

# International social work placements: Can overseas students stimulate professional learning for NGO staff?

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## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the outcomes of collaborative work undertaken between a team of social workers supporting a New Zealand social work student from the University of Waikato completing her final placement. The student was placed at Children's Future International (CFI), a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Battambang, Cambodia. While a great deal of research looks at learning achieved for students, this article examines whether the student had an impact on the knowledge, awareness and practice of the social workers and teachers at the NGO. Specifically, it considers the student's focus on consumer empowerment and service dependency over a three-month period. Recommendations are provided to ensure the effectiveness of overseas placements.

**Keywords:** *Dependence; independence; social work; international placements; cultural competence*

## INTRODUCTION

It has been long established that social work students feel better prepared following opportunities to practice what they learn in a formal classroom setting through role plays and field placements (Cooner, 2010; Peterson, 2014; Wehbi, 2011). This international social work placement took place in Battambang, Cambodia for a New Zealand social work student studying at University of Waikato. This small-scale research project set out to determine the efficacy of a foreign student supporting the development of a new process within a Cambodian-based non-government organisation (NGO). The host NGO, Children's Future International (CFI), had been exploring service dependency, consumer empowerment and consumer advocacy; all relatively new concepts for the NGO. To support these explorations, the social work placement was set up to seek ways to enhance service delivery, increase staff understanding of service dependency and improve outcomes for consumers at CFI in these areas. The organisers of the placement were cognizant of the risk of further encouragement of colonial practice models. This risk was discussed overtly throughout the placement; some of the reflections from the student focused purely on *white privilege*.

This research aimed to determine whether an overseas student social work placement could have a positive effect on the host organisation's awareness, knowledge and practice regarding specific social work processes. This paper provides an overview of the literature as it relates to social work in developing countries, dependency, empowerment and advocacy. Alongside this there is a focus on the learning outcomes of this placement which, the authors believe, was enhanced by tacit learning. An outline of the methodology for this research is provided, with key findings and finally some recommendations for future placements.

This piece of research was a collaborative effort between CFI and the University of Waikato involving 12 staff, one student social worker and the field supervisor from the university; in total, 10 Khmer (Cambodian nationals) and three New Zealand citizens participated in this study. An invitation to be involved was offered to a Cambodian social work programme – this offer was declined. Human ethics approval was gained through the University of Waikato.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In this brief synopsis, this literature review will firstly offer some foundation of cross-cultural social work practice in a developing context. Secondly, literature regarding dependency and empowerment in a developing context; thirdly information regarding empowering people within a range of contexts; and finally, a consideration of the learning that takes place during student placements.

### **Social work in a developing context**

Transferring western theories to other contexts has been shown to be flawed (Larson, 2013). Western theories are not tailored to the needs of the local environment nor do they ensure local ownership (Larson, 2013). Coates, Yellow Bird, and Gray (2008) argued alternative strategies need to be adapted to address local community problems and needs. Hugman (2012) considered these issues are further compounded by professional ethics and how these may change when working between cultures. This is due to the values and beliefs of the client group but also the needs within the community. When working in a developing

context, western social workers must recognise the role of the community and families in keeping children safe and that formal child protection models may fit poorly in a local context as they are often modelled from countries in the global north (Wessells, 2015). There was an identified need, though, to effect some change in the processes at CFI. With careful planning and negotiation, an attempt to implement a westernised process with a strong Khmer influence was made to try to navigate some service developments.

### **Dependency**

Managers at CFI had noticed there was what would be described, in western social work practice, as a dependency on services. This dependency had caused a huge client base at the NGO, as people known to CFI were being held in the service longer than required. Effectively, there was no throughput of people within the service. This had led to a slowing down, or an inability to offer services to new children as the system had become blocked. There was a culture of *non-closure* within CFI. This piece of research and specifically the student placement, was set up to try to understand and, if appropriate, effect a change to this culture. Cooper (2012) argues that, when a client becomes dependent on services, they become disempowered through reinforcement of the message that they cannot do things for themselves. Dependency can be defined as unequal, asymmetrical, and sometimes a paternalistic relationship, in comparison to a partnership which is based on equality, mutual respect, joint activity and joint learning (Strier, 2013). When a client is dependent on a service, they are unable to complete usual tasks by themselves, therefore become dependent on extra support (Cooper, 2012).

Harnett and Day (2008) argued child protection interventions can have negative impact on children and families, particularly when the family becomes dependent on the service. This is demonstrated when services disempower parents, which reduces their autonomy and capacity for positive actions (Harnett & Day, 2008). Also, potentially harmful, is a lack of clarity over the changes that a family may need to make for a child to be successfully exited from the child protection service (Harnett & Day, 2008). The lack of a robust plan can result in learnt behaviour while families seek guidance and survival (Drewery & Claiborne, 2014).

