In Hong Kong, the outcome-based approach, which is heavily competence-based, has become the mainstream practice in social work education. Accordingly, student learning is broken down into different levels and different dimensions of outcomes, which must be tangibly demonstrated and assessable. The outcome and evidence-based mode of education is most popular in professional education. Kuhlmann argues that for the past three quarters of a century,

professional education in general, and social work education in particular, has increasingly been dominated by an approach to curriculum characterised by its emphasis on objectivity, quantification and certainty [29]. The focus for competence-based social work training is the achievement of behavioural goals, which is understood as core competencies. In other words, social work competencies are, and have to be, demonstrated in behavioural terms, which are commonly understood as practice skills. This helps explain why skills, rather than critical reflection, are viewed as more concrete and down-to-earth in social work practice. The educational objectives stipulated by the Council of Social Work Education in the USA have clearly pointed out the importance of competencies in social work education:

Competency-based education is an outcome performance approach to curriculum design. Competencies are measurable practice behaviours that are comprised of knowledge, values, and skills. The goal of the outcome approach is to demonstrate the integration and application of the competencies in practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities [30]

In principle, social work competencies should be understood more comprehensively as a combined outcome of knowledge, skills and values, which are constantly interacting, reflecting and reformulating in the social welfare context in which the needs and problems of service users are located. However, when it comes to frontline practice, practice skills are far more often used to reflect competencies because they are more easily observable, demonstrable and quantifiable in behavioural terms. Moreover, competence is often related to the ability to practice within agency requirements. In other words, agency policies, procedures and practice requirements are important factors shaping what constitutes practice competence and practice orientation, including what are regarded as important in everyday practice, what agency policies and procedures must be followed and what are important for service evaluation and performance appraisal.

A typical example is social work practice under the LSG in Hong Kong, where social workers have to fulfil the quantified number of service indicators in order to meet the Funding and Service Agreement (FSA) assigned by the Social Welfare Department of the SAR government. Moreover, service outcomes are also monitored in explicit behavioural terms according to the Service Quality Standards (SQS) in related to the LSG. What is important to note here is that the present understanding of social work competence in Hong Kong has been rather narrowly conceived and has also become, to a considerable extent, employment dominated. How and to what extent this will shape the learning emphasis in fieldwork, as far as competence-based and critical reflection is concerned, will be carefully studied in this research.

B. Critical Reflective Learning in Social Work

Reflective learning has long since been developed in education and adult learning [31]-[34] and has been introduced in social work teaching and learning in the past two decades

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[35]-[38]. In professional practice, according to Schön, the basis of reflective learning is grounded on the understanding that professionals learn to practice through 'reflection-in-action', which emphasises the immediacy of reflection in the midst of practice, and the experience itself would constitute the basis of the next action [39], [40]. It is not a top-down learning approach in which knowledge and skills are learnt in the classroom and then applied in the practice settings. Rather, it is a process of knowledge-action-reflection cycle whereby professionals learn and improve their practice from practice-in-reflection.

In the case of social work, reflection is thus an ability of social workers that is necessary for the purpose of self-correction and improvement of service [41]. In other words, through reflection professionals can be aware of, and criticize their own routines so as to bring new insights for knowledge and practice. That said, it is necessary to note that reflection can sometimes be a conflated concept, which can mean different things in different contexts [42]-[45]. For example, reflective practice can be taken as a way to smoothen one's practice towards given objectives without critically considering the social and cultural assumptions of the practice and the structure and power underpinning them. Thus, being reflective in social work may sometimes be used in competence-based training where students are asked to reflect upon their own skills and see how to improve them. This is, however, a narrow understanding of reflection because the underlying rationale of the agency policies, assumptions and values behind the practice can often be unexamined and unchallenged. In addition, the neo-liberal welfare climate that shapes the present priority of social work is also neglected. Therefore, there is a need to go one step further and locate reflective practice in a critical framework. Without being critical in reflection, the transformative power of social work practice will be reduced. The existing parameters of practice, which sees the locus for change as residing in the individual practitioners will then be maintained [46], [47].

