

# Reflecting on Field Education Partnerships on Migration and Immigration: A Canadian Perspective

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*There is growing interest in social work education to consider migration and immigration policies and practice. Based on reflections on my experience as a field education coordinator in Canada, this article contends that social work education needs to consider field placements in immigrant-serving agencies and organizations, as a way of developing new knowledge and practice to address social exclusion in society.*

It is widely acknowledged that field education remains invaluable in social work education. Students, as learners, are provided with opportunities in the field to develop practice skills, apply and build knowledge, and develop a professional identity under the supervision of their field instructor. Every year social work students undertake field placements or practice in immigrant settlement agencies and organizations providing services to newcomers, immigrants, and refugees in Canada. Immigrant settlement agencies and organizations provide an important site of learning for social work students interested in developing new knowledge and skills in social work practice with newcomer, immigrant, and refugee clients and systems.

In the field, students can improve their understanding of immigrant and refugee settlement and integration experiences; learn about services offered by nonprofit organizations in partnership with government; more fully experience social action and social justice; and gain increased understanding of the historical, political, economic, and social factors associated with international migration and immigration. As a field education coordinator in an undergraduate social work program in western Canada, I have often met with immigrant settlement workers, human service practitioners, and other community members to discuss the learning opportunities available for these students. This article draws from my reflections as a social work field education coordinator on the

importance of better preparing social work students to address diversity in social work practice and the needs of newcomers through field placements in immigrant- and refugee-serving agencies and organizations.

Migration is one of the defining global issues of the early twenty-first century, as more and more people are on the move today than at any other point in human history (International Organization for Migration, 2012). There is growing recognition that migration is an essential part of the economic and social life of every nation. This manifestation is evident in our social work practice. There are multiple and complex dimensions of migration, for example, in labour migration, family reunification, and integration, among other practices. As the first-wave generation of migrants ages, their children and even grandchildren are reaching adulthood having spent their entire lives in the countries their families chose long ago (Frideres & Biles, 2012). Increasingly, many Canadian universities are attracting foreign-born international students who bring diverse life experiences to the classroom and may consider permanent resident status in the future. As educators we strive to address social work practice in the context of diversity in our curriculum; our students are being called upon to serve clients of increasing diversity in society. This reality needs to be reflected in social work field education. In Canada there is a need to address the new Standards for Accreditation (9 and 10) in order to better prepare social work graduates to work with

newcomers to Canada in their settlement and integration process.

### **Immigration and Integration**

Canada, like other immigrant-receiving states, welcomes migrants for economic, family, and humanitarian reasons (Bhuyan and Smith-Carrier, 2010). Immigration is a recognized aspect of Canada's social, cultural, political, and economic development. Total immigration levels have remained unchanged in recent years at 240,000 to 265,000 per annum. Immigrants make up 19.8% of Canada's total population, and this is projected to rise to 22.2% by 2017 (Statistics Canada, 2005). It is estimated that by 2031, roughly 30 percent of the Canadian population will likely be a visible minority, with 36% of those being under 15 years of age (Biles, Drover, Henley, Ibrahim, Lundy, & Yan, 2010, p. 5). The 2006 census revealed that there were over six million immigrants in Canada, representing one in five Canadians at the highest proportion in 75 years. The ethnic profile of Canada's newcomer population has changed from predominantly European to non-European ancestries. Today over 200 ethnic origins are represented within Canada's diverse society. The majority of immigrants belong to a visible minority and report a mother tongue other than French or English. There are a number of global trends that will continue to impact migration and immigration such as labour force growth, economic disparities between developing and developed countries, natural disasters, globalization and trade liberalization, technology, and transnational migration practices.

To ensure a cohesive and inclusive society, there is a need for policies and programs that will be effective and efficient in integrating newcomers (Biles & Frideres, 2012). Practicum students are often confronted with the complex reality that the integration of immigrants in host communities is a multi-dimensional process. Integration is the process by which immigrants become accepted into society, and are able to fully participate in the social, cultural, political, and economic structures of their society (Biles & Frideres, 2012). In this process a variety of community-based partnerships may be required at different levels to promote immigrant settlement and integration. Given contemporary challenges in serving immigrants and their

communities, Engstrom and Okamura (2007) call for a reexamination of social services, social work practice, and social work curricula.