### **Empowerment**

Although empowerment is a well-supported and lauded western philosophy, it is not necessarily understood in the same way as it is in non-western societies. There is a diverse range of meanings for the term *empowerment* within which are many inconsistencies (Davies, 2013; Narayan, 2002; Sheppard, 2007). Due to these differing definitions, the idea of empowerment can be hard to follow or demonstrate in practice. Empowerment changes through cultural context. Therefore, what may be empowering in one cultural context may be disempowering in another (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2017; Menike, 1993; Teater, 2014).

Empowerment seeks to enable people to manage their own affairs and participate fully within the community (Barnes, 2008; Davies, 2013; Sadan & Churchman, 1997; Sheppard, 2007). Empowerment exists where people are disadvantaged or powerless, and interventions are made to reassign power back to the people within their situation or society (Narayan, 2002).

Evidence suggests that school can be an empowering setting since it holds an important role of empowering students as the school environment influences individual characteristics and ecological factors; however, the main focus is empowerment within the academic domain (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009; Kirk, Lewis, Brown, Karibo, & Park, 2016; Maton, 2008).

Empowerment within an NGO in a developing context is about supporting people to no longer live in poverty and to develop sustainable livelihoods (Menike, 1993). To do this, NGOs empower the client with tools and resources they can use individually, such as education and training (Menike, 1993). It is important to note individuals living in poverty will have their own definition of empowerment and creating this change may be a slow process. This process is said to come from wisdom and experience rather than a defined set of steps (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2017; Davies, 2013; Menike, 1993; Narayan, 2002; Payne, 2014; Sheppard, 2007; Teater, 2014). The team were also aware of the ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’ and sought to increase empowerment in respectful and sustainable ways that did not see western concepts as the only solution to poverty (Frey, 2016).

### **Changing behaviour through tacit learning and capacity building**

An important feature of changing behaviour and attitudes is to enhance people’s tacit knowledge. People need to participate in a range of learning experiences from deliberate learning (based in traditional classroom or professional development settings), through to reactive learning (which takes place through experiences), in order to develop a clear understanding (Eraut, 2000). Tacit learning takes place through experience and is much harder to define (Leonard & Sensiper, 1998), but is generally thought to provide more in-depth learning that can last a lifetime (Warhurst & Black, 2015). Tacit learning occurs at a non-conscious level, embedding knowledge in a way that classroom learning cannot; providing the rationale for social work students to participate in student placements as an essential part of their learning and development as professional practitioners (Andrews, 2017; Evans & Light, 2014; Lam, 2000; Marsick & Watkins, 2015).

Research has shown there are inherent complexities to capacity building in developing contexts. A study by McWha (2011) found barriers to capacity building in developing contexts were largely due to power imbalances and perceived divisions between “expatriates” and “locals”. Her research found capacity building was more effective when undertaken by a volunteer (who was seen as more equal once potential salary inequalities were removed) who overtly showed they were interested in two-way learning. In this context a student volunteer was best placed to take on a capacity-building role (McWha, 2011).

### **Background to the placement NGO**

CFI is situated in Ek Phnom, approximately 8 km north of Battambang, Cambodia. Ek Phnom is a rural and an extremely poor part of Cambodia. CFI provides a holistic service to children and their families in the region. CFI is part of two national child protection networks: Family Care First (2019) and 3PC (2019).

CFI exists first, to provide for the basic needs and safety of children (ages 5–21), and second, to provide them with educational opportunities not otherwise accessible. CFI favours a

results-driven approach that delivers programmes in a community with untreated trauma from the Khmer Rouge genocide, poverty, malnutrition, unsafe migration, and exploitative experiences such as child labour, physical and sexual abuse, underage sex work and neglect. CFI empowers children and youth to break the cycle of poverty utilising innovative social work approaches and first class education. CFI's services provide basic support needs and reduces risks regarding child protection and unsafe migration, for some of the most resource-poor and vulnerable children, and their families, in Cambodia (CFI, 2019).

### **Organisational approach**

CFI provides services that support sustainable change (Richter et al., 2017; Seyfang & Smith, 2007). This change supports the development of a robust social infrastructure needed to foster child and youth development and lead to economic growth. CFI's methodology is succinct and targeted. Focusing intently on moving children and youth along a continuum of services that ensures basic needs are met, maintains school enrollment, promotes higher education, and gives youth the opportunity to become modern leaders and professionals.

