

A DIARY OF A STUDENT UNDERGOING PRACTICUM IN A JUVENILE REHABILITATION CENTRE

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Abstract

Just like in any other context of social work, practices and supervision in the setting of a juvenile treatment centre can also have their own set of challenges. Supervision is a primary tool for measuring the competencies of social workers who are providing direct intervention towards the rehabilitation young offenders. This paper is the reflection of a student social worker who has experience of undergoing practicum in a juvenile rehabilitation centre in Malaysia. From the experience, some pertinent issues faced by the institution were identified that are related to constraints in administrative and psychological knowledge. This paper, however, will only discuss the psychosocial issues, which includes the issues related to: 1) attitudes of the welfare workers in the centre, 2) treatment plan offered by the institution, 3) job scope of the welfare workers, and 4) the role of the institution in treating the young offenders. Suggestions relating to job competencies of social workers with support from the literature are also discussed in great depth.

Keywords: supervision, social work competencies, young offenders

Introduction

Juvenile delinquents are a sensitive group of individuals. The processes that can lead a young person to commit a crime often do not arise out of juveniles' own choice. Various factors influence an adolescent's decision making – and this includes decision-making at the aftermath of committing a crime. This is why prevention from relapsing is as important as prevention from committing a crime. To address the issues of treatment after committing a crime, various institutions have been established to help these young offenders to get back on track in Malaysia.

Although social welfare is a long-standing institution in Malaysia with regard to the problem of juvenile delinquency, social work is still a relatively new field.

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Many rehabilitation centres for juvenile delinquents are operating as welfare institutions focused on fulfilling the basic needs of young offenders. These institutions will ensure that the basic needs of the individuals who are housed in there would be taken care of. This includes ensuring ample amounts of food and drinks, a roof and a place to sleep, provision of education and religious activities, as well as leisure activities. However, there are deeper problems faced by the residents that should also be addressed by these institutions.

The Diary

This paper documents some of the experiences of a student undergoing a practicum in a juvenile rehabilitation centre in Malaysia. The juvenile rehabilitation centre houses only male juvenile delinquents who have been arrested or have been sent by their parents there. The offences committed are usually minor, like theft, problems of general conduct, burglary, and drug addiction.

The practicum was from 23 May 2011 until 12 August 2011. The diary entries in this article are not arranged chronologically, but are presented more like single snapshots to discuss a particular point. Other than doing what was “expected” of the student, he also observed the demeanours and behaviours of both the residents and staff. The student also chatted with the residents on a wide range of topics from their feelings at being at the centre to their feelings about the staff, and their plans after being released.

Treating young offenders is a challenging task, thus commitment from several parties is very necessary to ensure greater efficiency of the rehabilitation process. The student’s observation includes those challenges that come not just the offenders’ feedback, but his observation of how parties concerned respond to the psychosocial needs of these individuals. The observation centred on:

- 1) The attitude of the welfare workers in the centre,
- 2) The treatment plan offered by the institution,
- 3) The job scope of the workers, and
- 4) The institution’s role in treating the young offenders.

The Attitude of the Welfare Workers in the Centre

“Diary: 15th July 2011 - This week was a tough one. One of the boys complained to me that he had a worrying tumour-like growth in the throat area and he felt very worried. He had been complaining about it since Tuesday and because the procedures required the resident to go to one of the welfare officers, I

asked him to do exactly that. On Wednesday, he came to me and complained about his ailment again. I asked, "Why wouldn't you go to the clinic today?" He only shrugged and said that the officer had asked him to wait.

When it was 5 p.m. and I was about to pack up and head back home, I checked up on him, and he was lying on the bed. According to him, the welfare officer had asked him to wait because there was no driver to take him..."

"Diary: The next day I could see that the boy was really suffering and I summoned up courage and went to see the centre "mother". I asked her if he could be sent to the clinic that day, and she acted as if slightly threatened and said, "It's fine Taufik, we'll do our best. We can't just go if the driver isn't here. Let us do our job."

