

Title: Evaluating the Portfolio as a Social Work Capstone Project: A Case Study in Hong Kong**Abstract:**

Capstone experiences can be an important rite of passage for students. The portfolio has been discussed in social work education discourse as a valuable pedagogic method for a capstone project. However, there are only a small number of studies evaluating the actual impacts of portfolio use in a social work program. This article addresses this gap, describing and evaluating the use of portfolios as capstone projects in a social work program in Hong Kong. The findings suggest that the portfolio-based capstone project is generally a positive experience from both instructors and students' perspectives and that there are three key learning impacts of this pedagogic method: i) the consolidation of students' learning throughout the program; ii) professional identity development; and iii) enhanced reflexivity. This study indicates that the small group tutorial format is a key attribute that contributes to these learning impacts. Further, the findings shed light on critical points of review and discussion regarding the program and the professionalization of social work in Hong Kong—specifically, the need to review and discuss the decolonization and localization of social work education.

Keywords: portfolio, capstone project, Hong Kong, localization.

Background**Capstone Projects in Social Work Education**

Capstone projects are a common pedagogical approach at the end of a curriculum; they are used in a variety of disciplines and professions (Apgar, 2019). The objectives can vary and, within social work education, there are key features underlying the capstone experience. First, a capstone project can facilitate integration, such as students' capacity to integrate their diverse coursework starting from year one, including their practicum experiences. Second, the capstone project can help students to demonstrate or illustrate their professional competence (knowledge, skills, values, and experiences) (Poulin, Kauffman & Ingersoll, 2022). In this way, it can help support the transition from student to practitioner and help students gain confidence by reflecting on the competence they have gained throughout the program. The capstone experience aims to give a sense of closure and coherence for students to prepare them for entry-level practice. Lastly, the capstone project can support students' professional identity development (Apgar, 2019). Social work is a broad field, with numerous areas of practice and diverse service user groups. The capstone project can help students to identify what unites them with the profession and, at the same time, what makes them unique in their social work identity (including their approach to practice). Capstone experiences can be an important rite of passage for students and there is a need for more discussion within social work educational discourse that explores different modes of instructional methods for capstone experiences and evaluate the impacts of these methods.

There are no specific instructional methods or formats for the capstone project. Across disciplines, there are numerous ways to complete it, including research reports, literature reviews, independent case analyses, portfolios, creative art works and performances, multimedia presentations, and practicums/internships (Kerka, 2001). Field practicums are considered the signature pedagogy and assessment measure, and the capstone of social work education (Guire & Lay 2020). At the same time, Jensen and Strom-Gottfried (2018) posit that assessing students' learning outcomes and professional competency should be multidimensional and include classroom-based instructional strategies and evaluations.

The portfolio is discussed in social work education literature as a classroom-based pedagogic tool that: i) evaluates students' competency, curricula, and program outcomes; ii) fosters self-reflection, self-evaluation, critical thinking, and self-directed learning; iii) helps students to integrate their different learning experiences (e.g., field education with course learning and/or between courses); and iv) helps students to develop their professional identity (Alvarez & Moxley, 2004; Coleman et al., 2002; Fitch et al., 2008; Jensen & Strom-Gottfried, 2018; Swigonski et al., 2006; Taylor et al., 1999).

The literature points to an overall positive stance toward the use of portfolios in social work education. However, there are only a small number of studies evaluating the actual impacts of portfolio use in social work programs, and these studies are dated (e.g., Alvarez & Moxley, 2004; Fitch et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 1999). Further, all the studies are conducted in regard to social work programs in America or England. This article aims to contribute to the discussion in the literature on the use of portfolios in social work programs. It is novel in scope, as it describes and evaluates the use of portfolios as a capstone project in a social work program in Hong Kong. In the next section, we delineate the details of our capstone course and the social work portfolio as the main assessment component.