This study sought to measure the ability to address knowledge and awareness of consumer empowerment and service dependency via student-led interventions, among managers and staff at the placement NGO. Importantly the student's placement was planned by the student's field educator, field placement coordinator and the student, to ensure that interventions took a volunteering for development approach, over a "voluntourism" approach (McGloin & Georgeou, 2016). The student's support team recognised the risks associated with positioning the student as an expert, coming to a developing country to help in a developing context. This was evidenced by the fact the student had their own learning objectives, positioning the placement as an opportunity for two-way learning, and ensuring that interventions focused on capacity building of both the staff at CFI and the student (Frey, 2016; Henry, 2019; McWha, 2011).

The student's work focused on developing awareness of the need for, and how to, implement a consumer consultation group (thereby increasing empowerment) and developing an exit pathway (therefore reducing dependency).

### **Student placement setup**

The placement setup was an important factor in the success of this intervention, both for education but also for the host organisation. The placement was designed to be a learning environment for all involved. The student and field educator set a work plan which involved various tasks, such as: literature reviews, interactive workshops and system design. The student social worker was placed in the social work office with Khmer social workers to enhance learning opportunities. This allowed for informal conversations regarding culture, knowledge and social work practice which, in turn, provided the student insight towards context, study and further knowledge that could be shared. The aim of this placement was to create a learning and reflective environment through the processes of the student's interactions, research and time at the organisation.

## METHODOLOGY

Before this placement commenced, consideration was given to how the student's learning objectives would be reached. Only one of the Khmer social workers and two of the teachers had a qualification in their profession – this is not unusual for Cambodia; what was unusual was a student holding more theoretical social work and research knowledge than most of her employed colleagues. The placement tasks were planned to flow into each other, with increasing knowledge regarding how to develop empowerment and how to reduce dependency as an overarching aim. The student commenced tasks such as a literature review, leading to delivery of professional development sessions for staff and finally to the development of practical service and systems processes. This approach was termed “knowledge development and flow” (Henley, Lowe, Henley, & Munro, in press). The student had support from colleagues and weekly supervision, provided by the field educator; however, they commenced most tasks individually

Strengths based scaling questions (CELSC Board, 2018), an internationally recognised framework, is the theoretical social work framework used by CFI social workers. This approach was also used as the means to gather quantitative data for this research. Staff at CFI are familiar with scaling questions as part of using a strengths based approach in practice (Roberts, Caslor, Turnell, Pearson, & Pecora, 2018). Five scaling questions were designed to capture participants' views on empowerment and dependency. These were placed into a Qualtrics online survey. Results were ranked into three categories: *bad*, *some*, and *good*. Answers on the likert scale, between 0–6 were considered *bad*; answers between 7–8 were ranked as *some*, and answers between 9–10 were ranked as *good*, the sectioning and labelling of ratings was automatically managed through Qualtrics™ online surveying software. The aims, as identified by CFI's management team and discussed with student and field coordinator, were to explore the following questions:

1. Could an overseas student provide interventions that increased awareness of service dependency in a developing context?
2. Could an overseas student provide interventions that increase awareness of empowerment in a developing context?
3. Could an overseas student design interventions to prepare workers to engage with service users in a developing context?

Alongside these five scaling questions were five, semi-structured, narrative questions designed to capture further information and views. These narrative responses were thematically grouped to understand the participants' views. The participants included CFI staff, predominantly social workers and teachers, who responded and agreed to be participants in the study.

CFI staff who decided to participate were asked to complete two surveys. Not all participants had a good level of spoken or written English. The questions were therefore presented in English and Khmer. It should be noted that, where qualitative responses were given, these have been left as given, these quotes are presented in *italics*.

Ethics approval was obtained through University of Waikato (the university where the student was studying). The field educator distributed the survey via email to the participants who had previously agreed to be part of the study; there was no compulsion to complete the survey. Participants were asked to complete an initial (baseline) and final (endline) questionnaire. Participants could remove themselves from the research at any point up until the end of the student placement. Responses were confidential. Participants were asked to sign a consent form prior to completion of the survey. In total, 13 surveys were sent out for the baseline, with 11 replies. All participants were Khmer except the Managing and Executive Directors. All participants agreed to a joint authorship approach, ensuring the same group were contacted to complete an endline.

Work undertaken was not only focused on education and knowledge raising via formal methods such as presentations but also via informal approaches, as the student social worker was sitting with CFI Khmer social workers on a daily basis and engaged in ongoing conversations.

