FIELD PRACTICUM EXPERIENCES OF BILINGUAL SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS WORKING WITH LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY CLIENTS

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This study examined the field internship experiences of bilingual graduate social work students who worked with limited English proficiency (LEP) clients. Data were collected via a Web-based survey from 55 bilingual social work students. Respondents reported that LEP clients required more time and work and generally had more complicated cases than monolingual English clients. Working in two or more languages often fatigued respondents. Respondents frequently interpreted for monolingual staff but received no training in using professional terminology when interpreting. They reported that agencies had only some documents translated. One quarter of the sample stated that being bilingual interfered with their field education. The article closes with recommendations for augmenting the language skills of bilingual students.

SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCIES find themselves working with an increasingly diverse client base that often has limited English proficiency (LEP). Providing needed services to LEP clients, and delivering culturally competent practice, presents challenges beyond those normally encountered—challenges that frequently fall disproportionately on bilingual social workers (Engstrom & Min, 2004; Engstrom, Piedra, & Min, forthcoming).

Social work students in field placements need specific training if they are to apply their knowledge of cross-cultural work effectively. This is especially true for bilingual social work students, who are likely to face the same challenges as professional social workers when delivering services to LEP clients. The study described here explored issues experienced by bilingual master of social work (MSW) students in field placements in order to identify areas in which social work education could better prepare them to work with LEP clients.

An extensive search of the literature catalogued in the Medline, PsycINFO, and Social

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Work Abstracts databases revealed no published research studies examining how social work students, or students in allied professions such as psychology and counseling, work with LEP clients in their field practicum agencies. Indeed, there are remarkably few research studies exploring the interactions and work of social work professionals with LEP clients (Engstrom & Min, 2004; Mitchell, Malak, & Small, 1998).

Cultural Competency and Language

With the U.S. population becoming increasingly diverse, cultural competence is a prerequisite for providing effective services (Min, 2005). Cultural competence ensures that people seeking services are understood and that their values and beliefs are incorporated into all facets of service provision, from outreach to program evaluation. Culturally competent practice draws upon the client's cultural strengths and incorporates beliefs and practices that are part of the client's worldview (Lum, 2003).

Language is one of the most important vehicles for expressing culture, and linguistic diversity is intertwined with cultural diversity (Isaac, 2001). The words used to express ideas, the idioms people use, and the subtleties of language reveal cultural beliefs and a person's outlook on the world (Piedra, 2006).

The need for linguistically appropriate services is well documented (Bender & Harlan, 2005; Bamford, 1991). Many clients are most comfortable expressing their experiences and feelings in their native language, and they are often most comfortable with a social worker from the same cultural background. Examples of language barriers and miscommunications in health and human services abound (Elderkin-Thompson, Silver, & Waitzkin, 2001; Bernstein, 2005; Bamford, 1991); for example, language barriers create health hazards in emergency rooms (Bernstein, 2005). Because of language barriers, the health needs of LEP clients are not being met (Bernstein, 2005) and, in fact, such barriers often cause LEP clients to delay or decrease health care-seeking behavior (Anderson, Scrimshaw, Fullilove, Fielding, & Normand, 2003).

Language barriers affect many different populations. Limited English skills were found to be a barrier for Asian Americans in accessing and using health and social services. Evaluation further showed that services must be culturally and linguistically appropriate if they are to be useful (Jang, Lee, & Woo, 1998; Kung, 2004; Lee, Patchner, & Balgopal, 1991). Many Latinos are not U.S. citizens and have limited English proficiency; these characteristics explain some of the coverage and access problems encountered by the Latino community (Ku & Waidmann, 2003). Monolingual Spanish-speaking patients at a clinic perceived a greater need than did bilingual patients for help with benefits and health, and they had greater difficulty in managing medication. These difficulties may be directly related to the language barrier (Diaz, Prigerson, Desai, & Rosenheck, 2001).