Being critically reflective, social workers must locate their reflection within the ideological, cultural, as well as structural framework upon which their practices are informed. They should have the awareness and readiness to go beyond existing practice requirements so as to unravel the factors which shape their practices and restrict alternatives. Moreover, critical reflection also requires social workers to challenge privileged knowledge (for example, practice theories and approaches) and to deconstruct the taken-for-granted assumptions underpinning the beliefs that this given knowledge receives as priority [48]. Without such critical reflection social workers would easily be bound by the existing service framework and its underlying assumptions and will not be able to consider alternatives for the benefit of their clients. Finally, for reflection to be critical, social workers must incorporate an understanding of personal experience within social, cultural and structural contexts [49]. Through this process, social workers attempt to connect their own personal experience, the construction of cultural beliefs and their relationship with the wider social world. Karvinen-Niinikoski sees this as a process of "searching for

critically reflective agency in professional practice" [50]. In the case of Hong Kong, while social work practice is embedded in the neo-liberal social context such as the LSG, social workers must learn to recognize that they are also creators and makers who have the possibilities of making changes. Critical reflection enables social workers to re-examine themselves, not only to look at personal strengths and weaknesses, but more importantly, to critically appreciate how their personal experience shapes their own practice orientation and how alternative practices are restricted.

C. Critical Reflection in Fieldwork

The fieldwork agency is apparently an important constituent of the students' learning community. It can facilitate critical reflection, but at the same time it can also discourage it. To make critical reflective learning possible in fieldwork, the agency has to be critically aware of its own training purpose and underlying assumptions and to make explicit their theory-in-use both in everyday practice and in supporting student placement. This is because field practice is the only, and the most important, 'nexus of influence' for students [51] and it is the agency which offers this unique experience for students to explore and to reflect upon the knowledge-practice relationship. The agency has to be aware of the important role they are playing in facilitating and enabling critical reflection of students in the placement because reflective learning must be an intentional experience and the enhancement of reflective learning in the field must be carefully designed [52]. Also, the agency has to consider to what extent they are committed to reflective learning and how much they are prepared to do so in their own everyday practice as well as in their interaction with students. This requires practitioners to identify their own underlying philosophies of social welfare and why they deliver services in the current way and to reconsider how far changes and alternatives can be possible. The agency needs also to be clear about their training assumptions, as to whether students are in the field to learn standardized practice and to acquire the required skills, or they are encouraged to reflect upon their experience and to explore alternatives in the service setting. It is upon the self-reflection of the agency that critical reflective learning of students can take place in the agency context.

IV. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

In view of the fact that the subject matter is new in Hong Kong, this research is designed as an exploratory study which seeks to understand the way in and extent to which the agencies support and/or hinder critical reflective learning in fieldwork. As the learning process in fieldwork education is very much embedded in the everyday working experiences and interactions between agency workers and the students concerned, the meaningful way of understanding this learning process is to step into the subjective interpretations of social workers who work with students in the agencies. For this reason, qualitative research approach is adopted and in-depth interviews are used to excavate the rich experience and interpretations of social work personnel in the agencies. In this research, mid-level agency managers, whose role is to make

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fieldwork arrangements as well as frontline social workers, who work directly with students in the field, are selected as informants. These informants are from five major areas of social work services, including family service, youth work service, elderly service, and rehabilitation service as well as community work service, where students are placed for fieldwork practice. Five mid-level managers and 10 frontline social workers from these five areas of service who have experience of working with students in fieldwork are invited for an in-depth interview. Details about the informants are listed in the Appendix. Informed consent was sought before the interview and the principle of anonymity was ensured for confidentiality. All informants were allowed to pull out at any time if they did not feel comfortable so as to ensure voluntary participation. In the end, all informants completed the interviews successfully. With the consent of the participants, all interviews were audio-taped and subsequently transcribed for qualitative analysis.

The procedure for data analysis involved: Firstly, verbatim transcription of interviews and multiple readings to familiarize the content before coding. Relevant keywords, phrases or quotations were highlighted accordingly with the codes. Secondly, after identifying basic themes all coded and highlighted materials were re-read again to identify similarities and being organized together. These organized themes were merged and were re-read to see whether there were any new themes, or how the emerging themes could be re-organized. Thirdly, these processes were repeated among the organized themes to allow major themes to develop. The investigator also highlighted the relationships between major themes and identified the themes that were important to the informants.

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this part of the paper, the author shall discuss the findings related to the informants' understanding of social work competence and critical reflection. The discussion will be organized into three parts. The first part is about what frontline workers and mid-level managers perceive as most important for students to learn in fieldwork. This will be followed by a discussion on how the informants understand social work competence and critical reflection. Finally, discussions will be presented on whether critical reflection is seen to be practicable and able to be learnt in the field.

