



Is Field Placement Ready for Bilingual Students?

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Students with second-language skills are sought after in a variety of field education settings, from agencies whose clients have limited English proficiency (LEP) to agencies which serve LEP clients only occasionally. Potential contributions of bilingual students are recognized on multiple levels. As a profession, social work promotes cultural competency and supports second-language proficiency as one way of increasing access to services for clients. On a community level, these students will soon become social workers with the ability to reach out to underserved populations. For agencies, the contributions of social work students with foreign language skills can facilitate work with a wider variety of LEP clients. For social work programs, students working with LEP populations bring firsthand knowledge of non-English-speakers' experiences, especially regarding the issue of immigration, into field seminars and practice classes.

Locating field settings where students have opportunities to demonstrate generalist or advanced practice competencies is an educational standard mandate (CSWE, 2008 EPAS B2.1.2 and M2.1.2). At the same time, field education programs must "provide a learning environment in which respect for all persons and understanding of diversity and difference are practiced" (CSWE, 2008, EPAS 3.1.1). These responsibilities would appear to be met by placing students in settings where they will use second language skills. However, they could be at odds if a student is not receiving the supervision needed when working with the special concerns of LEP clients. Cautionary measures must be taken to assure that the practicum student's language skills are properly utilized, and that the student receives clinically and culturally competent supervision.

Addressing and Utilizing Second-language Skills

Placement in agencies working with LEP clients can give interns opportunities to improve their language skills as well as their cultural competency skills. Students who are acquiring a second language, however, need to be carefully screened. It should not be assumed that students are fluent enough for social work practice. Field departments must ascertain how the agency in question will verify second-language proficiency if the intern will be working in a second language. Engstrom, Min and Gamble (2009) found that MSW bilingual field students, even native speakers, were not prepared to translate professional terminology into more common terms of the second language. Of greater

concern is the tendency of agencies to use interns as interpreters. Engstrom, Min and Gamble (2009) found that a great deal of interns' time was spent in interpreting for other workers. The students reported that translating was performed in lieu of practicing other educational competencies. Even after they graduated, bilingual social workers were still asked to interpret regularly without compensation (Engstrom, Piedra & Min, 2009). This is in direct contravention of the National Association of Social Workers' standard: "The use of language translation should be done by trained professional interpreters" (2001, p. 8). The final concern is that interns with second-language skills will be assigned only LEP clients; the field liaison must advocate for a diverse caseload for interns.

A number of defined relationships exist in the field placement arena, including client systems, students, the field instructor, the field liaison and the field director. All parties need to be involved in the conversation on issues regarding the role of the bilingual student, and how competency will be assessed. Bilingual students may or may not have sufficient language skills; they may also not be culturally competent enough to work directly with clients. If they are asked to work in a bilingual capacity, the limits of that work must be made clear. Therefore, field directors should craft placement policies that consider how students are selected for placement, how language skills are evaluated, and whether the field instructor has the language and cultural competencies to properly instruct students in bilingual work with LEP clients. Students who have traveled or studied abroad learn a foreign language in a particular context and within a structured environment. English-speaking social work students are learning new uses for words and concepts in English and must guard against using jargon with clients. It would follow that students using their native language (other than English) in a field setting must have training in the use of that language supplementing what they would have learned in their homes. Providing field instruction and guiding the development of students' professional roles in bilingual contexts, including communication on the telephone, in writing, and orally, requires direct instruction from bilingual and culturally competent social workers or task supervisors who can directly monitor students' work throughout the placements.

Students should also learn how to use in-person interpreters properly when working with dialects or languages unfamiliar to them. Trained interpreters, for example, do not have separate conversations with social workers or clients in front of other parties. Rather, they interpret in the first person on behalf of the speaker. "Interpreters in the clinical setting are the crucial links between therapist and client. Their role should be as unobtrusive as possible, facilitating clear and understandable communication back and forth" (Musser-Granski, 1997). The use of language lines should be a last resort, as nonverbal communication is lost to the telephone interpreter. Students should also be encouraged not to speak on behalf of their clients when making referrals to other agencies, especially if clients are not present with students during phone calls, but should instead teach clients how to communicate directly with the agencies through interpreters or with specific bilingual professionals in the referred-to agencies. "[B]ilingual counseling [...] includes issues of language use; issues associated with the acquisition of a second culture and adjustment by immigrants to a second culture; the con-

sideration of culture-based assumptions of health, functioning, and coping; and, ideally, counselor sensitivity to environmental pressures and sociopolitical realities that impinge on and stress the individual" (Fuertes, 2004).

Clinical and Cultural Competence in Supervision

Field liaisons must devote particular attention to the quality of field instruction in agencies working with LEP clients. Clients with limited English proficiency are generally first- or second-generation immigrants or refugees. With the availability of inexpensive and accessible travel and communication, cell phones, and internet-based free calls, people's lives frequently span national borders for long periods of time. The term for this state of living in two places is transmigration. From social work's person-in-environment perspective, a transmigrant is a person-in-*two*-environments. Their lives are delicate dances of maintaining emotional, family, financial and legal ties to both their home and host countries. They travel back and forth as they are permitted by money, employment obligations and immigration status (Hunter, Lepley and Nickels, 2010). A host of accompanying issues requires heightened awareness of social work students beyond cultural and language issues. Immigration laws and processes, social service eligibility requirements and the risks of sharing information with certain public entities are a few examples. Students will need to be coached on these issues, or they will run the risk of offering well-meaning but dangerous advice.

In agencies well experienced with these issues, interns can learn important practice skills. Conversely, interns can be quickly overwhelmed and unsupported in a setting where staff is unprepared to address these challenges. Field liaisons should offer frequent consultation to field instructors in agencies working with LEP clients. In addition, schools of social work should offer course content on subjects such as immigration, and workshops on cultural competency for both students and field instructors.

A word of caution regarding field settings that might request bilingual students in order to serve a currently underserved population: students in a field placement are not intended to provide bilingual capacity to agencies. They are placed for a limited period of time in order to learn professional skills. Therefore, if the student was the facilitator of the relationship between client and agency, the agency's service provision may be jeopardized after the student's departure. Instead, agencies should encourage students to use their language skills to refer those clients to other agencies that can address clients' needs over time in a bilingual capacity. LEP clients have already experienced significant losses, and frequently transitioning relationships with helping professionals contribute to the experience of disorientation. "[S]upervisors and supervisees in bilingual counseling should be aware of the stress associated with acculturation, which includes the shock of not being able to communicate with others; the loss of family and friends; anomie; diminished social standing; underemployment; and the oppression that comes with racism, anti-immigrant attitudes, and exploitation" (Fuertes, 2004).

With careful attention to assessing interns' language proficiency, building a diverse caseload, monitoring the intern's role in the agency and supporting clinically and culturally competent supervision, field placements can offer rich learning experiences for bilingual students.

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