Providing interpreters is one way to deal with language barriers; however, social service providers who use interpreters must be sure that the interpreters have been properly trained (Tribe & Morrissey, 2004). Interpreters must be trained in the ethics of interpreting and be knowledgeable—in both languages—

of professional terms and concepts (Suleiman, 2003). Most providers receive little to no training on how to provide effective services through interpreters (Engstrom & Min, 2004; Engstrom, Piedra, & Min forthcoming). Persons from children to cabdrivers have been improperly used as interpreters in health care settings (Bernstein, 2005). Currently, many bilingual paraprofessionals are being used to interpret for and provide services to LEP clients. Despite a general lack of training, bilingual social workers often function as translators or interpreters for their agencies and for monolingual English colleagues (Engstrom & Min, 2004; Engstrom, Piedra, & Min, forthcoming). There is a need for more bilingual, bicultural professionals who are trained in interpreting and in mental health terminology (Musser-Granski & Carrillo, 1997).

Around the world, health and social service agencies are finding ways to serve LEP populations better. A study of community health centers in Massachusetts showed that bilingual, bicultural social workers are often an integral part of health care teams and can greatly help to improve patient care (Ngo-Metzger et al., 2003). A program in Australia sought to improve mental health services for LEP clients by providing accessible and culturally appropriate services (Ziguras, Stankovska, & Minas, 1999). In the United Kingdom bicultural workers provide critical services to refugees who may have been tortured. Because of the demands of this work, a support and supervision group for bicultural workers has been recommended (Tribe, 1999).

In a focus group, bilingual professionals working in health care settings identified acknowledgment of language skills, agency support, and adjustment of workloads as important ways in which organizations can help bilingual workers (Johnson, Noble, Matthews, & Aguilar, 1999). Because of the high demands placed on them bilingual social workers are at risk of exhaustion, especially when there is little recognition of the unique stressors they experience in working with LEP clients (Lecca, Gutierrez, & Tijerina, 1996). Training and supervision related to working with LEP clients are rarely available. Further, bilingual workers are seldom compensated in terms of workload even though LEP cases are often more complex and time consuming than cases involving native English speakers (Engstrom & Min, 2004; Engstrom, Piedra, & Min, forthcoming). Agencies must be aware of these issues and be proactive in hiring sufficient numbers of bilingual staff (Lecca, Gutierrez, & Tijerina, 1996).

Social Work Education and Language Competencies

Public and private sector health care and social service organizations seek to reduce cultural and communication barriers to quality care and to increase cultural competency and cross-cultural education (Smedley, Stitch, & Nelson, 2003; Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2003). However, few graduate social work and psychology programs provide training on the delivery of cross-cultural mental health services (Adkins, 1990). This, unfortunately, ignores the fact that students need specialized training in applying their language skills to professional practice (Biever et al., 2002).

The social work profession has a commitment to recruit and train minority social

workers. It has been noted that the shortage of minority social workers is detrimental to LEP clients from various cultural backgrounds (Berger, 1989). In the education field, teacher training programs have been created to meet the needs of LEP students. The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs, funded a program to improve the education of LEP students by increasing the number of minorities in education and providing training for those persons (Bernal, 2004).

Little has been written about efforts to train social work students to work with LEP clients. San Diego State University and the University of Georgia have worked with universities in La Paz, Mexico, and Veracruz, Mexico, respectively, to develop international educational exchange programs to help social work students build cultural and linguistic competence (Boyle, Nackerud, & Kilpatrick, 1999; Carrilio & Mathiesen, 2006). At Southwest Texas State University, students participating in a language immersion program specifically designed for social work students developed a social work vocabulary and were better able to engage in social work practice in Spanish than students who had completed only a conventional Spanish course (Smith, Hawkins, & Carnes, 1999). Unfortunately, such programs are rare in schools of social work.

A study at a Toronto university found that 80% of bilingual field practicum students in a bachelor's degree program whose native language was not English felt that being able to speak another language was an asset in their field placement. However, they felt it could be a barrier when communicating with others at the agency (Razack, 2001). Graduate programs with specializations for bilingual students must make additional supportive services available, such as assisting with English proficiency if needed (Rosenfield & Esquivel, 1985).