Details of Our Capstone Project Course and the Social Work Portfolio

Introducing the Social Work Portfolio as the New Capstone Project

In January 2020, the capstone subject was revised, and the portfolio was used as the new instructional method, replacing a research-based project on a topic students chose. The rationale for redesigning the capstone subject was based on informal feedback from students and instructors from previous cohorts regarding the heavy workload and lack of motivation/interest when conducting the research-based project as a capstone project. The authors, who were the co-subject leaders of the capstone project, received a teaching and learning grant to examine the impacts of two new instructional methods—the social work portfolio and the flipped classroom approach—to two cohorts (2020 and 2021) of undergraduate social work students. This article reports the findings regarding the impacts of the social work portfolio specifically.

The Organization and Structure of the Capstone Project Course

For this subject, there are six lectures, which are attended by all students and are meant to introduce students to general concepts in developing different aspects of their portfolio. The lectures are facilitated by the two subject leaders. There are seven tutorials, in which the class is split into small groups of six to eight students and is guided by a tutorial instructor as the students dive deeper into concepts and topics introduced in the lectures and further develop and finetune aspects of their portfolios. There are also two lecture periods set aside at the end of the semester for a peer-review of the preliminary drafts of the capstone projects.

Format of the Social Work Portfolio

The social work portfolio, which is the main assessment component of this course, is a final project to be completed in the final year of the undergraduate social work program. It is an independent project that is executed under the guidance of the tutorial instructors of this subject, to help students to integrate and consolidate the values, skills, knowledge, and significant learning experiences gained throughout the program (including practicum experiences), and to showcase and demonstrate their contextualized model of practice. The social work portfolio is meant to capture both the students' competence as generalist social workers and their unique identities and lived experiences that inform their practice.

The portfolio has a predefined organization/structure (Fitch et al., 2008); it consists of three sections. The first is on the integration of theory and practice. We ask students to identify, describe, and integrate the different relevant theories that resonate with them and reflect on why they have selected these theories and how they will inform their future practice. The second section focuses on personal and professional integration. We invite students to examine how their personalities, worldviews, and personal experiences may influence their professional practice. The final section focuses on the students' future directions. We ask students to describe a clear action plan for their continued professional development past graduation.

For each of the sections, students are asked to identify “artefacts” throughout their past courses/field experiences in the program upon which to reflect. Artefacts can be a range of items (tangible or intangible) and include but are not limited to essays/papers written, books and articles read, notes from a lecture or guest speaker, a class discussion the student can recall vividly, and/or a field experience (e.g., an encounter with service users or supervisors). These artefacts are included in the portfolio with a written reflection of approximately 1000 words in each section (a total of 3000 words). Additionally, students must integrate scholarly references—five within each section. We provide students with an option in terms of the format of the portfolios; they can either compile all the artefacts and reflections in an ongoing Word document or use an online platform, www.wix.com, which is a free website builder.

Assessment Components of the Capstone Course

The social work portfolio is the main assessment component of the capstone course, worth 70% of each student's final grade. The remaining assessment component is participation in lectures (10%) and tutorials (20%). The social work portfolio is a continuous assessment; after the lecture and tutorials for each of the sections, students are asked to submit a draft of their work on that section for the tutorial instructor to provide feedback. Participation marks for their efforts are allocated for completing and submitting their drafts.

Methods

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Human Subjects Ethics Subcommittee (HSESC) at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (reference #HSEARS20200618002). This study used both qualitative and quantitative data to evaluate the impacts of the social work portfolio as a capstone project.

Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

The quantitative measures used to assess students' learning experience and performance in the course included their overall grades and participation in and attendance at lectures and tutorials. Only the students' overall grades in the portfolio-based cohorts (2020 and 2021) were compared to the previous research-based cohorts (2018 and 2019), as the authors were not instructors of the previous cohorts; thus, records of participation in and attendance at lectures and tutorials were not available for analysis prior to this point. Students' level of participation in lectures and tutorials and the quality of their final assignment were graded by the instructors of the course. All letter grades were converted to a grade point on a 4.3 scale. Descriptive statistics regarding students' performance in the course in the research-based and portfolio-based cohorts were first computed. Then, an independent t-test was computed to compare the students' performance between the research-based and portfolio-based cohorts. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to perform the analysis. P-values < 0.05 were regarded as statistically significant.

