

International recruitment in child protection: the experiences of workers in the Australian Capital Territory

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Abstract

Recruitment of staff in child protection services is a major challenge for statutory agencies in Australia and overseas. Retaining experienced staff is difficult given that the nature of the work is stressful, complex and staff turnover is high. Recruiting child protection staff from different countries is one strategy used by many national organisations to increase staff numbers. This paper reports on how a group of 23 child protection workers recruited during 2003-5 by the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Office of Child, Youth and Family Support from England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic experienced this recruitment process and their transition to working in an Australian child protection context. The paper concludes with a discussion of how these experiences can inform international recruitment strategies in child protection organisations.

Introduction

The problem of maintaining sufficient numbers of skilled child protection staff in statutory agencies is an international phenomenon (Gibbs, 2001; Hodgkin, 2002; Richmond, McArthur, & Winkworth, 2005; Tham, 2006; Westbrook, Ellis, & Ellett, 2006). Research indicates that the factors involved are complex and include rising child abuse reports, the highly stressful nature of the work, and the need for support, professional supervision and organisational recognition for workers (Gibbs, 2001; Richmond, McArthur, & Winkworth, 2005; Stevens & Higgins, 2002). For some years the United Kingdom has actively recruited social workers from a number of countries, including Australia, in order to address staff shortages (Evans, Huxley, & Munroe, 2006).

However, there has been little empirical work undertaken on the issues involved in the recruitment of overseas qualified child protection workers, particularly in relation to the transferability of knowledge, skills and boundaries across international borders. Instead recruitment objectives have often been underpinned by the assumption that practitioners who opt to work abroad will have the capacity to adjust positively and quickly to new statutory contexts and practices. This paper presents research conducted in 2006 with 23 social workers from England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. These social workers were recruited by the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Office of Children Youth and Family Support in 2003-5 in order to fill a number of vacancies, primarily in front line positions. The paper provides a brief overview of the child protection recruitment and retention literature and presents the research process. The research findings identify the range of reasons why these child protection workers chose to come to work in the ACT, their qualifications and practice experiences and their reactions to working in a new child protection context. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings for future international recruitment processes.

The skills shortage, retention issues and international recruitment in child protection

The shortage of workers in child protection is an international phenomenon. In the USA rates of annual turnover of staff in public child welfare vary from 20% to 40% (Westbrook, Ellis, & Ellett, 2006). The United Kingdom and Sweden have experienced severe shortages in their social work provision, and specifically in the area of child protection (Tham, 2006; Welbourne, Harrison, & Ford, 2007). All jurisdictions in Australia have also experienced shortages in child protection workers and increasing workloads (Richmond, McArthur, & Winkworth, 2005). Research on retention issues in child protection indicates that strategies for promoting staff retention need to include the organizational environment, the competence of the individual worker, the nature of the work, and the work context (Hodgkin, 2002). The organizational climate needs to be supportive, workers need to be suitably trained for the jobs to which they are allocated with opportunities for movement and progression, managers need to treat staff as competent and value their input into decision making (Bednar, 2003; Westbrook, Ellis, & Ellett, 2006). Across studies, quality supervision seems particularly significant (Bednar, 2003; Gibbs, 2001; Westbrook, Ellis, & Ellett, 2006).

In Australia, the shortage of child protection workers is evident and a particular source of concern given the fact that there has been a marked increase in child abuse reporting due to a complex array of factors that fall outside the remit of this paper. For example, statistics indicate that the number of notifications of child abuse have risen nationally by 50%, that is, from 198,355 in 2002-2002 to 309,517 in 2006-2007 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2008). This is particularly evident in the ACT where, following Vardon's major review and report on the ACT's child protection services, the need for a significant increase in the child protection workforce was identified in order to adequately service the needs of children and families in the ACT (Vardon, 2004).

One strategy to ameliorate local shortages of workers is international recruitment. The United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland both utilize overseas recruitment to fill child protection positions (Firth, 2004; Welbourne, Harrison, & Ford, 2007; White, 2006). The numbers of social workers trained outside the UK seeking recognition to work in the UK has increased from 227 in 1990/1991 to 2,534 in 2003-2004 (Firth, 2004). This is one indicator of the increase in international recruitment. Many social workers recruited to work in both UK and Ireland are from Australia (National Social Work Qualifications Board, 2006; Welbourne, Harrison, & Ford, 2007).

In the United Kingdom, some of the issues involved in international recruitment are being identified and debated (Eborall, 2003; Evans, Huxley, & Munroe, 2006; Welbourne, Harrison, & Ford, 2007; White, 2006). These include a recognition of the stresses and adjustments new recruits experience in working in unfamiliar policy, legislative and cultural contexts (Evans, Huxley & Munro, 2006; Welbourne, Harrison, & Ford, 2007) and the additional pressure that this places on agencies to provide induction (Eborall, 2003). Welbourne, Harrison and Ford (2007) suggest that the recruiting agency and employers need to recognize that social work practices may not necessarily easily translate across national borders, and that contextual and cultural aspects of practice may be different. Organizational arrangements, and political and policy influences all impact on practice in areas such as child protection (McDonald, Harris, & Wintersteen, 2003).

