

## **Fieldwork Placement Revelation in Hong Kong Indigenous Practices – Languages**

**Dr. Chan Yuk Sim Catherine**

Associate Professor,  
Hong Kong Nang Yan College of Higher Education  
Hong Kong

**Dr. Fung Chi Ho Benjamin**

Associate Professor  
Hong Kong Nang Yan College of Higher Education  
Hong Kong

### **Abstract**

Fieldwork education is an essential and an integral part of the curriculum of social work and helps students to develop professional behavior. Fieldwork training can foster the integration of theories and practice-based knowledge.

Hong Kong is a place where Chinese and foreigners gather, and Chinese and English are equally important. However, English is the main language of instruction in most College. During the fieldwork placement, students are required to submit assignments in English writing. However, some fieldwork supervisors also said that students have practical abilities, but they often fail to express them in their reports while in English writing. For some students with weak English writing skills, they are very worried that their grades will be affected. This question is worth exploring especially in Hong Kong's situation.

**Keywords:** Fieldwork placement, competence assessment and language proficiency

### **1. Introduction**

1.1. Fieldwork education is an essential and an integral part of the curriculum of social work and helps students to develop professional behavior. Fieldwork training can foster the integration of theories and practice-based knowledge.

1.2. Throughout the fieldwork placement, many elements need to be concerned such as supervision approaches in the social work profession, supervisory practice models, supervision formats, supervisory practice strategies, assessment system and grading system. (Chan, Y. S, 2021).

1.3. Honestly, students show much concerning on the assessment system of the fieldwork. Assessment is a core feature of social work field education, which includes formative and summative assessment (Hay & O' Donoghue, 2009). In terms of formative assessment, it is an ongoing process of monitoring and providing feedback on student's work. For the purpose of formative assessment, it is used for enhancing

student's learning (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006). Fieldwork supervisors can help students identify their strengths, weaknesses and target areas that need work. Summative assessment evaluates student learning at the end of fieldwork placement by comparing their performance against standards or benchmarks. Usually, use for grading purpose to distinguish between different levels of class performance and to ensure standards are met (Shute and Kim, 2014). There is hot debate on the kinds of assessment methods that are best for students. Nonetheless, competency assessment is very important in social work fieldwork education, however which competencies need to be achieved or how such competencies can be measured and who should be involved in the process of assessment remain unclear (Hay & O' Donoghue, 2009). This is a topic worthy of further discussion. As mentioned by Black and Wiliam, 1998, students' learning and academic achievement will be influenced by the type of assessment used.

1.4. Here, the main research method used is documentary research. Through content analysis, revisit the concern issues of fieldwork placement. Under this study, the writer would use the placement supervisors' reports and the placement handbooks of different institutions as the main content of this study.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Documentary Research Methods**

2.1.1. Documentary research method is adopted in this study. According to Payne and Payne (1994), it used in exploring and categorizing physical sources, usually written documents, whether in the private or public domain. Of course, this type of research is the most cost effective and time efficient than those social surveys, interview and focus group. There are, of course, different limitations to this research methodology. For example, limited control over data quality; limited generalizability; limited ability to answer specific research questions; limited ability to collect qualitative data; and bias (JU Ahmed, 2010).

2.1.2. Documentary research is a good way to analyzing the content of documents to find out patterns, themes and other reflections. There are different data analysis methods such as content analysis, statistical analysis or discourse analysis. The writer used content analysis to carry on the study. Placement supervisors' reports and the placement handbooks of different institutions as the main content are used. Thirty-two placement supervisors' final reports and the Fieldwork handbooks of four schools<sup>1</sup> offering social work programmes were used for this study.

2.1.3. Hong Kong is a place where Chinese and foreigners gather, and Chinese and English are equally important. However, English is the main language of instruction in most College. During the fieldwork placement, students are required to submit assignments, such as proposals, sessions plans, recordings and evaluation reports (Fieldwork Placement Manual, NYC, 2023). Part of it requires English assignments, which is a big pressure for some students. Some fieldwork supervisors also said that students have practical abilities, but they often fail to express them in their reports while in English writing. For some students with weak English writing skills, they are very worried that their grades will be affected. This question is worth exploring especially in Hong Kong's situation.

### **2.2. Content analysis**

#### **2.2.1. Placement Handbook – Assignments**

2.2.1.1. Take an example from fieldwork handbook of Gratia Christian College, *“The language used for record writing should be relevant to the agency requirement. Besides the learning contract and orientation report of which one is to be written in English, the Fieldwork Supervisor should decide on the use of language for each type of assignment and ensure that about half of all the written work will be written in English”*

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<sup>1</sup> Hong Kong Nang Yan College of Higher Education; HKCT Institute of Higher Education; Hong Kong Gratia Christian College; and School of Continuing and Professional Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

2.2.1.2. Under the Hong Kong Nang Yan College of Higher Education, social work students only seven of the students' assignments can be written in Chinese, for example. Orientation report, learning contract and daily log. Others must be written in English.