On the same day, another resident appeared to need to call his father as he had been locked up in the mini jail for a disciplinary problem he had committed a week earlier, asked me if I could call his father for me. I said I couldn't do that but I'd be happy to take the number and ask one of the officers to sort out his problem. I took the number and gave it to the "mother," who on been given the number lost her temper. She went to the resident in question and yelled at him for giving the number to me. "Did you eat shit?? Why did you give it to him??" was exactly what she said.

As a result of this incident, she asked to meet me the next day. When we met she mostly talked about what part I of "let us do our job" that I did not understand. She said some really mean things, particularly about why I was so adamant about sending the sick boy to a clinic, because that would only teach the boys to be more spoiled. She argued that even if I had not been concerned about his health, he wouldn't die. This made me think that would they only do something after he had died? She then set boundaries by saying that she will do her job, as I will do mine or do whatever it was that I was sent to the centre to do. So, I guess I am not part of the group of welfare officers after all..."

"Diary: 4th July 2011 – Last weekend, the residents, some staff members, a colleague and I went to Langkawi for the centre's annual trip for the residents. It was a nice trip and my colleague and I carried out some motivational programmes and talked about a lot of things. We also showed a video about a man who lost both of his arms and legs and could only move by wheelchair. One or two boys cried..."

But I'm not sure if our programmes would be enough to provide these boys the inspiration to want to change.

“Diary: An interesting event happened on the day of our departure. The cook at the centre cooked fried meehoon but apparently she cooked only enough for the staff and the boys, but not the two practicum students, i.e. my colleague and I. I only knew about this when the “mother” came up to us and said that there wouldn’t be any food for us, and apologised. But before she came to apologise, there was some very loud yelling between the “mother” and the cook. The “mother” was apparently very angry that the food was not enough and yelled very loudly. My colleague and I, and also the kids heard what what said, and we just didn’t know what to do. So, all of us just pretended not to see or hear anything. The cook was clearly upset about the yelling and we sympathised with her predicament. Food is obviously a big deal for the “mother”....”

Welfare officers in any welfare institutions are the key performers in ensuring the efficiency of the institution. Without the right attitude towards social welfare and social work, a lot of damage could be caused, especially to the clients who are in need of a lot of kindness and understanding. From the experience of the practicum student, it is evident that there is a great challenge with regard to the issue of needing to have a better understanding of the residents at the centre. Juvenile delinquents are, as was observed at the centre, a sensitive group of individuals and they are vulnerable to the treatment society inflicts on them (Hoffmann, 2011). The “society” these young offenders come in contact with at the centre are the welfare workers. Therefore, the attitude of welfare workers is one of the key factors in achieving success in treating juvenile delinquents.

No doubt there are welfare workers around the world who on occasion, may resort to yelling, name-calling, and humiliation to handling a disciplinary problem. Some welfare workers argue that only by being tough would the residents in the centres do what these officers tell them to do. This relates as to how the officers see their work and what the institution stands for. Literature has suggested that attitudes towards various aspects of rehabilitation are important in efficiently treating offenders. Probation officers, for example, who have to deal with juvenile delinquents, are found to perform more efficiently when they have positive attitudes towards residents and the role rehabilitation centres should play (Schwalbe & Maschi, 2009).

Some welfare workers feel compelled to have a punitive attitude towards delinquents – especially those who tend to be more strict (Baron & Hartnagel, 1996). Punitive attitudes can be made worse if officers have a preconceived idea that offenders have certain traits (Edens, Guy, & Fernandez, 2003). This might lead to the belief that these young offenders “deserve” the harsh treatment they receive in institutions like the centre in question. Perhaps this punitive attitude is because social work involving young offenders in Malaysia is a relatively new field. More education, training and awareness are necessary until society

understands that young offenders commit offences because of a variety of factors that go beyond the free will of the offenders themselves. This is worthy of a new study.