One of the main interventions was at the halfway mark of the placement. This involved the student delivering a presentation to prepare CFI teams to consider definitions of empowerment and dependency. The entire CFI staff group (not just those involved in the research) were asked to consider both what the organisation and themselves personally could do to increase empowerment, decrease dependency and ensure support is in place for those who need it. The presentation was in a workshop format.

## **FINDINGS**

The findings presented are selected from the 10 questions participants answered before the social work placement began and again in the final week of the placement. The focus is on the scaling questions, although some of qualitative responses are included. It should be noted that these questions measured participants' self-reflection on their understanding of these topics, rather than an exam or test of their knowledge in each area.

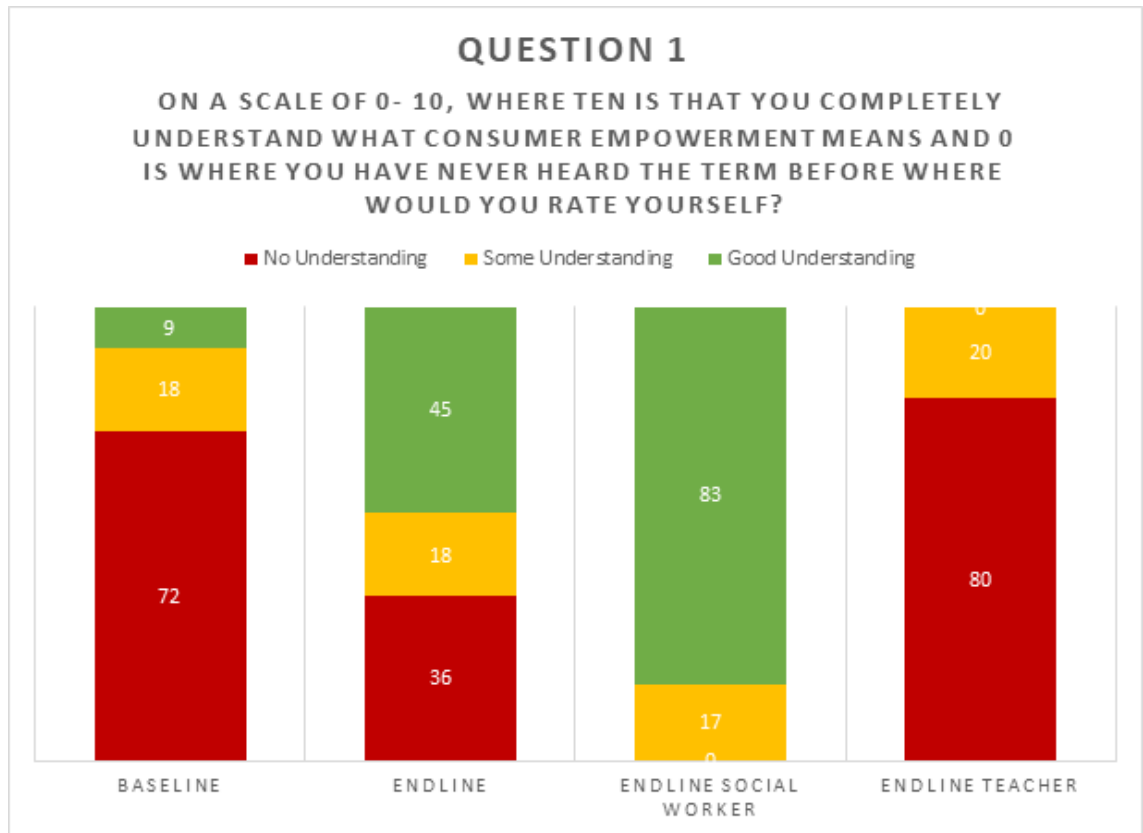
### **Consumer empowerment**

These questions explored the participants' understanding of consumer empowerment. The baseline data demonstrated eight out of 11 participants believed they had little understanding of consumer empowerment and how this related to people using CFI services, with the exception of three participants who showed some or good understanding of this concept. The baseline was not surprising as empowerment is not commonly discussed in this context.

The endline data showed a significant difference in participants' views of how well they felt they understood consumer empowerment; 45% (five participants) described a good understanding, 18% (two participants) felt that they had some understanding and 36% (four participants) still had no understanding.