2.2.1.3. For CUSCS, four sets of assignments must be written in English such as orientation report, learning contract, mid-term evaluation and final evaluation report.

2.2.1.4. HKCT Institute of Higher Education, half of the assignments should be written in English including all types of recordings in case work and group work and administrative reports such as orientation report and daily log.

2.2.1.5. That mean English is one of the major languages used in fieldwork assignments. Different institutions have different requirements for placements, but the language requirements also require a combination of Chinese and English. It is important to understand that language is important for learning, but it is also important to understand that students with high language proficiency will achieve higher grades, and this is the issue that the researcher wishes to bring up for discussion.

## **2.2.2. Placement Handbook - Ares of Assessment**

2.2.2.1. Under the study the placement handbooks from different local institutes<sup>2</sup>, aspects of assess student's performance are usually included in professional attitudes, organizational and administrative ability, knowledge and skills, written assignments and use of supervision. There may be slight differences between different institutions. Knowledge and skills are the most important area in assessment by a high proportion. How do fieldwork supervisors assess student's competencies in work without direct observation? For some institutions, live supervision is must. Through the live supervision, supervisor would directly assess the performance of student. However, live supervision is not a compulsory mechanism. To a certain extent, supervisors depend on the written work to assess the performance. For institutions moderation, College colleagues mainly based on students' assignments, to carry out the moderation exercise.

2.2.2.2. Apart from knowledge and skills, written assignment is another assessing element in fieldwork placement. All the higher education institutions require written documentation for summative assessment purposes at the end of fieldwork placements. Students need to submit a portfolio containing various assignments. For example, proposals, session plans, recordings and evaluation reports. Some assignments need to be written in English to test student's ability to use language. Therefore, it seems that writing skill is one of the assessment methods for evaluating the performance of students. Fieldwork supervisors depend on these assignments to conduct assessments. Indeed, the fieldwork supervisor has a significant influence on the assessment of the student through the written assessment documents required at the end of their fieldwork placement (Hay & O' Donoghue, 2009).

2.2.2.3. As stated before, most institutions also require English as the main written language, so students will face a big problem. For the writer's working experience in acting a role of fieldwork coordinator, good student papers are always written with a good language proficiency. Students can use words to express what their thoughts and actions.

## **2.2.3. Reports from fieldwork supervisors**

2.2.3.1. As the writer is acting a role of fieldwork coordinator, she needs to review all kinds of supervisors' and students' documents for doing the moderation exercise. She identifies a topic of concern. Throughout the student's final evaluation reports from 69 sets of final reports from 28 fieldwork supervisors under one of the higher education institutions, which provides a Bachelor of Social Work programme in Hong Kong, some fieldwork supervisors pointed out that students' English ability is not enough to express their substantive work. Because the institutions require students to submit English

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<sup>2</sup> Fieldwork Placement Manual, NYC, 2023; Fieldwork written work, HKCT, 2023; Fieldwork Placement Handbook, CUSCS, 2018; and Fieldwork Handbook, GCC, 2019.

homework, it is recommended that they need to focus on improving their English skills. Below are some excerpts from the final evaluation reports of the placement supervisors:

*“High level of discipline and competence is demonstrated in his practices and his paperwork handling. His writing presentation was clear, systematic, and able to demonstrate his reflective thinking as well as his understanding of the social work knowledge. Still, his English is weak. Obviously, he has used much time to improve his quality of writing..... Meanwhile, it is suggested that the student worker to improve his English. English is a medium of instruction in the degree course. Therefore, he is required to write simple and fluent English”.* Supervisor A said.

*Supervisor B mentioned” For writing and presentation skills, the student worker should consider how to improve his writing skills and come up an improvement plan to enhance his writing ability. The student worker should pay more attention on how to deliver the message and his ideas through the paperwork especially in English writing. Frankly, the writing skills will be one of the key factors to affect his competitiveness in the job market and he should take it as serious as possible”.*

*He also recommended “The student worker is strongly recommended to improve his writing skills after the placement and try to follow the instructions to hone his writing ability, it is recommended that the student worker can continuously improve this area because in the real practice, the student will be ready to take up some tasks, such as funding proposals or agency’s report. In particular, using the English language is extremely important for the agencies’ correspondence and the communication. The greater writing ability the social worker has, the better reporting and documentation can be composed for the service users”.*