A. What Students Must Learn in Fieldwork

Three elements were emphasized by the informants here. First, it is the majority view that the purpose of fieldwork is to prepare students for practice in the 'real world' of social work, and the agency is there to provide a 'total environment' for students to learn to migrate from the 'ideal world' of the classroom to the 'real world' of social work practice. According to this group of informants, practice is the end product of learning. Thus, students must be able to grasp the essential attitudes, methods and skills needed for working in the agency. This requires students to be proficient with the nature of the services, the 'culture' (ways of practice) of the agency, the administrative rules and regulations (and also the

limitations and boundaries), the needs of the community and the clients, as well as the proper working attitude of being a social worker. An example of this view is put forward by Informant Billy who is a frontline social worker from an Integrative Family Service Centre (IFSC). He expressed that the most essential thing for students to learn in fieldwork is to practice in the agency setting. This includes an understanding of the way in which the agency operates and services are delivered, an ability to follow the work pattern of the agency, such as how to relate to clients and collaborate with other stakeholders and how to relate to colleagues. Billy claims that all these must be mastered by the students because this is exactly what will be required for a paid social worker in the future.

The second element that many frontline informants think that students must learn is proper working attitudes in an agency setting. Two aspects are identified as important: firstly, it is the attitude of being a social worker, which includes the ability to maintain a proper attitude with clients according to social work principles, such as respecting clients' individuality and having non-judgmental attitudes. The second aspect is the attitude towards work, which includes a proper sense of responsibility in work, proper behaviour as employed staff, such as observing punctuality and other agency rules and regulations, as well as attitudes towards colleagues. The following quotation from Informant Kay demonstrates how work attitudes are seen as important:

> "Some attitudes must be learnt, for example accountability and sense of responsibility… If your attitudes are not good, even if your other performances are outstanding I would think this is an important shortcoming. Also we see as very important, students' attitudes to clients and to colleagues; whether they show enthusiasm or just treat work as a task to complete… so learning the work attitudes is our important expectation."
(Kay, frontline worker in youth service)

The third element that students must learn in the agency, as identified by most informants, is to grasp the necessary skills and methods for practice in a particular service setting. A majority of the informants are of the view that this is the most important thing for students in fieldwork, and students must be able to locate learning practice within the role and mission of the agency. In other words, practice competence is identified as most important for fieldwork learning, and students must learn to translate generic skills to fit specific agency settings and services.

B. How Social Work Competence Is Being Understood

Overall, the findings suggest that the interpretations of social work competence among frontline informants are largely consistent with their views about what students must learn in the agencies. The fit-for-purpose and down-to-earth view of social work practice is seen as prevalent among many frontline informants. In other words, social work competence is very much agency-bound, in which it is taken to mean the ability of students to practice within agency requirements and agency routines. This is well attested by Informant Peter, a frontline

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worker in community work service, who suggests that social work competence is the ability to work within an agency boundary, without which one can hardly work properly without 'troubles' especially in government subsidized agencies. Put it more directly, social work competence, as shared by many other informants, is the ability to complete work tasks required by the agencies. Notwithstanding this understanding, however, a few informants also express that social work competence must include the ability to reflect one's own practice. For example, Informant Vicky suggested that current social welfare context in Hong Kong has forced social workers to treat people as work tasks, and managerialism, which stresses monitoring and accountability, has made social workers 'accountable devils' who can satisfy all the quantitative output requirements but fail to satisfy the people in need. That is why Vicky proposes that a competent social worker must also be reflective. In her own words:

"Competence is the ability to become self-reflective, continuously develop the ability to be in touch with clients, revisit client's problem and situations, has the ability to use what is learnt, not to do only fashionable things." (Vicky, frontline worker in rehabilitation service)

However, it must be noted that 'reflection' has not been regarded as something that can replace the acquisition of practical competence and skills. Rather, most informants suggest that it is essential for students to initially acquire basic competence in the field and then create space for reflection. For example, Informant Amy who is a frontline worker in IFSC expressed that practice competence is a prerequisite for reflection. In her view, students must be able to get hold of all the basic practice skills and fulfil all the work requirements of the agency before proceeding; otherwise, the room for reflection will be limited.