There is a clear overall difference between the baseline and endline for the participants' understanding of consumer empowerment moving from 9% (one participant) to 45%

(five participants), some understanding remained at 18% (two participants) and no understanding decreased from 72% (eight participants) to 36% (four participants). However, it should be noted that, when looked at separately, the level of change in knowledge between the social work and teaching team varied greatly, as presented in Figure 1:



**Figure 1.** Baseline versus endline data for Question 1.

Though the samples were relatively small, these results indicate that there had been a positive improvement of a self-assessed understanding of consumer empowerment; however, it is evident that there were gaps and significant differences between outcomes for social workers and for teachers.

At the endline survey, the results demonstrated 83% (five participants) of the social workers had a good understanding of consumer empowerment and 17% (one participant) had some understanding. The results from the teachers show an opposite conclusion, as 80% (four participants) had no understanding and 20% (one participant) had some understanding of consumer empowerment. This is a significant difference. The implications from this finding are that regular discussions around empowerment enabled social workers to grasp the concept more readily and be able to apply the concepts to practice. Maintaining the conversation about empowerment with all staff on a regular basis would likely improve the overall understanding of the concept.



This comparison can also be seen in Question 2 regarding understanding of consumer empowerment. The responses from the baseline included answers such as *“I have no ideas”* and *“Ask them what they like and what they want to change about CFI”*, ranging to other answers such as *“To me consumer empowerment is when a worker enables a person to take responsibility for themselves, know where to access support”*. This showed there was a different understanding across the participant group particularly in the initial stages of this research.

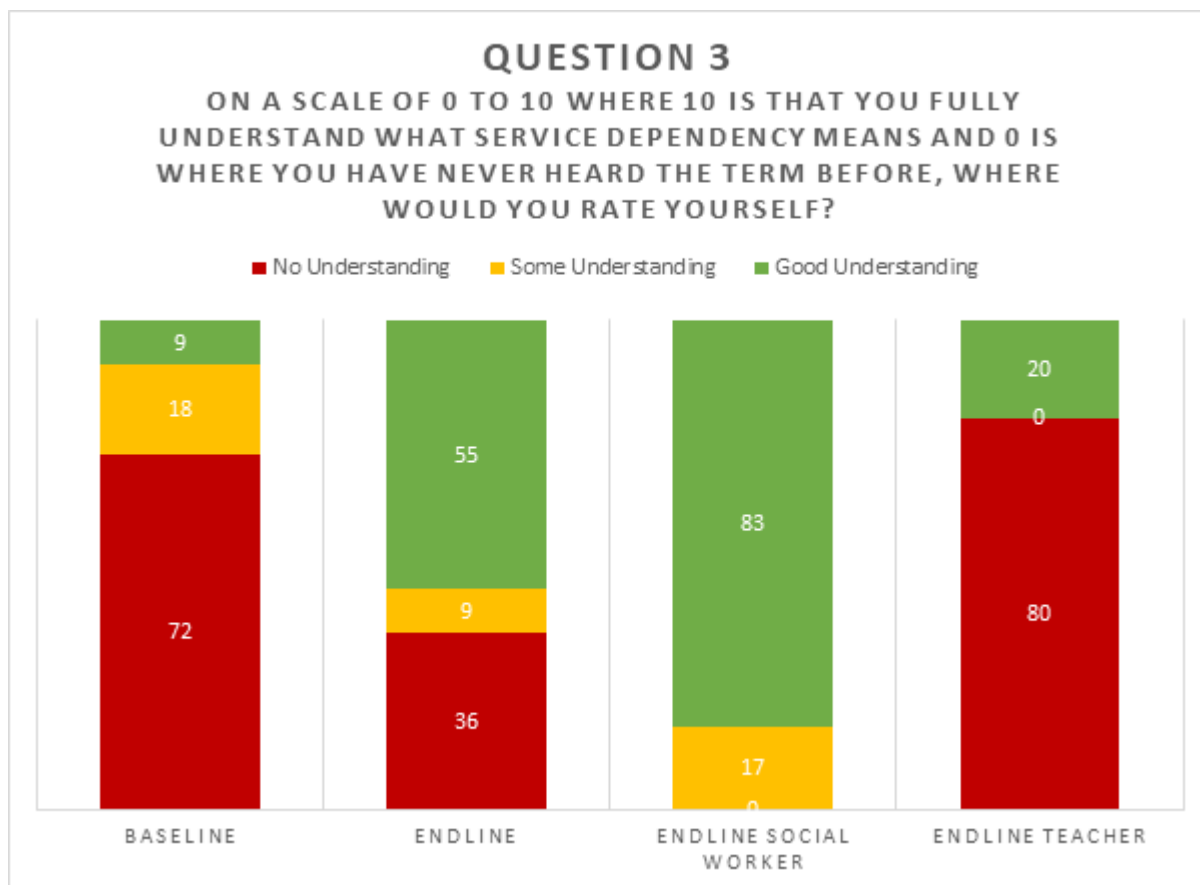
However, the responses at endline, Question 2, provided a range of answers from *“through survey, training, asking the question”* and *“don’t know”* to detailed responses such as *“I know that consumer empowerment is all about to empower the client to involve in every discussion and decision making that affect their life and benefit”* and *“From my understanding of consumer empowerment, it means you give the power to the family or your client by providing them a say”*. By being able to compare these responses, a clear increase in understanding of this concept for most participants was demonstrated.