I would further argue that social work field education needs to consider how to improve knowledge of immigration policy and practice in order to prepare social workers for the evolving needs of the field, and to acknowledge the importance and complexity of Canadian society, including the dynamics affecting anglophone, francophone, indigenous peoples, and newcomer populations. Many immigrants face systemic barriers in our institutions and seek out supports and services in immigrant-serving agencies and organizations. There is an important role for social workers and students in this process. I have been told by many students of the value of their learning in understanding Canadian immigrant policy and immigration policy, and its impact on social justice and relationship to social work practice. Students can learn how personal and social factors influence practice with diverse clients and communities in terms of identities, values, experiences, and structures.

In the Canadian context, diversity refers to a range of characteristics including, but not limited to: age, colour, culture, disability/non-disability status, ethnic or linguistic origin, gender, health status, heritage, immigration status, geographic origin, race, religious and spiritual beliefs, political orientation, gender and sexual identities, and socioeconomic status. In the field, students can begin a process of identifying and challenging their own personal assumptions, views, and stereotypes regarding diversity and learn how immigrant-serving agencies respond to the needs of diverse clients in the community. Developing competence with diversity can be a learning objective in the field education learning contract in addition to providing effective service to diverse clients and communities.

### **Social Exclusion**

Many factors affect the social integration of immigrants, such as racism and institutional barriers in the health care, education, and justice systems, among others (Derwing & Waugh, 2012). In Canada, many racialized groups and newcomers experience marginalization in many economic and social spheres. In field seminars, students are

encouraged to share their practicum experiences in a group setting to facilitate cooperative and experiential student learning. I have found the concept of social exclusion articulated by Galabuzi (2009) as particularly insightful in helping students understand immigrants' settlement and integration experiences. Galabuzi (2009) defines social exclusion as "the inability of certain subgroups to participate fully in Canadian life due to structural inequalities in access to social, economic, political, and cultural resources arising out of the often intersecting experiences of oppression relating to race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, immigrant status, and the like" (p. 254). Moreover, "Social exclusion is both process and outcome" (p. 253).

In the current neo-liberal global order, processes of social exclusion have intensified with the deregulation of markets, the decline of the welfare state, the commodification of public goods, and the increasing non-standard forms of work and exploitation in workplaces (Galabuzi, 2009). Social exclusion provides a space for a discussion and analysis of oppression and discrimination in this policy environment by shifting the focus back to the structural inequalities that determine the intensity and extent of marginalization in society (Galabuzi, 2009).

For example, overall unemployment among immigrants to Canada is high at 14%, compared to the national rate of 7.4%. In their field placements, students learn about the lack of credential recognition and their impact on newcomers' employment options and livelihoods. Martinez-Brawley and Zorita (2011) argue that social workers could play a more central role in serving immigrants and in incorporating anti-oppressive practices. Reflective practice allows learners to practice reflectively and apply methods of critical thinking and inquiry to their developing social work practice.

During supervision and in field seminars, I encourage students to consider their own values, beliefs, behaviours, biases, prejudices, and knowledge paradigms, along with how these may differ in their agencies. In the early weeks of their placements, I ask students to participate in agency orientations to learn about the agency history, organizational structure, policies, funding sources,

and key stakeholders, as well as about the roles of immigrants and newcomers in the community. As students become aware of personal identities and experiences, socialization, values, and attitudes in relationship to diversity, a social justice approach can allow students to deepen their understanding of oppression, and adopt cross-cultural and antiracist perspectives and practices. Field agencies may facilitate students' participation in advocating for change and social justice at the individual, organizational, and systemic levels through social action strategies. Sometimes students' greatest learning comes from the challenges experienced in their field placement when there are difficulties in meeting client needs. This is particularly true with respect to the situation of temporary foreign workers in Canada.