Methods

Recognizing the importance of providing high-quality linguistically appropriate services, this study built on previous work by Engstrom & Min (2004) by examining the field practicum experiences of social work students working with LEP clients. Specifically, this study addressed the following questions:

1. To what extent do bilingual MSW students interact with LEP clients in their field practica?
2. What field agency resources are available to MSW students who work with LEP clients?
3. How do field agencies prepare bilingual students to work with LEP clients?
4. Do agencies use bilingual students as interpreters or translators, and does being bilingual result in different expectations and experiences?

Research Design and Sample

The study used a cross-sectional survey and was exploratory—specifically, it was conducted via a Web-based survey design. Study participants accessed a survey site via the Internet, and provided their responses electronically.

Participants were students in a school of social work MSW program at a large public university in southern California. At the time

of data collection, 251 students were enrolled in either a 1st-year or a 2nd-year social work field course on main campus and in a 2nd-year distance education field course in a rural county. Researchers sought cooperation and recruitment of students from this pool in two ways. First, an invitational e-mail message was sent to students who were enrolled in these courses. The message included the purpose of the survey, an assurance of anonymity and confidentiality, and a link to the survey Web site. Second, a flyer with the same information as in the invitational e-mail message was posted and distributed to students.

Of the 251 students contacted, a total of 108 students responded to the survey (a response rate of 43.0%). Of these 108 respondents, 55 students identified themselves as bilingual, and they are the focus of this study. This response rate likely constituted a high percentage of the bilingual students enrolled in the program. These formed the study sample: 27 students from the 1st-year course and 28 from the 2nd-year course.

Women constituted the majority of the participating students for both the 1st-year and the 2nd-year respondents: 92.3% and 69.6%, respectively (see Table 1). The majority of the respondents were of Latino/Hispanic origin for both the 1st-year (69.2%) and the 2nd-year students (82.6%), followed by self-identified members of Caucasian, Asian/Pacific Islander, and African American ethnicities. The average age of the respondents was 30 years old. It is no surprise that Spanish was the predominant language other than English. The most frequently cited way of learning a language other than English was the family (66.7%), followed by language study in schools. Approximately two thirds of the bilingual students reported feeling "very" comfortable working with clients in a non-English language.

Measures

The survey instrument contained two major sections for the 1st-year students: a demographic section and a field-experience section for their current field settings. For the 2nd-year students who had completed the 1st-year field education course, an additional section was inserted to gather information about those their 1st-year field experiences. The demographic section asked for basic information: age, gender, ethnicity, language(s) spoken other than English, method(s) of acquiring non-English languages, and level of comfort with using the language in work with clients. The second section, on field placement and field experience, sought the following information: population the field placement served, location of the agency, number of clients assigned, proportion of LEP clients, and whether the student translated or interpreted for agency or other workers.

The survey instrument was based on a previously published qualitative study of bilingual social workers (Engstrom & Min, 2004; Engstrom, Piedra, & Min, forthcoming). Major qualitative themes from this original study were converted to closed-ended questions. A small group of bilingual educators then evaluated the survey for face validity and constructed open-ended questions to capture additional qualitative input. The instrument was pilot-tested on both monolingual and bilingual MSW students. The survey was conducted in late April and May 2004.

Quantitative data were analyzed with basic descriptive statistics using frequencies and cross-tabulation. Because of the small sample size, no attempt was made to use inferential statistics. Qualitative questions were independently examined by two members of the research team to identify and code themes and they, in turn, relied on an iterative

TABLE 1. Demographic Characteristics of Surveyed 1st- and 2nd-Year Bilingual Social Work Graduate Students