### **Service dependency**

These questions explored the participants’ views of how well they understood service dependency. The baseline demonstrated 72% (eight participants) believed they had no understanding of dependency, 18% (two participants) had some understanding and 9% (one participant) had good understanding.

The endline results show a positive move to 55% (five participants) stating they felt they had a good understanding, 9% (one participant) had some understanding and 36% (four participants) felt they had no understanding.

Comparing the baseline to the endline showed that there was an increase from 9% (one participant) to 55% (six participants) displaying that participants felt they now had a good understanding of dependency. Again, there was a significant difference between teachers’ and social workers’ endline view of this question, with a notable improvement in the social work participants, as seen in Figure 2. Please note in Figure 2, where zeros appear, this means no participants answered in this category. For example, no social workers rated themselves as having “no understanding” at the endline.

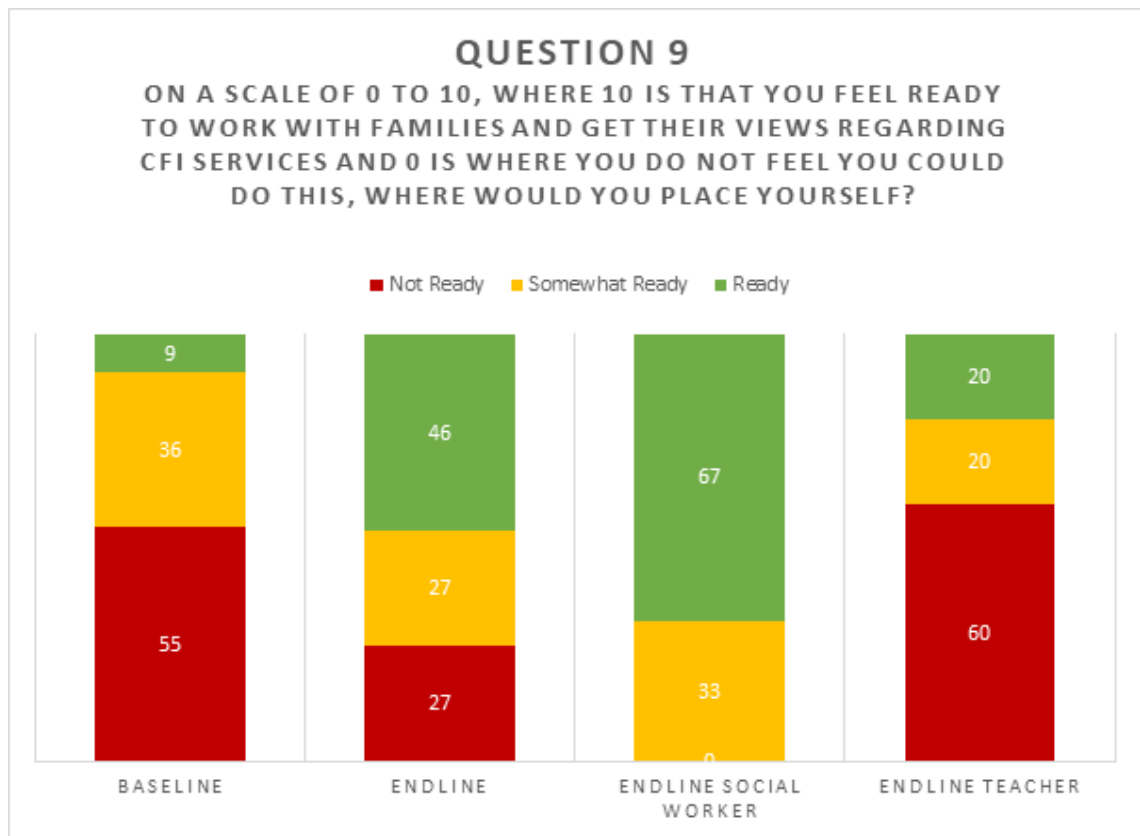


**Figure 2.** Baseline versus endline data for Question 3.

**Do you feel ready to work with families to seek their views?**

The final set of questions explored participants’ views on how ready they were to work with families to seek their views. At baseline, 55% (six participants) did not feel ready to work with families in this way, 36% (four participants) felt somewhat ready and 9% (one participant) felt ready. This meant that over half (6 out of 11) of the staff group involved in this research at baseline did not feel ready to work with families and gather their views on CFI services. This is a significant piece of data and one the student’s interventions set out to challenge.