A further issue that is considered in the UK in relation to international recruitment is the level of support, training and time needed for overseas workers to adjust to a new practice

environment. Welbourne, Harrison and Ford (2007: 33) identify the provision of adequate support to overseas-trained social workers as an ethical issue because it is linked to the development of safe working practices for both workers and service users. The development of a Code of Practice in the UK for employers in health and social welfare seeking to recruit people from overseas is one outcome that has emerged out of recognition of the existence of these ethical issues (Social Care Institute for Excellence, 2007).

Generally, the Australian experience of international recruitment in child protection is not clearly documented and it is difficult to form a coherent picture of its prevalence. We know that Australia has a history of recruiting overseas social workers to work in child protection (Markiewicz, 1996), and we also know that the number of overseas qualified social workers seeking professional recognition to work in Australia has more than doubled between 1998-1999 and 2005-2006 (Hodgson, 2006). However this is only one very general indicator of numbers of social workers moving to Australia. In addition, the debates about the merits or otherwise of international recruitment are not well developed. While Liddell, Donegan, Goddard and Tucci (2006) argue that overseas recruitment in child protection in Australia has not been effective in addressing skills shortages or creating sustainability in the child protection workforce, these claims are not clearly evidenced in Australian research.

The gaps in knowledge about the efficacy of international recruitment strategies in Australia and the extent to which they address sustainability in the child protection workforce warrant attention. According to Lyons (2006), the international movement of workers, including social workers and child protection workers, can illuminate key areas of practice. For example, it can provide an opportunity to research into ‘good practice’ in recruitment and induction across international boundaries. It can also highlight the benefits and stresses of relocation, how to maximize the expertise of the new recruits to the workforce and also to explore the impact of international recruitment from a service users’ perspective (Lyon 2006, p.373). It also offers an opportunity to consider how organizational practices which aid retention can be tailored to the needs of workers recruited from overseas. The research presented here attempts to fill these knowledge gaps by focusing on how one group of social workers experienced an international recruitment process.

The research process

The recruitment of a group of overseas trained child protection workers to the ACT Office of Child, Youth and Family Support over a 2 year period (2003-5) was identified in 2006, by the researchers and the Office management as a unique opportunity to examine in some depth the experiences of international recruitment in child protection. A good working relationship between the Australian Catholic University (ACU) School of Social Work and the Office of Children Youth and Family Support (hereafter ‘the Office’) provided a solid foundation from which to undertake such an inquiry. At the time of the study, these organizations had already worked together to develop undergraduate and post graduate courses. This same collaborative relationship led to the development of a research institute, the Institute of Child Protection Studies. The research team included two Australian academics from the ACU and a UK social work academic. Together the team had considerable knowledge of the key educational and practice issues in relation to Australian and UK/Irish contexts.

The research team gained permission from senior management of the Office to access the recruits during working hours and ethics approval was provided by the ACU Human

Research Ethics Committee. The research participants were assured that their individual responses would not be identifiable and that the data would be aggregated. Initial consultations were also held between one of the researchers and a small group of research participants who were keen to clarify the research process and objectives. On completion of the research, a research report was also provided to each recruit and to the Office Management Group.

A mixed method approach was adopted in order to gather meaningful qualitative and quantitative data and access as many of the overseas recruits as possible. The methods chosen included a brief questionnaire, a World Café group interview (Tan & Brown, 2005) and individual and focus group interviews. The World Café method is a way of gathering data through setting up 'conversations that matter' with a view to accessing collaborative and collective thinking and ideas about critical issues. Participants are invited to meet as a group on one occasion, during which the participants discuss a number of predetermined questions in a number of smaller groups. Participants are asked to identify the main themes that are raised in the discussions and then to move between groups to generate and pollinate ideas.

The entire cohort of twenty nine workers that were recruited by the Office were invited to participate in the research. An information letter was provided the Office management to disseminate to each worker. This resulted in a response rate of 79%, with 23 recruits participating in the research. The high response rate reflects a number of factors, including management endorsement of the research, a general interest from the recruits in the research questions and an enthusiasm to share their experiences of moving to a new working environment. A number of the workers also recognised that the research could provide the Office with valuable information about how workers experience international recruitment and that this in turn could influence future recruitment strategies.