*As one of the supervisors C addressed that “the writing skill is one of the key components and highly influences her competitiveness”. His written report mentioned “it is recommended that the student can further improve her writing skills which are extremely important for a competent social worker. The writing skills can include two parts in this case. First, the student worker should pay more attention on the English language to make sure the grammar and structure sentence on those submitted assignments. Second, the student worker has to think carefully about how to make your own perspectives in a document appropriately... the more practical writing skills the student has, the greater ability he/she can perform in the social work profession”.*

*Supervisor P said “student is better in communicating verbally than in writing especially in English language.”*

*Supervisor L also mentioned that “As to the writing skill, since most of the reports were written in English, this somehow, hindered his expression of the profession terminology in social work”, “he also advised to polish more on his report writing, more organized, more fluent, especially, if English is required as a media of presentation”.*

*Another supervisor F reported “as an experienced frontline worker in the field, use of Chinese as the medium of language for communicating and writing becomes the usual practice and the chance of use of English is relatively small. Using English in academic aspect for her seems difficulties to express adequately solely because of the use of English and misunderstanding could be easily present from her own written communication. Though it is not easy for one to learn English in a very quick sense, it is recommended for her to pay efforts in trying to find suitable ways or means to use and to learn English in her coming future”.*

*Supervisor W reported “student’s English grammar or use of wordings could have room for improvement”..... “Further advancement on case work outcome presentation, group work role and English presentation would be expected”.*

*Supervisor O addressed that “By reading student’s daily logs and weekly logs, its demonstrated that he could make deep review and process his learning experience in Chinese writing. He made effort in drafting his group recordings and programme evaluations, but he is relatively weak in English writing.”*

*Supervisor O also expressed that “his (student) expression in Chinese writing is more efficient than English writing”. He marked another student as “generally, her English writing occasionally make mistakes, with readable presentation”.*

*Supervisor K recommended that “student needs to improve his presentation both in Chinese and English”.*

*Supervisor LE said “for using English as the medium of language for the written work, it is suggested for him to pay more attention on using simple English for expression and explanation in order for him to meet the basic requirement for others to obtain basic understanding. While there is some negative influence coming from his own written communication based on his relatively poor English.”*

*Supervisor A mentioned “Indeed, he should have a big room of improvement on his writing skills, such as not concisely expression, grammatical mistakes, typos and colloquialism”.*

*In supervisor LS’s report addressed “He need to polish his language skills to truly reflect the work actually done; otherwise, his good performance might not be truly reflected. This would be a fair assessment to demonstrate his capacity in the social work profession.”*

*Supervisor LL mentioned “student feedback that she could not just use English right away in all her written assignments. She needs to improve her English writing in presentation.”*

*Supervisor A reported that “it is suggested that student worker to improve his English. English is a medium of instruction in the degree course. Therefore, he is required to write simple and fluent English.”*

*Supervisor FU addressed that “accuracy of English wordings and grammar, together with the time of submission of paper work would also need some improvement.”*

2.2.3.2. The above is to express a lot of problems about students' writing in English. It is not that they do not know how to write relevant reports, but they are limited by their own English ability and cannot accurately express the situation at that time. In summary, students' English writing problems are as follows:

- Many grammatical mistakes;
- Sentence structure; and
- Unable to accurate expressing the phenomenon;

2.2.3.3. From the above, this is a question about English proficiency. Based on the supervisor's feedback, students need to improve their English writing skills, otherwise, it will be difficult for them to get high marks in the writing section. Of course, student also needs to strengthen his or her professional writing. It includes language proficiency, accurate, clearly and fairly and present the social worker’s professional view.

2.2.3.4. Some of the supervisors also suggested that social workers in Hong Kong mainly serve Chinese people and use Chinese more. If they change to Chinese for their practice assignments, believing that students can express more easily. Language should not hinder them from becoming social workers. The supervisors also said that many students were unable to fully express their actual working conditions because of their English language skills, and was this fair to some students with weaker language skills? The training institutions needs to strike a balance.

### **3. Implications for training institution in Hong Kong**

#### **3.1. Basic Principles for writing**

3.1.1. To help students, faculty members and fieldwork supervisors need to encourage them to improve their writing skills, especially their professional writing skills in English. Prepare some English assignments of different levels for students to use as a reference.

3.1.2. The importance of the report is to give a clear, complete and accurate picture of the client's situation, including feelings, emotions and what was said.

3.1.3. In social welfare settings, there are many different types of writing required such as recordings, referrals, evaluation for serving different purposes and needs. Therefore, functionality and purposefulness are also the first concerns for social workers or placement students (Social Welfare Department, 1999). Logical and coherent presentation in writing is an important way for effective written communication.