The results of the endline showed a marked difference as 27% (three participants) still did not feel ready; 27% (three participants) felt somewhat ready and 46% (five participants) felt as though they were ready to work with families to seek their views. Comparing the baseline to the endline data, there was a noticeable difference in responses to the same question with an increase from 9% (one participant) to 46% (five participants) who felt they were ready to work with families to seek their views. There was a decrease from 36% (four participants) to 27% (three participants) who felt somewhat ready and a decrease of 55% (six participants) to 27% (three participants) who did not feel ready to work with families to seek their views. Again the differences between the social work and teacher participant groups are highlighted in Figure 3, with a clear distinction between the two groups.



**Figure 3.** Baseline versus endline data for Question 9.

Completing a clear baseline before the student arrived in Cambodia ensured we could meaningfully assess the impact of the student placement on staff attitudes and knowledge. This baseline provided a basic measurement of where CFI was at regarding the researched subjects before the student intervention.

As explained in the methodology, an overall endline was taken, but with an additional question of whether participants were teachers or social workers. Overall results indicated successful interventions were delivered regarding an increased knowledge and awareness, with improvements across all scaling questions, see Figure 4 below:

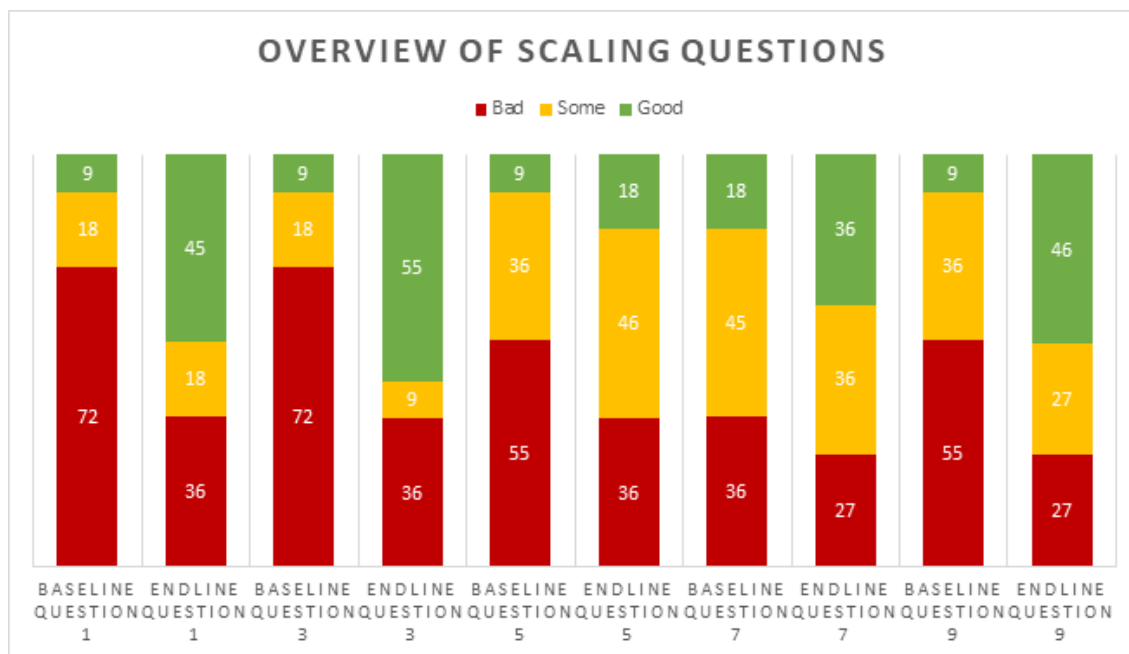


Figure 4. Baseline versus endline data over the five scaling questions.

These findings demonstrated it was possible for an overseas student, with planned delivery to increase awareness and knowledge regarding empowerment and dependency within a developing context. However, the interesting findings from this data were apparent when results from social workers and teachers were compared.

This section has presented a range of evidence from a staff-wide workshop and comparison of survey data between the baseline and the endline. Having established these findings, we will now discuss their implications.