The 23 research participants were asked to complete a questionnaire on the transferability of knowledge, skills and values between the UK/Ireland (UK/I) and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). This quantitative data provided information on participants' demography, professional qualifications and experience and attempted to identify the extent to which practice knowledge was considered transferable to the ACT child protection context. The analysis of this data involved generation of simple frequencies and, like the qualitative data, the findings emphasised the importance of organisational context, culture and also a sound theory base (Trevithick 2005: 75; Trevithick 2007: 20) as central to the transferability of knowledge, skills and values. The research participants were then asked to discuss, using open questions within a World Café format, three areas of social work knowledge that they would prioritise as being essential for practitioners working in statutory child protection, plus any other recruitment experiences and issues that they considered important. In an analysis of the qualitative data generated by the World Café method, and the discussion and points that emerged, a number of key themes were identified.

For the purposes of this paper, consideration will be given to the key qualitative research data that emerged, namely the reasons why these child protection workers chose to come to work in the ACT, their qualifications and practice experiences and their transition to working in a new child protection context. Further publications related to transferability of knowledge are anticipated.

The Research Findings

Demographic profile and the recruitment process

A total of 12 female and 11 male recruits, aged between 24 and 52 (mean age = 36) participated in the research. Of these 23 recruits, 15 identified their nationality as British, two as Northern Irish, one as Irish and four identified themselves as Scottish. For the majority of research participants this was their first experience of working in another country. Their reasons for seeking work in the child protection sector in the ACT varied and included the chance to provide positive opportunities for their families, to seek career enhancement, to broaden their professional experience and the desire to live and work in Australia.

The extent to which the international recruits understood the purpose of the recruitment strategy varied markedly. Some recruits were aware that the Office was undergoing a post Vardon Report process of organisational change and that the international recruitment of experienced workers from abroad was an important step in achieving this aim. Other recruits understood the recruitment process as primarily driven by significant staff shortages, especially amongst front-line staff. The recruits recognised that some of their new local colleagues appeared to be wary of the changes and influences that the “new kids on the block” might bring to the agency. For some research participants this impacted negatively on the development of collegial working relationships.

In addition to these work pressures and uncertainties, participants indicated other initial difficulties in their move to the ACT. This included visa issues, accommodation problems, the challenges of settling families into a different cultural environment and homesickness. These factors all took their toll.

Challenges to professional status and identity

The recruits brought with them a range of practice experiences in the statutory, voluntary, residential and non-residential sector in fields of practice that included: child protection; adoption/fostering; mental health; criminal justice; disability services; addictions; homelessness; health; education; asylum seekers/refugees and management. Generally the research participants identified themselves as social workers with 20 research participants having received the professional social work qualification in the UK, which was either the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) or the Certificate of Qualification in Social Work (CQSW). The DipSW or the CQSW was the sole social work qualification for eight of the research participants and ten recruits also had an undergraduate or postgraduate degree in social work. Some had achieved a range of additional qualifications including certificates and diplomas in child protection, community education, mental health, criminal justice and nursing. Others had undergraduate and post graduate degrees in Arts and Psychology.

This difference in social work qualifications was one of the key issues which some of the recruits confronted in the early stages of their employment at the Office. As identified above, eight of the research participants had a Dip SW or CQSW as their sole social work qualification. In Australia a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) is the basic requirement for eligibility of membership of the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). The AASW is the professional body that establishes national standards for social work education. This discrepancy meant that the recruits who have a DipSW or a CQSW without a social work degree could not officially be recognised as social workers in Australia and this was experienced as a direct challenge to their professional status and identity and had implications for promotional opportunities.

Another area of challenge to professional identity of the research participants, which they were unaware of and unprepared for, was the realization that in Australia child protection workers occupy a variety of professional backgrounds and that the professional title ‘social worker’ is not widely used in statutory child protection agencies, including the Office. This is not the case in the UK where it is not possible to be a child protection practitioner without a social work qualification. The recruits expressed considerable dismay and alarm at the prospect that they would lose the title of social worker and for many practitioners, this threatened to undermine their professional identity and, for some, appeared to discount the professional experience and expertise they had acquired over a number of years:

“My strong professional identity is being stripped away because I am not allowed to call myself a social worker.”

The fact that supervision was also provided to some of the recruits by non-social workers and this experience did not generally involve reflection on issues such as social work knowledge and values/ethics, compounded their concerns that their professional identity and knowledge base was in danger of being eroded.

Adapting to a new child protection context

The research participants described the ACT child protection context as both similar and different to their previous practice environments. A common area of similarity included the universal nature of child abuse:

“Child abuse unfortunately looks the same everywhere. You get the same presentations of emotional or physical abuse no matter where you are working”

However the organisational responses to child protection were experienced as different. These differences were mainly reflected in legislation, agency policy and procedures. One particular area of service provision that was highlighted by many of the research participants was the roles and responsibilities that statutory child protection workers and workers in the non-government sector had in the assessment of children and families. Many of the overseas trained social workers regarded themselves as bringing significant assessment skills to their practice and their inability to be involved in this area of child protection work left them feeling frustrated and professionally challenged.