	1st-Year Bilingual MSW Students (*N*=27)		2nd-Year Bilingual MSW Students (*N*=28)	
Characteristics	% or Mean	*SD*	% or Mean	*SD*
Gender				
Male	7.4		30.4	
Female	92.6		69.6	
Ethnicity				
Caucasian	25.9		25.0	
African American	3.7		0.0	
Asian/Pacific Islander	3.7		3.6	
Native American	0.0		0.0	
Latino	66.7		71.4	
Age (means)	30.0	6.2	30.7	5.7
Languages spoken (may select multiple responses				
Spanish	88.9		96.4	
Tagalog	0.0		3.6	
American Sign Language	3.7		0.0	
V ietnamese	7.4		3.6	
Other language				
Methods of acquiring capacity to speak language (may select multiple responses)				
Born in non-English-speaking country	11.5		21.7	
Moved to non-English-speaking country	23.1		17.4	
Family spoke other language	66.7		69.6	
Studied other language in grade school	26.9		34.8	
Studied other language in college	34.6		30.4	
How comfortable with working with clients in the language other than English				
Very uncomfortable	0.0		0.0	
Somewhat uncomfortable	0.0		0.0	
Somewhat comfortable	34.6		30.4	

process to organize and determine distinct thematic contents.

Results

An overwhelming majority of bilingual social work students had at least one LEP client over the course of a year-long field practicum. As shown in Table 2, LEP clients made up a slightly larger percentage of caseloads for 2nd-year students (36.6%) than for 1st-year students (30.1%). Further analysis indicates that Spanish-speaking students had higher LEP caseloads than students speaking other languages.

The fact that almost all bilingual students in the study assisted both English-speaking and LEP clients meant that they were in a position to reflect on whether working with LEP clients required more of their time than working with English-speaking clients. Nearly 9 of 10 students said it took more time to work with LEP clients. Indeed, 46% of the sample noted that helping LEP clients consistently ("all of the time" to "most of the time") took more time. Second-year students were more likely to report that LEP clients took more time than were 1st-year students (60.0% vs. 33.4%, respectively).

Not surprisingly, when asked whether LEP clients required more work of them, more than two thirds of bilingual students responded yes, with more 2nd-year students (76%) than 1st-year students (63%) answering that way. There are a number of reasons why bilingual MSW students reported that LEP clients required more work. To begin with, many of their clients were immigrants who had little experience interacting with U.S. social institutions. Hence, bilingual students reported that they had to do more work educating clients about the purpose and use of social services (92%) and the legal system (78%). Bilingual students found that interpreting for their own clients (81%) and also interpreting for the clients of other workers (76%) created more work. Communication in the language of the client (86%), intake and assessment (64%), and the need to establish rapport and relationship (61%) before initiating official business were areas in which bilingual students thought LEP clients required more work than did English-speaking clients.

The complexity of LEP cases relates to the issues of time and work effort. Generally, the more complex the client's case, the more time and effort must be expended on the intervention. Nearly two thirds of bilingual students found that LEP clients had more complicated cases than English-speaking clients. First-year students (66.7%) were more likely to answer affirmatively than were 2nd-year students (48%), perhaps because they had less professional experience in working with LEP clients.

Students who considered LEP cases more complex offered a variety of rationales for their answers. Some of their responses concerned the types of issues LEP clients bring to social service agencies. Bilingual students reported that the immigration status of most LEP clients (93%) complicated their cases because of the myriad eligibility rules governing benefits and services to immigrants. Likewise, LEP clients often (73%) fear authorities such as immigration and police officers, and most are dealing with adjustment to life in a foreign and often strange land (acculturation stress: 80%). Bilingual social work students noted that the lack of resources for LEP

TABLE 2. Field Placement Experience With Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Clients for 1st- and 2nd-Year Bilingual Social Work Graduate Students