With regard to education, the first step would be to expose the life of young offenders to society, including personnel who need to work with them. A study in the U.S. shows that undergraduates who were brought on a tour of a correctional facility and given a talk on related issues are shown to have more positive attitude towards various aspects of juvenile delinquency and their treatment (Leunes, Bourgeois, & Grajales, 1996). We could employ a similar program in Malaysia that can enhance the understanding and knowledge of welfare officers in rehabilitation centre with regard to the true nature of young offenders and the correct way to treat and interact with them. They also need to be made aware of the damage that can be wreaked because of negative attitudes and unfair treatment of these young offenders.

The Treatment Plan Offered by the Institution

“Diary: 6th June 2011 – Today was a bit relaxed at the centre. Apart from than chatting with some of the residents and carrying out some counseling sessions with a few of them, we also had the pleasure of talking with one of the security officers here by the name of M**. M** told us how he had a bigger dream than being a “pak (Mr) guard” at the centre, especially when his presence was not really appreciated. Currently, he was engaged in an ongoing feud with a senior staff in the centre. It started about a year ago, when he had some issues with regard to his responsibilities at the centre. He said that there was one intense day when the senior staff in question asked him to come into his office and proceeded to yelled at him for not following orders. They are still not speaking to each other until now...”

“Diary: 28th June 2011 – Today my colleague and I conducted a short activity session. We did Truth Totem, a game called “if I were...”, and after that another activity in which they just described about the closest friend they had in the centre. I also collected several diaries that I asked a few of the kids to write a week earlier about anything they like. I asked for their permission to read the diaries, and they enjoyed the reading and gained an insight on life. But one piece of heartfelt writing caught my attention. In the diary, the writer wrote about how he couldn’t wait to get out of the place.

He was saddened by the fact that even when he really wanted to change and be back with his family, he just couldn’t, because everyday there would always be a resident who would try to violate some disciplinary rules secretly. Sometimes they would go to the bathroom to smoke, sometimes they would use drugs in

the bathroom, and most of the time, living in the place is like playing a game of survival. He was not sure if he'd be fully rehabilitated when he gets released the next year. His writing really made me feel humbled. If these boys know that what we do for them isn't enough, why it is so hard for the welfare officers to understand this?"

Other than the workers, institutions as a whole play a crucial role in ensuring that young offenders get correct and effective treatment. An institution is a system that needs collective collaboration from all parties involved. When discussing the role of juvenile rehabilitation institutions, we cannot step separate ourselves from the issue of internal culture that influences the effectiveness of these institutions. In one correctional facility in the U.S. located in Arizona, one law enforcement professional, Michael Branham, was appointed to analyse issues that were faced by the facility and make improvements (Dempsey, 2007). According to Branham, members of a juvenile institution need to have a sense of integrity, accountability, and more importantly, ownership of the institution they belong to. Departments concerned need to identify issues that exist at the facility, including detecting misconduct of staff members.

Michael Branham retooled many departments that helped identify various issues faced by the institution concerned. Malaysian rehabilitation facilities can employ the techniques used in his work because certain aspects of rehabilitation institutions are in urgent need of "overhauling." The observation by the student in the practicum showed that the system in the institutions in Malaysia are functioning in their "comfort zone." The processes, procedures, rules, and regulations of the institution are all sanctioned by the laws concerned. This can result in the parties involved in the centre's management to do what they have been doing every day for years – and where changes to the system are seen as threats.

Since the staff members at the institutions have their everyday routines, to formulate new programmes and treatment plans for the young offenders would be difficult. While basic needs such as food, drinks, and a place to sleep are well taken care of, other needs that can address the tendency of these offenders to commit offences are ignored. While every individual case is different, studies have suggested that young offenders experience a childhood of neglect and abuse (Neely-Barnes & Whitted, 2011). Neely-Barnes and Whitted argue that the need for young offenders to have the state of their mental health addressed is greater than merely fulfilling basic needs; this is because their social, emotional, and behavioural needs are linked to their offending behaviours. The authors suggest that these needs can vary across gender, race, and age.

Neely-Barnes and Whitted further suggest that by recognizing these psychological needs and how they vary across individuals from different backgrounds, more suitable and accurate treatment plans can be delivered to stop the likelihood of committing further offences and to prevent recidivism. Since the study was conducted in a foreign country, Malaysian researchers who specialise in juvenile delinquency need to see if the findings can be applied to Malaysian juvenile institutions and young offenders.