As far as mid-level managers are concerned, their interpretation appears to be quite similar to that of the frontline informants. Of the four mid-level managers who have shared their views on this, three construed social work competence as knowledge, skills and values and fieldwork as a venue for students to integrate these three elements in practice. This is a classical understanding of social work competence. The question remaining here, however, is how these elements are being integrated and how their relative importance is being weighted. In this regard, unlike the frontline workers who tend to place more weight on the ability to fit into agency practice and the acquisition of practice skills, more mid-level managers tend to place emphasis on the ability to practice based on social work values and ethics. In other words, according to mid-level managers, the ability to integrate social work values with practice skills is a major component of social work competence. Practice must be guided by values and competence is the ability to make ethical decisions.

C. How Critical Reflection Is Being Understood

Firstly, critical reflection is taken to mean reflection of one's own practice and the purpose of such reflection is to rethink the practice process and shed light on one's own skills for future improvement. This is a kind of 'reflection-on-action' where students think back on the practice situation itself and see whether one's practice skills could be sharpened. Therefore, the focus of reflection is on the practice level with special attention paid to the skills of the students.

The second aspect of critical reflection understood by the frontline informants is that critical reflection is a way to look beyond existing services and see how they can be improved. This understanding is shared amongst Informants Vicky, Kay, Amy and May. For example, Vicky suggested that reflection of service provision is a continuation of practice reflection where one has to continuously ask oneself what kind of services one is providing and how it can better meet the needs of clients. Thus, social workers cannot replicate their daily work without reflection. According to Vicky:

"…you can shut your office doors and follow the routines every day. But this is not critical reflection. In our service many workers fail to do so (critical reflection). When we repeatedly face the same difficulties in delivering our service, in fact we need to put the agenda up to a higher level… We need to keep on thinking, reflecting, modifying and upgrading our service" (Vicky, frontline worker in rehabilitation service)

The third aspect of critical reflection as put forward by two frontline informants, Amy and Jane, is that it is a process of looking sensitively at the social policy which may have created the problems and asking questions about how the problems are rooted in social structure. In other words, critical reflection must reach a deeper level so as to challenge the social structure, which to a certain extent, creates the problems of clients and to challenge the policies of the Government, which limits the possibility for change. An example of this is given by Informant Amy who sees critical reflection as a mind-set where students should be equipped and made ready to query government policies. She emphasizes the need to be critical in reflection because it is not just an evaluation of how well one practices:

"[Critical reflection] is from the outset to have a mind-set so that one would not need to say 'yes' to all government suggestions. There is no need for an NGO to present itself as very timid who says yes to everything. Students have been socialized to be obedient to rules since they were young. But as social workers we should be different. If all social workers are only yes people, it is a downgrade of social work." (Amy, frontline worker in family service)

The fourth notion of critical reflection, which is a majority view of the frontline informants, is that it is a kind of self-reflection through which one sees one's own strengths and weaknesses as a professional helper. In this light, majority of frontline informants suggested that one has to consider how one's practice is affected by one's background such as upbringing, gender and other factors because only with such reflection one can work beyond one's limits. This view is well represented by Informant Kay, who suggested that:

"When you go to fieldwork, at least you should have a mind-set where you should think more that you won't be blocked by taken-for-granted meanings about what is good and what is bad and fix yourself there. It is not

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so...At least you should have an attitude to constantly rethink beyond common understandings... It is like life-long learning. If you block yourself from this attitude you will never be able to open up. I think students should at least hold on tight to this reflective thinking in fieldwork." (Kay, frontline worker in youth service)

The last aspect, which is a minority view from two frontline informants, (Peter and Choi), is that critical reflection can only be constructive if it is done within the agency framework; thus, a social work student or a social worker has to observe agency boundaries and the limitations of the existing welfare context in order to be reflective. The very essence of this view is that the purpose of critical reflection in fieldwork is not to be critical towards the agency and its services, but it is more important for students to critically evaluate their own performance. In other words, one can develop critical reflection as a personal quality but when it comes to social work practice, agency frameworks must be observed

As far as mid-level managers are concerned, their understanding of critical reflection is found to be somewhat similar. Firstly, reflection is about self-reflection and practice reflection, whereby one has to constantly ask why one is doing what one has done and how it can be improved in the future. Secondly, critical reflection is taken to mean reflection on values and ethics. It is an ability to connect actions and mind. It is to question given truths and consider the values underpinning the actions. This is consistent with mid-level managers' concerns with value-based practice and reflection on the consistency between value and practice. One example here is provided by Informant Elsa, who suggested that critical reflection involves a re-examination of social workers' value stance in social work actions. The third notion of critical reflection is to be able to look at things from different angles and to be creative and innovative. For example, Informant Man suggested that critical reflection is about 'new' ways of thinking so that social workers do not need to be bound by agency routines and can break through service limits with creativity and innovation.