## DISCUSSION

### Consumer empowerment

As described in the literature review, empowerment seeks to enable people to manage their own affairs and participate fully within the community (Barnes, 2008; Davies, 2013; Sadan & Churchman, 1997; Sheppard, 2007). We broke this question down to the difference in understandings from the social workers and teachers for the endline. The social workers and teachers all attended a workshop delivered by the student on this subject; however, the social workers had more daily informal conversations with the student social worker which might have resulted in the difference in understanding. Empowerment within social work often focuses on individuals at the expense of wider societal issues. To undertake this work, a good understanding of the reasons for someone becoming disempowered is required. Work then focuses on the individual and their environment (Connolly, Harms, & Maidment, 2009; Payne, 2014). Literature highlights how goals, shared power, shared decision making and a positive sense of community all help to create empowering environments (Cargo, Grams, Ottoson, Ward, & Green, 2003; Maton, 2008). From the data collected, it is apparent participants from CFI have been able to reflect on the concept of empowerment and apply it to their daily practice.

Empowerment within a teaching environment considers how teachers need to be aware of students' experiences and how they can empower them in the classroom. Empowerment can occur when students are enabled to meet their individual needs through learning and social relationships and working with others (Kirk et al., 2016). The different knowledge outcomes between social workers and teachers could suggest that more time and engagement is needed with the teaching team to build their tacit knowledge in this area.

### **Service dependency**

There is an obvious difference between CFI social workers' understanding of dependency and that of CFI teachers. Again, the authors believe that this was a result of the additional time spent working, learning and developing tacit knowledge in informal peer group settings. However, the increased knowledge overall of the CFI staff group compares well with established literature; Cooper (2012) argues that, when a client becomes dependent they become disempowered, as there is a reinforcement of the message they cannot do things for themselves. For the team at CFI this meant dispelling some of the concerns associated with client exits and challenging the non-closure culture. It could be expected more conversation related to this took place in the informal office setting rather than the more formal setting of the capacity building workshop.

For an NGO moving in the direction of consumer empowerment, the final two questions were the most important. What impact will the student's work have on readiness of CFI's workforce to meaningfully seek the views of families? Following the established pattern, there were mixed results.

### **Do you feel ready to work with families to seek their views?**

The results from this section highlighted a clear difference in response from baseline to endline data. Clearly, some participants saw the importance of this work, and were already undertaking, or wanting to undertake, activities in this area. This final question provided an overall summary of the success of the student's interventions. What we noticed is a significant increase in the number of workers feeling ready to interact with families. In comparison to the rest of the data gathered, this is particularly true regarding social workers, rather than teachers; the evidence demonstrated a complete reversal of numbers of staff ready to engage.

Understandably, as they were already engaging with families more frequently, social work participants were far more comfortable with the level of engagement with families than were the participant teachers. However, one argument for such a shift from baseline to endline is the impact of the daily interactions between student and social workers, as opposed to the irregular interaction with teachers. Additionally, as McWha (2011) describes, it could have been the transfer of knowledge via a student volunteer that supported learning to take place.

What has been established is that it is possible for an overseas student to increase knowledge regarding dependency among social workers. What is harder to achieve is an increase among professional groups not directly involved in the placement, in this case, teachers. Among this group these concepts would not have been discussed in as great a detail, or as frequently, and may have been a huge shift of thinking for teaching staff.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the data gathered from this study the team has clear recommendations for those planning overseas student placements:

1. Impact of interventions may be different between professions. Ensure interventions take these differences into consideration, with opportunities for students to work across teams and with different professional groups regularly.
2. Design different interventions for different professions or mixed professional groups to maximise learning.
3. Recognise tacit learning as an important part of two-way placement learning. Ensure opportunities for this learning are supported.

## CONCLUSION

This small study has demonstrated an overseas social work student can have a direct and successful impact on the awareness and knowledge of staff in the host agency. To enhance success, a placement needs to be well planned and targeted to achieve certain set outcomes.

This study demonstrates a clear difference in the success of interventions between different professions, in this instance social workers and teachers. The reasons for these significantly different outcomes could be the result of different starting positions of professions or as a direct outcome of the student interacting on a daily basis with social workers.

This placement experience provided an excellent two-way learning opportunity for the host agency staff. The benefits for both student and CFI staff to engage in joint learning has enhanced long-term learning and positive behaviour change for everyone involved.

Thanks to the engagement of the entire CFI staff, the student, and the support from the University of Waikato, CFI has been able to make significant improvements to service delivery and outcomes for people using services. CFI's intention is to take this learning and build it into future placements, where comparative research will be completed, and to enhance service delivery.

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