The Job Scope of the Workers

“Diary: 25th May 2011 – This is the third day of our practicum, and things seemed to be going quite well. The warden was not in on the first day, but we got to meet him on the second day. We discussed what the institutions expected of us as practicum students. He said that usually the students who undergo their practicum there in the past would conduct some mini activities with the aim of teaching some specific values to the boys. We were also told that part of this practicum involved us joining an annual trip to Langkawi with the boys and that we would have to design the programme for the trip. So, basically, the warden seemed to expect us to be motivational facilitators ..

I then asked the warden if they carry out programmes to manage the deeper psychosocial needs of the boys. I asked if the boys undergo any kind of treatment or if there was any intervention programme designed for each boy. The warden said that he was aware of such needs, but currently because the resources were limited, they had to wait before carrying out such programmes. The warden even acknowledged that there should be an in-house counselor but there was none...”

From the observation of the student who underwent the practicum, the job scopes of workers in the juvenile rehabilitation centre reflect the programmes the institutions offer, mainly, the provision of basic needs. The staff includes administrative staff who deal with the filing and documentation of the residents, religious staff who deal with the observance of religious development among the residents, a “mother” who acts as the mother figure in the institution, security officers, cooks, and of course a driver and janitors. The staff who deal direct with the residents use experience and knowledge gained from short-term training sessions to determine what needs to be done with the young offenders. There was a lack of psychology- or social work-specific treatment plans offered to the residents (or a counselor who could offer those kinds of services). For these kinds of programmes the centre is dependent on students who do their practicum there or visiting motivational speakers.

The staff manage duties like disciplinary issues, what to do when the family of a resident visits, the organisation of official events, and other administrative business. There seem to be a lack of specific duties with regard to the needs of the residents as asserted by Neely-Barnes and Whitted (2011). Most institutions, such as the juvenile rehabilitation centre in question, operate under the government; thus aspects like daily procedures and job scope of the workers are already specified and there is very little room for change or flexibility in work scope.

When talking about what a social worker has to do for his or her clients, we cannot escape from discussing the role of the social worker. Perhaps what happens in the context of the Malaysian welfare system is the ambiguity of what social workers (or social welfare workers) are expected to do, because according to Suppes and Wells (2000), there are many roles a social worker need to uphold, which the general public, probably the social workers themselves, do not fully understand.

The National Association of Social Workers (2005) lays down several roles social workers are responsible for when dealing with adolescents and children, including those who have been exposed to a criminal lifestyle. Some roles deemed important are that of an advocate, an educator, a representative, an assessor, and a facilitator. However, with modern trends in social work, has made the work social workers more sophisticated role, that is, a case manager (Fook, 2002). A case manager assesses risks and needs, and plans treatments in individualised ways. Case managers would be what residents in Malaysian juvenile rehabilitation centres need, because although there is a pattern as to why they commit offences, these reasons can be very individual and unique across cases.

By understanding what roles a social worker needs to uphold in dealing with juvenile delinquents, clearer job scopes need be designed, so that every welfare worker in Malaysian juvenile rehabilitation centres can carry out their responsibilities more effectively.

The Institution's Role in Treating Young Offenders

"Diary: 30th May 2011 – So far, my practicum is going fine. The youths seemed to have received me well and I got to know some of the staff more closely. Everyday, the routine is the same. In the morning, every resident would line up for morning assembly, but the ones who go to school would not be there. Then, the residents who do not go to school will do a little cleaning up of the premises. There'd be tea time, free-activity time, and lunch. Muslim residents are required to change into their prayer garments and pray congregationally in

a small mosque on the premises. It seems like the centre has done a good job of providing the basic needs of the youths. I just wished the centre were more attentive to what they need psychologically and emotionally as much as their physical needs.”