	1st-Year Bilingual Students (*N*=27) % or Means	*SD*	2nd-Year Bilingual Students (*N*=28) % or Means	*SD*	Total Bilingual Students (*N*=55) % or Means	*SD*
The number of clients in field placement (means)	13.7	9.5	21.8	17.1	17.8	14.4
Percentage of LEP clients (means)	30.1	37.0	36.6	33.6	33.7	35.2
LEP clients take more time to work with						
all the time	3.8		12.0		7.7	
Most of the time	29.6		48.0		38.5	
Some of the time	48.1		32.0		40.4	
None of the time	18.5		13.0		13.5	
LEP clients require more work	63.0		76.0		69.0	
Reasons LEP take more work	(*n*=17)		(*n*=19)		(*n*=36)	
Referrals	76.0		58.0		61.0	
Communication	82.0		89.0		86.0	
Educating re services	94.0		89.0		92.0	
Educating re legal matters	82.0		75.0		78.0	
Intake & assessment	71.0		58.0		64.0	
Case notes	41.0		37.0		39.0	
Interpretation	84.0		79.0		81.0	
Relationship building	65.0		58.0		61.0	
Interpreting for others	76.0		58.0		76.0	
LEP cases are more complicated	66.7		48.0		58.0	
Reasons LEP are more complicated	(*n*=18)		(*n*=12)		(*n*=30)	
Accumulation stress	83.0		75.0		80.0	
Immigration status	89.0		100.0		93.0	
Fear of authorities	83.0		58.0		73.0	
Language complexity	89.0		67.0		80.0	
Lack of resources	100.0		67.0		87.0	
Referrals	83.0		50.0		70.0	
Various multiple needs	83.0		83.0		83.0	
Assigned new LEP client when already working with one	85.0		86.0		86.0	
Asked to take on LEP client when preferred not to	25.9		7.1		16.4	

clients (87%) complicated their efforts, as did the time and effort necessary to make referrals (70%). Not surprisingly, slightly more than 80% of these bilingual students stated that LEP clients had more needs than English-speaking clients, and about the same percentage (80%) observed that intervening in two or more languages made LEP cases more complicated.

The demands on bilingual social work students were compounded by the fact that 86% of them reported receiving new LEP clients while they were already working with existing ones. This raises potential equity and workload issues in field placements. If bilingual social work students have the same number of clients as do monolingual students, but their cases require more time and effort, then, in effect, bilingual students have higher caseloads. Moreover, not all bilingual students are satisfied with serving mostly LEP clients. Indeed, approximately 16% of the bilingual students reported being assigned additional LEP clients when they would have preferred not to take on any more LEP clients.

Workload issues were not the only area of concern for these students. Some of them also expressed concern that serving LEP clients limited their exposure to clients with other backgrounds. One student noted the need "to balance the caseload so that you attain a broader understanding of diversity instead of being placed in a position that [exposes you] to one ethnicity." Another student commented, "When you are a bilingual worker you sometimes get stuck with all of the Spanish-only cases."

One of the issues raised by previous research (Engstrom & Min, 2004; Engstrom, Piedra, & Min, 2009) is that of fatigue resulting from constantly switching from one language to another while working with LEP clients. Approximately 60% of students reported being fatigued from bilingual work, with 25% indicating that working in two languages fatigued them all or most of the time. As might be anticipated, those students with higher LEP caseloads expressed greater fatigue, as did those working with Spanish-speaking clients. This finding is congruent with and reinforces the earlier findings that LEP clients take more work and present more complicated cases.

Agency Context

Bilingual students reported that their field agencies had limited resources to assist LEP clients (see Table 3). Forty percent of the sample replied that their agency had professional interpreters available to facilitate communication with LEP clients, and 60% of those students said they had access to professional interpreters all or most of the time. It is in this area that the experiences of 1st- and 2nd-year students significantly diverge: 57% of 2nd-year students, as opposed to 22% of 1st-year students, interned at agencies where professional interpreters were available. Also, 2nd-year students reported having greater accessibility to those interpreters than did 1st-year students.