Only one mid-level, informant Elsa, related critical reflection to critical awareness of social policy and the power of the social worker, which shapes the standpoint of social work practice. Yet, it is argued here that she has not gone far enough in suggesting how much critical reflection should be allowed within the agency setting and how far she expects this to bring about agency, as well as service, change when such reflection contradicts the boundaries of the agency.

In sum, critical reflection has been understood differently amongst frontline informants, as well as their mid-level counterparts. However, the mainstream notion of critical reflection as understood by the majority of informants reveals that there is a lack of challenge on social policy and its underpinning ideology, which informs the existing services. There is also a lack of fundamental re-examination of why current agency practices and competence-based approaches to social work must be upheld. Critical reflection is found to be restricted and is mainly confined to direct practice, service evaluation, self-reflection and appraisal of personal strengths

and weaknesses as the focus for thinking. This finding is consistent with the criticism of Brookfield, who argues that reflection can be focused solely on the "nuts and bolts of process" [53], and leaves the criteria, the power dynamics and the wider structures unquestioned and such reflection cannot be regarded as critical because of the absence of a critical edge. Only a few informants have included the need for students to challenge the existing welfare ideology and the underlying assumptions of the existing practice routine, while the majority has overlooked the structural causes of clients' problems and the possibility that social work perpetuates these problems through their services. Even among the minority of workers who see value reflection as important, it tends to emphasize the continuation of social work professional ethics, rather than to encourage critical reflection of how social work values are overridden by the neo-liberal anti-social welfare climate in Hong Kong. To some extent, the findings again suggest that the espoused theory of fieldwork learning adopted by agency informants is very much informed by the competence-based approach of social work, which is also the prevalent theory-in-use in the agency. Furthermore, the lack of critical reflection among social workers in placement agencies may imply a possible restriction in the scope and depth of critical reflective learning of students in fieldwork.

D. Critical Reflective Learning in Fieldwork

The findings suggest here that there are diverse views as to whether critical reflective learning can happen in fieldwork. On the one hand, there are a few frontline informants who suggest that social workers in the field should support and enhance critical reflective learning of students and they have had a few successful experiences in doing so. However, even those who support critical reflection feel that there are still some conditions that need to be met in order for it to be enhanced. On the other hand, most frontline informants are of the view that enhancing critical reflection in fieldwork is extremely difficult, although this aspect of learning is preferred.

Only three frontline participants feel positive about enhancing critical reflection in fieldwork, in that they think they should do so and have some actual experience in doing so. For example, Informant Amy considered that critical reflection is a life-long quality of a social worker that has to be developed during fieldwork. She made use of interactive opportunities, such as debriefing sessions after service programs to stimulate students to consider issues beyond agency rules and service limits and to rethink how government policies brought about such limits. Her aim here is to develop a way of evaluation beyond service implementation so that students can be aware of the need to consider broader policy issues, which shape and constrain services. She also made use of informal chats with students, although there is no formal evaluation of how much it has been effective. Amy's experience suggests that frontline social workers have to be conscious of their purpose in stimulating critical reflection and need to take the initiative; otherwise, nothing would have been done. On the other hand, most informants, frontline and mid-level managers alike, find critical reflection very difficult to carry out. For example,

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Informant May gave advice to students only about practice skills, which helped solve students' immediate difficulties, while critical reflection was not in the agenda. For Informant Vicky, this all depends on the initiative of students. Informant Jane explained that critical reflection is important for community workers but mentors may be unaware of their role in enhancing this:

"*I don't seem to have this role. No one ever told me that I need to have this role in my work. But I think this is important*". (Jane, frontline worker in community work)

In sum, the informants show that they have different experiences and diverse views as to whether critical reflection can happen in fieldwork. These diverse views could be a result of their daily experiences embedded in their perceived 'reality' of the agency context. On the one hand, some frontline informants are overwhelmed by practical constraints in their everyday practice. On the other hand, some frontline informants have entrenched themselves with, and in so doing, have become a part of the 'reality' of the agency culture. To these informants, the most important learning element of students in fieldwork is to learn to practice within existing agency and policy frameworks. Critical reflection is thus taken to mean improvement of practice competence. Reflection beyond this level does not appear to be an agenda in their practice, not to mention enhancing critical reflection of students. As for the mid-level managers, although they seem to be more distant from the frontline barriers, critical reflection is still being restricted within the profession (value-based practice) and service development.