### **Temporary Foreign Workers**

Barriers remain for temporary foreign workers who have few rights and are vulnerable to abuse due to systemic inequality (Elliott, 2012). Using temporary workers to address permanent labour demands creates a two-tiered society with a disposable workforce that is admitted only for its labour and that has fewer rights and protections than Canadians (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2012). Migrant workers are vulnerable to exploitation because of their lack of status, isolation, and lack of access to information about their rights.

Field education provides new learning opportunities for the integration of knowledge, values, and skills in practice. One of the current challenges faced by many immigrant-serving organizations is the emergent need for services for temporary foreign workers.

Temporary workers have little to no access to settlement services to help them integrate, even if they should want to transition to permanent residency. Field agencies are placed in situations where they are asked to provide services without recognition or support. On October 16, 2012, it was announced that Canadian Denhua International Mines Group plans to bring as many as 2,000 Chinese nationals into Canada to work at its mine, in a situation reminiscent of the workers who came to Canada to build the Canadian Pacific Railway. The Canadian government apologized for the Chinese head tax, offering individual payments of

\$20,000 to anyone alive who had paid it or any living spouse of those who had paid it.

Under the temporary foreign worker program employers can pay 15% below the average wage for that job in that region, and workers will be fully reliant on Canada Denhua for assistance in getting housing, health care, and ensuring their safety. Why are low-skilled workers from developing countries treated differently than high-skilled workers from developed countries? What is the government's role in forcing employers to make working conditions more attractive for Canadians to relocate and retrain? Why is the government allowing the majority of the jobs in the Denhua mines to go to Chinese nationals? This action has now prompted a review of the temporary foreign worker program in Canada. Social work practicum students confront such human rights and social justice issues in the field and in their placements with immigrant and multicultural services societies.

### Reflections on the Field

Although social workers have been working diligently toward culturally sensitive practice, the predicaments and challenges that immigrants and refugees face are beyond cultural or racial discrimination (Lundy, 2010). The case of temporary foreign workers highlights the evolving current dilemmas facing many practitioners and policy makers. Challenges such as social exclusion require a comprehensive response, and social workers are positioned to become actively engaged in raising awareness, contributing to knowledge and skills for practice, and promoting the role of social work among policy makers and practitioners in immigrant settlement and integration. Yan and Chan (2010) explain that “we are keenly aware that social workers need to have knowledge not only of the relevant policies and laws that tell us what to do and not to do but also of the rights of our clients and the challenges that they confront” (p. 22). This knowledge can also be facilitated in field education. Social workers need to be aware of the issues, challenges, and barriers faced by newcomers. In addition, it is imperative that social workers become increasingly involved in the debates surrounding immigration policies to provide a critical and anti-oppressive voice for recognition of the issues of human rights and social justice that face newcomers to Canada (Drolet, Robertson, & Robinson, 2010).

Social work education curriculum, field practica, and research contributions have the potential to advance knowledge and increase student understanding of migration and immigration. In this era of globalization, immigrants' settlement experiences are relevant to the education and training of social workers in a diverse society.

As a field education coordinator, I have encouraged social work students to consider field placements in immigrant- and refugee-serving agencies and organizations. Students report transformative learning in their field placements where solidarity is recognized through human rights and social justice approaches (Drolet, Clark, & Allen, 2012). For example, listening to newcomers' stories, joyful and painful, allows for new knowledge and thinking to emerge through reflectivity by considering the role of power (and inequality) within our society. Reflective practice allows for the possibility of multiple truths and the inclusion of a diversity of perspectives by privileging voices from the margins or those excluded from the expert role (Bolzan, Heycox, & Hughes, 2001). By acknowledging oppression as a complex structural issue that interacts with other forms of oppression and manifests in different ways, it is possible to actively pursue social change. Students are often personally affected by the change being sought—protection of workers' rights, access to permanent residence, and access to services. Immigrant-serving agencies and organizations provide a variety of services to newcomers, immigrants, and refugees, and often experience challenges in meeting the full range of needs due to policy limitations.

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