It is important that agencies working with LEP clients have agency documents and forms translated into the languages of the clients they serve. However, none of the students in the sample reported interning at an agency where all the documents and forms

TABLE 3. Statistics Related to Experience of 1st- and 2nd-Year Bilingual Social Work Graduate Students With Field Placement Agencies

Experiences With Field Placement Agencies	1st-Year Bilingual Students (N=27) %	2nd-Year Bilingual Students (N=28) %	Total Bilingual Students (N=55) %
Students felt fatigue	(*n*=27)	(*n*=25)	(*n*=52)
All the time	3.7	0.0	1.9
Most of the time	11.1	36.0	23.1
Some of the time	29.6	40.0	34.6
Professional interpreters available at the agency	22.2	57.1	40.0
If yes, were interpreters easy to access?	(*n*=6)	(*n*=16)	(*n*=22)
All the time	16.7	6.3	9.1
Most of the time	33.3	56.3	50.0
Some of the time	50.0	31.3	36.4
None of the time	0.0	6.3	4.6
To what extent were agency documents translated into the languages of the clients?[a]			
All of the documents	n/a	0.0	
Most of the documents		32.0	
Some of the documents		57.0	
None of the documents		11.0	
Does the agency rely on bilingual social workers and other professional staff to serve as interpreters for other staff members?	(*n*=27)	(*n*=24)	(*n*=51)
All the time	100.0	100.0	100.0
How frequently have you been asked to do interpretation for the agency/other workers?[a]			
Once a week or more often	n/a	54.0	
Bimonthly to monthly		25.0	
Never		21.0	
Training on professional/medical terminology:			
Yes	7.4	0.0	3.6
Your bilingual skills interfered with your social work field learning:			
Yes	29.6	21.7	25.4
Agency more interested in students':			
Bilingual skills/ability	3.7	7.1	5.4
Professional social work learning	37.0	57.1	47.3
A combination of both	59.3	35.7	46.3

[a]Because of a software problem, data on these questions were not collected for 1st-year students.

had been translated. One third of the 2nd-year bilingual sample reported that their internship agency had most of its documents translated, approximately 60% of those students noted that some documents had been translated, and 11% indicated that no documents had been translated. The lack of translated documents creates additional work for bilingual staff and students because they are called on to communicate the meaning of the documents to LEP clients by speaking with those clients. As one student put it, "Most of the information is available in English and not Spanish. This takes double the time."

The primary language resource that agencies did possess was bilingual staff, both professional and nonprofessional. Almost all the bilingual students stated that their agencies relied on bilingual staff to serve as interpreters. Some students reported that their agencies had sufficient bilingual social workers to serve LEP clients, whereas others reported that their agencies relied on "cleaning ladies to interpret for social workers." In other instances, bilingual students noted that the demand for bilingual services outstripped the capacity of the agency to provide them. One 2nd-year student commented that there are "longer waiting lists for LEP clients and they are often turned away or referred to other agencies." Additionally, bilingual students noted that some agencies tended to "overuse bilingual professionals." By that the students meant using bilingual professionals as interpreters rather than for their other skills and knowledge.

Field agencies used bilingual students to supplement their often-limited language resources. A majority of 2nd-year bilingual students (54%) reported that they had served as interpreters for other staff members at least once a week or more often. The demand on bilingual students for interpretation is one of the important areas that separates their field experience from that of monolingual students. Nearly one half of all respondents reported that interpreting for others meant more work for them.

Preparation to Work Professionally with LEP Clients

It is one thing to use language in everyday communication; it is an entirely different matter to have clients comprehend the meaning of the terminology used in social services. Indeed, one of the functions of social work education is to give students the ability to understand and articulate various professional terms and then be able to communicate the meaning of those terms in everyday language. An unspoken assumption appeared to be that bilingual students would intuitively know how to import professional terminology into another language and then be able to use common language to make the terms understood by their clients. As one qualitative comment had it, "The most difficult aspect of working with LEP clients was finding the correct terminology for therapeutic terms in the second language." Only two of the surveyed bilingual students had attended a workshop or conference associated with their field placement that provided guidance on how to make professional terms comprehensible to LEP clients.