VI. Conclusion: Some Recommendations for Improvement

Fieldwork is a key component in social work education in Hong Kong. However, in spite of its importance, few local researchers have examined the role social work agencies play in enhancing students' learning in the field. This study is an attempt to fill this research gap. The findings overall suggest that the fit-for-purpose and down-to-earth view of social work practice is seen as prevalent among most informants. There is a strong line of thought that social work competence is the ability to practice within agency boundaries. The importance of reflection is found to be subordinate to that of practice competence.

As far as critical reflective learning is concerned, the findings suggest that critical reflection is narrowly conceived and is taken to mean primarily reflection of one's own practice, and the purpose of such reflection is to rethink the practice process and shed light on one's own skills for future improvement. The importance of questioning and challenging the underlying assumptions of existing social work practice, social policy frameworks that constrain existing practice and the social structure which shapes disadvantages and under privileges is lacking among most participants. The lack of critical reflection among the agency informants, together with the agency-led and reality-directed fieldwork conception would likely restrict the learning of critical reflection in fieldwork.

This situation is less than ideal in fieldwork learning, as far as the development of critical reflective practice is concerned. Measures have to be taken to address the problems found in this research so that critical reflection is more likely in fieldwork learning and the agencies can hopefully become more supportive in enhancing critical reflection. For this purpose, three major measures are proposed below.

First, measures have to be taken within the agency so as to strengthen social workers' readiness to facilitate critical reflective learning. This suggestion takes into consideration the experience of Ruch who used this approach in clinical settings to facilitate reflective practice among co-workers. Based on Ruch's experience, for practitioners in the field who support critical reflective practice it is suggested that they form small support groups to share success, as well as frustrations in critical reflective practice and to gain insight from others' experience [54]. Gradually, this will hopefully form a critical reflective base for the team and the experience of such sharing can become an encouraging and supportive force for the agencies, including practitioners and students [55], [56]. This critical reflective base may become a source of support for students during their fieldwork.

Secondly, the existing obstacles of enhancing critical reflective learning and practice are very much embedded in the current neo-liberal welfare climate in Hong Kong. In the case of Hong Kong, the limits of the LSG scheme and the ways in which it undermines critical reflective social work practice and limits the critical reflection of students has to be recognized and changed. There is also a need for the social work sector in Hong Kong to re-establish the social work mission towards the pursuit of social justice amidst the loss of the social elements of social work [57]. The pursuit of this mission relies on social workers who are critically reflective on existing social conditions and social work practices which perpetuate social inequalities and social disadvantages.

Finally, in order to create a social work sector that is supportive to critical reflective learning, the whole social work sector should be engaged, through both the platforms of the agency as well as the university including students, in an ideological reflection of what social work is now doing in Hong Kong and the way in which it serves the disadvantaged and the privileged. There is a need to challenge the values of social welfare ideology and structure prevalent in Hong Kong today and to question the underlying assumptions of competence-based social work practice in the agency.

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APPENDIX

Background information of the participants in the in-depth interview*

Service / Information	Youth service		Elderly service		Family service		Rehabilitation service		Community development	
MID-LEVEL MANAGERS										
Name	Elsa		Man		Sean		Sue		Chris	
Level of Social work education**	MSW		MSW		BSW		BSW		MA (SW)	
Working experience in social work (year)	29		>25		8		12		24	
Working experience in present post (year)	4		2		4		1.5		10	
FRONT-LINE WORKERS										
Name	Kay	Tim	Choi	May	Amy	Billy	Vicky	George	Jane	Peter
Level of Social work education**	BSW	BSW	MSW	MSW	BSW	BSW	BSW	MSW	BSW	BSW
Working experience in social work (year)	18	7	13	20	11	30	16	10	16	6
Working experience in present post (year)	5	7	9	1	8	6	7.2	6	16	6
Number of students supported (approx.)	10	20	20	15	5	24	25	>20	20	15

*All 15 participants are employed in 15 different social work agencies that are receiving government subsidy as major funding source.

**MSW= Master of Social Work; MA(SW)= Master of Arts in Social Work; BSW= Bachelor of Social Work

Fig. 1 Background information of informants

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