The intensity and immediacy of local political responses to child protection issues was also a different experience for many workers, as one practitioner noted:

“Different politics and a different history of social policy development have a huge impact on the discourse of child protection”

For some recruits this led to a recognition that their knowledge and skills may not always be readily transferable, and that the new context did not facilitate the practice of some practice perspectives learnt in the UK. They found that a significant amount of new knowledge about child protection work in the ACT needed to be developed. This left some workers feeling de-skilled, *“I feel like I am back to the beginning of my career”*, while others recognised this process of knowledge acquisition as an opportunity for professional growth.

One important area of new knowledge involved developing an understanding of the Australian cultural context. For many participants this included the history of Indigenous Australia and the impact of colonisation on the contemporary experiences of many Indigenous communities. For example, although the research participants indicated a in-depth understanding and use of anti-oppressive practice perspectives in their work, in an Australian child protection context some participants were unfamiliar with how the removal of the Stolen Generation might affect their relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients.

Implications of the research

The research findings suggest that while international recruitment processes can attract experienced and well qualified child protection workers to agencies that are struggling with staff shortages and experiencing organisational change they can, in the initial stages of transition, leave workers feeling somewhat overwhelmed and at times de-skilled and uncertain about how they best to contribute to the local practice context. This research provides some empirical evidence for the literature emerging from the UK which suggests that international recruitment in the human services is a complex matter (Evans, Huxley, & Munroe, 2006; Welbourne, Harrison, & Ford, 2007). In addition, the experiences of the 23 social workers who participated in this research provide key insights into what areas of the recruitment process could be improved in order to encourage not only the retention of new staff, but also facilitate new recruits making a positive contribution to service quality.

Recruitment

As stated previously, the international recruitment of social workers is a global phenomenon but there are currently no international equivalency requirements for social workers (International Federation of Social Workers & International Association of Schools of Social Work, 2004). This means that each country will ascribe their own standards and requirements in relation to social work qualifications. While it could be argued that every social worker should take individual responsibility in relation to these matters, it is important that recruiting agencies become aware of how equivalency issues can undermine a worker's professional identity, status and opportunity for career progression.

The research findings also indicate that while many research participants experienced the core nature of child abuse as similar to what they had experienced in their previous work, there were a range of contextual differences in relation to child protection practice, policies and service provision. This finding supports the idea that while social work is an international profession that shares similar goals and common values, it is nevertheless shaped by different local social, cultural, economic and political contexts (McDonald, Harris and Wintersteen, 2004, p.191).

The potential recruitment implications are that those agencies involved in international recruitment processes should openly discuss with applicants this complex mix of similarities and differences so that potential recruits are aware of the professional and practice challenges that this may pose. The findings also suggest that the transferability of knowledge and skills involves workers analysing the social, political and cultural context in which they will be practicing. Recruitment processes need to somehow capture whether or not workers can develop this capacity.

Retention and service quality

The research participants reaffirmed the importance of comprehensive early entry training and induction into new child protection contexts. A recent national audit of training provided by Australian statutory child protection learning and development units, emphasised the importance of targeted and effective training in meeting the needs of new recruits and maintaining a coherent knowledge and skill base across the child protection sector (Bromfield & Ryan, 2007). This type of support is also regarded as critical by writers such as Welbourne, Harrison and Ford (2007) who assert that: “working within a legislative, cultural and political context that is unfamiliar has stresses and potential risks for social workers and in different ways for their employers and service users” (p.30).

This suggests that the amount of time and support needed in the transition period may initially be higher for international recruits than for locally trained workers of comparable experience. The literature cited earlier also suggests that high quality supportive professional supervision is of critical importance in the retention of child protection staff (Wyles, 2007). It would seem likely that this would be an important way of providing transitional support to international recruits, and it may indeed involve more time in the transition period (Eborall, 2003; Social Care Institute for Excellence, 2007).

A detailed analysis of the impact of international recruitment on the quality and client experience of service delivery was beyond the scope of this research, but it is clearly an important area for future research, especially given the nature of the child protection work.

Conclusion

This paper provides some empirical evidence on the experiences of international recruitment in an Australian child protection agency. The research participants identified the transition stage as characterised by the need to deal with issues such as challenges to professional identity including differences in the equivalence of social work qualifications between countries. The recruits also found that they needed to adapt to different organizational policies and develop an understanding of new cultural influences. This required the development of new knowledge as well as the integration and transferability of existing knowledge and experience in child protection. These findings suggest that recruiting organizations need to acknowledge that differences in context profoundly influence practice. Targeted support, information and training is needed in the transition phase in order to maximize the contribution which overseas qualified workers can make to Australian child protection.

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