3.1.4. Under the effective written communication, five elements are the basic principles of effective writing addressed by Task Group, Social Welfare Department, 1999. Although these requirements are for frontline social workers, the writer believe these principles can also be applied to placement students.

The Five C's principles are as follows:

3.1.5. The five c's are clear, complete, concise, correct and considerate. (social welfare department, 2001).

Clear means the entire message must be clear. Student can use simple and specific words to avoid ambiguity and vague references.

3.1.6. Complete refers to sound internal logic of the issue and appropriate use of the wordings in reports. To prevent under- or over-communication of information to the reader.

3.1.7. Concise indicates that the written communication should be as short as possible. Irrelevant, unimportant information and officialese should be avoided.

3.1.8. Correct means carefully in providing accurate information in record. Students should consider of spelling, grammar and sentence structure.

3.1.9. The last one is consideration, and it refers to considering of the attitudes and feelings of the reader in presenting his or her message.

3.1.10. Therefore, students need to well prepare their writing assignment for following the above basic principles as well as college's requirement. All the higher education institutions in Hong Kong require written documentation for summative assessment purposes at the end of fieldwork placements. Students need to submit a portfolio containing various assignments. Also, some assignments need to be written in English to demonstrate student's ability to use language. To cite an example of Hong Kong Nang Yan College of Higher Education and HKCT Institute of Higher Education, each student needs to submit six to eight sets of English assignments including proposal, intake report, mid-term evaluation report and self-evaluation report. On top of this, writing skill is one of the assessment methods for evaluating the performance of students while marking and preparing moderation exercise by fieldwork supervisor and college's staff.

3.1.11. According to the writer's experience, students with better results are always more proficient in English. Students can use words to express what their thoughts and actions. This is why we, as social work educators, need to strengthen our students' skills in writing different documents, both in terms of formatting and language, especially in English. In addition to the English and Chinese lessons, we need to make better use of Pre-placement preparation workshops.

### **3.2. Pre-placement preparation workshops**

3.2.1. Pre-placement preparation (PPP) workshops can be a useful way to enhance the writing skills of students. However, current pre-placement preparation workshops focus on instrumental and technical training of students. There is no specific module on teaching student's professional social work writing. Arguably, a student does not only apply the theory into practice but also learns the practical skills. Under the requirement of the Social Workers' Registration Board (SWRB), prep-placement preparation workshops (PPP) are required with a total of 100 hours. The aims of these workshops are to provide students with positive orientation and adequate preparation for their fieldwork experience (SWRB, 2023).

3.2.2. To take an example, some institutions (NYC and HKCT) organized an English course for students. Course content is directly related to aspects of English writing required by practicum. The topics include developing a learning contract for placement, structure and language features of reports, writing effective orientation reports and writing effective evaluation reports. Practical skills are important, but you should not neglect writing skills either.

### **3.3. Revisit language requirements**

3.3.1. As previously stated, accuracy and clarity of presentation are of paramount importance. It is absolutely understood that the College needs to assess the practical and language skills of students, however, appropriate principles need to be applied.

3.3.2. It is the writer's experience that the College will use the students' coursework as the moderation, so their writing ability, particularly in English, will influence the assessor's assessment of their performance. Does this mean that students with higher language proficiency will have better overall performance?

3.3.3. Of course, whether the institutions will consider converting the assignments of the fieldwork placement into Chinese or both can be used. In this way, students can express easily and avoid affecting their overall performance because of their English ability. This is more reflective of their performance. In addition, now that they are working in Hong Kong and their clients are mostly local people, Chinese language is equally important. Likewise, many social welfare organizations use Chinese as their main writing language, so is there a need for the College to review the requirements and policies on the use of language in practice?

3.3.4. As teachers of social work, language ability is important, however, it is not the only element of being a competent social worker. In summary, both the fieldwork supervisors and the writer suggested that the Pre-placement Preparation workshops should be used more efficiently and that the language requirements should be reviewed.

3.3.5. This is just the beginning for us, as a social worker training institution, to explore how we can have better training for students to become professional social workers. On the other hand, we will be closer to the actual environment of the society and train up more localized social workers.

### **4. Conclusion**

4.1. Fieldwork placement training is an important part of social work training and allows social work students to apply the knowledge and skills learnt in the classroom. Supervisors also need to assess the performance of the students. Therefore, a proper assessment system is very important.

4.2. In addition, the author believes that the assessment system should also be in line with the local culture and environment, which is exactly the application of human beings in a situation or person-in-environment, a set of localized assessment criteria is needed.



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