Of course, the workers' work movements are regulated by the official procedures prescribed by the institution and government regulations. Changes are difficult to implement mainly because of the bureaucratic nature of most government institutions in Malaysia. Institutions play a key role in ensuring that facilities and centres to work more creatively, efficiently and smoothly. To do this, institutions need to move from being “custodial” to being more evidence-based (Vinter & Janowitz, 1959; Shields, 2011). Specialists who can apply research findings and scientific evidence to work should be invited to be a part of the family of institutions that deal with juvenile delinquents. Institutions should be more flexible in their dealings with the clients in terms of hiring personnel, procedures to handle clients, and also movement of the workers.

Since institutions have the authority, they, as a holistic entity, need to be aware of the existence of subsystems (e.g. the security, the administrators, the workers, etc.) within the institution to understand how they work. If these subsystems are disconnected, things will not work well for the institution (Martin, 2005). The persons who are in the highest positions in the organisational rank need to play a more active role in taking steps to ensure that the subsystems work well together so that the institution work as a whole. While bureaucracy can have its own advantages, flexibility is also necessary for a more liquid movement within institutions, and result in much needed change.

The Essential Competencies

Enhancing the necessary competencies among welfare workers is seen to be a necessary step. When talking about competencies, it was observed that the needs of offenders housed in a centre are comprehensive, thus requiring a comprehensive skills on the part of the workers to address those needs (Godinez, 1999). It is the responsibility of the institution to tailor programmes at the centre around the needs of the residents. This will require a counselor, educator, therapist, and also recreational facilitator. To identify what needs the residents have for a successful rehabilitation programme, a social worker needs to be a case manager, collectively, as well as individually for all residents. According to Godinez (1999), it is also important to have a healthy ratio of staff to residents as this can prevent stress by eliminating work overload among staff.

Because this rehabilitation centre deals with young offenders, knowledge with regard to handling adolescents is imperative (Brown, 2003). According to Brown, institutions that handle children can be needlessly separated from juvenile justice. In Malaysian welfare institutions, for example, services for children are divided into three: protection, rehabilitation, and development. That these three services can crossover between one another is often ignored. Children who need protection because of abuse or neglect might become potential offenders if this not recognised or treated at an early stage (Kapp, 2000). The practicum student observed that residents often come from families whose parents are often negligent, abusive, and can even be offenders themselves. By interlinking protection, rehabilitation, and development, more comprehensive programmes can be redeveloped and introduced for the improvement of the residents' rehabilitation programme.

The individual skills of welfare workers in the rehabilitation centre should also be addressed as part of the competencies needed for the job. As discussed above, workers need to have an attitude that is less punitive (Baron & Hartnagel, 1996), and to be more attuned to rehabilitative and therapeutic measures. It appeared to the practicum student, one reason to explain the distance between the workers and the residents was because of the lack of empathy on the part of the workers towards the residents in their care. Empathy is the ability to put one's self into the situation of another person. Empathy is no doubt one of the skills that should be developed and honed in the workers (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, n.d.) to enable them to carry out their roles effectively.

Conclusion

The observations made by the practicum student at the juvenile rehabilitation centre may be superficial, but they still pose several research questions, which if carried out, can help the facilities deal with young offenders better and improve their overall effectiveness. It is acknowledged that Malaysia still have a lot to learn as to what practices needed to be employed or discarded in dealing with juvenile delinquency. But to move forward, more specialists are needed to contribute their expertise, by engaging in social work or researching, for the betterment of conditions in juvenile rehabilitation centres in Malaysia.

By understanding this, youths who need to be placed in juvenile rehabilitation institutions can be aware of what is in store for them, and what is ideal and what is realistic. There is a huge gap between the welfare officers currently serving these institutions and the students who might soon soon take up office in the same institutions with regard to their beliefs and values. This can be a

source of conflict if professional upgrading among social workers and welfare workers in Malaysia is not carried out.

All in all, for an institution to work well and efficiently, the components or members of the institution need to stay connected with each other and have a clear sense of what is expected of them. By having a well-rounded system, young offenders can benefit from its efficiency, thus promoting their ability to function well in society – which is the original aim of social work.

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