Classroom education also did not give students content or skills that would enable them to make better use of their 2nd-language professional abilities. Although this survey

did not directly measure whether coursework facilitated work with LEP clients, a number of qualitative comments reflected the absence of curriculum to "help students work with the LEP population." One student recommended that schools of social work "should provide supervision in the other language [that] students are using with their clients." Another student suggested having "more professors, field liaisons, and field instructors that have had experience working with LEP clients. This would definitely help MSW students because they would be able to share their experiences, compare and contrast these experiences, and work together to better help these clients." Finally, one 1st-year student recommended "having actual courses that help students work with the LEP population."

Perceptions of Bilingual Students

The strong demand for bilingual staff opens the possibility that agencies will use bilingual students primarily as interpreters and translators. By focusing on the language capacity of bilingual students, internship agencies can detract from the students' opportunities to learn essential social work knowledge and skills. Indeed, this appears to happen to more than a few bilingual students. When asked if they felt that their bilingual skills interfered with their professional social work learning, one quarter of the sample responded affirmatively. Some of these students reported being the only bilingual professional staff at their internship agency, which meant that they spent much of their time functioning as translators and interpreters. In a qualitative comment, one 2nd-year student reported not disclosing her bilingual ability at her 2nd-year placement because she felt that her language skills had been exploited at her 1st-year placement.

Almost half the sample (46%) reported that field practicum agencies were equally interested in the professional learning of bilingual students and their language skills and ability. More 1st-year students (59%) felt that way than did 2nd-year students (35.7%). A small percentage of the sample (5.4%) reported that their field agency was more interested in them for their bilingual ability than their social work learning. All of these students believed that their bilingual skills interfered with their social work learning.

Discussion

This study is the first to examine the language issues experienced by 1st- and 2nd-year bilingual MSW students in their social work field education settings. The results can be summarized as follows: Almost all bilingual MSW students reported having LEP clients in their caseloads. They found that LEP clients had more complicated cases, took more time, and required more work than English-speaking clients. These students reported that agencies asked them to interpret for other staff and to translate agency documents. A majority of bilingual students reported being fatigued by working in two languages. In addition, one fourth of bilingual students felt that being bilingual interfered with their learning in the field. A majority of bilingual students reported receiving little to no training in work with LEP clients and how best to communicate professional language to them.

This study is limited by the small sample size and the fact that only graduate students were surveyed. In addition, because this population was drawn from a university located close to the U.S. border with Mexico, Mexican American and immigrant populations may be overly represented in the client base. Therefore, results may not generalize to other university programs or populations.

Despite these limits, our findings suggest several important points for social work field education and for the social work curriculum overall. In addition, there are implications for further social work research.

Field education offices must recognize that unique demands are placed upon bilingual social work students, and must ensure that demands for their language skills do not interfere with their learning opportunities in the field. Equally important, schools must assess the language resources and capacities of field practicum agencies and consider these carefully when deciding where to place students.

Ultimately, language issues in field placements should be considered in the context of the entire social work curriculum, which must prepare all MSW students to work with interpreters and to identify other language and cultural issues and barriers to effective service. The curriculum must also offer specific support for bilingual social work students so that they can work more effectively with LEP clients. There are often no agreed-on standards for translation of professional or specialized terms and concepts; nevertheless, bilingual students need training to prepare them to discuss difficult emotional and psychological issues with these clients.

Based on our review of the literature, very few studies have addressed language issues in social work field education. More research is needed in several areas, including

1. studying the impact of bilingual skills on social work students' field learning;
2. researching the awareness and understanding of how schools of social work deal with bilingual social work students;
3. developing an understanding of how social work field agencies train, use, and supervise bilingual social work students; and
4. understanding the balance struck between highlighting their language strengths and socializing them into professional social work practice.

Schools of social work are in a key position to prepare social workers to deliver culturally competent service. By attending to the curriculum and field placement needs of bilingual students and focusing additional research in this area, schools will be better able to deliver on the promise of developing culturally and linguistically competent social workers who will be able to meet the needs of all clients who seek health and social services.

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