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with students and focus group discussion (FGDs) with tutorial instructors, in which the questions were focused on evaluating the entire subject, but also included specific questions related to the social work portfolio. Recruitment for the interviews (and all subsequent communication with potential participants) was conducted by a research assistant to ensure anonymity. Students chose to be interviewed online or in person, and a HKD100 (about USD12.8) gift certificate was provided to them upon completion of the interview. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the research assistant. A total of 13 students were interviewed (seven and six, respectively, from the 2020 and 2021 cohorts). A total of 12 tutorial instructors were interviewed (seven and five, respectively, from the 2020 and 2021 cohorts). The interviews and FGDs from each cohort were conducted between May and June of their respective years. The transcripts were imported to NVivo for coding and analysis. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006), which included both inductive and deductive methods of coding, was employed to identify themes in the qualitative data.

Results

Quantitative Results

A comparison of the students' performance in the course, divided by research-based and portfolio-based cohorts, is shown in Table 1. As the independent t-test shows, the students' overall performance in the research-based (mean = 3.23; SD = 0.45) and portfolio-based (mean = 3.20; SD = 0.51) cohorts did not differ statistically: $t(494) = 0.76, p = 0.447$.

Table 1

Comparison of the students' performance and participation in research-based and portfolio-based cohorts.

	Research-based cohorts N = 246	Portfolio-based cohorts N = 250	t(df)	P
Student performance (grade point; mean, SD)				
Overall grade	3.23 (0.45)	3.20 (0.51)	0.76(494)	0.447

Qualitative Results

Several themes were identified in both the instructor and student data, capturing both positive and negative sentiments toward specific aspects of the portfolio project as a capstone project. At the same time, there were a couple of unique themes present in the instructor data only. In this section, the themes identified from both sources are presented first, followed by the unique themes.

Theme: Integration and Consolidation of the Four-Year Learning Journey

A key theme identified in both the instructor and student data was that the portfolio experience helped to integrate and consolidate learning throughout the four-year program. As one student shared, "Personally, I feel good about this capstone subject. Capstone is the first subject within four years that has provided students with a small group supervision to talk about our feelings and achievements across our four years of learning." Another student

echoed this sentiment: “Yes, I like it. It is meaningful because there is no other course like this to help students establish what you have learned and experienced comprehensively. Other subjects tend to be more about giving you knowledge and theories.” The following was shared by another student, which also emphasized the importance of consolidating the learning from the four-year program:

I think this capstone project has enabled me to learn something other than knowledge and theories. The most important thing is that it has let me reflect on what I have learned. I think it is great that there is a course to sort through and wrap up the studying that have taken place over four years.

An instructor expressed the following:

I think they seldom take the time to reflect on the different topics that have been covered over the past four years. They did not consolidate their learning before that. It is a good opportunity for them to review. They seldom take the time to reflect. They are too busy. After the integration, they were more impressed by what they learned.

Another instructor mentioned how the focus on integration/consolidation is beneficial for the students:

I think this needs to be done by other departments. The capstone topics are not knowledge-based. There are many elements of integration and consolidation. I personally think it is beneficial for the students. There was similar feedback from the students last year. They said they have never thought about stuff in this way before. Some students have negative views because they think it is exhausting to reflect on so many items. However, I believe it is beneficial for them.

Another instructor stated:

I think the current structure is good enough. In my opinion, social work is different from other disciplines in that students are required to do placements before the capstone project. I think the placement is a perfect real practice opportunity to let them utilize what they have learned. Also, there are supervisors to advise them. This is already a process of so-called integration. Therefore, the capstone project is the second time they have carried out integration. I don't think we have to spend much time starting from zero again to do the integration.

Theme: Guidance on “What Type of Social Worker I Would Like to Be”

Another key theme identified in both the instructor and student data was that the portfolio experience helped to develop the students' unique professional identities by encouraging them to locate themselves within the broad context and numerous practice areas of social work. As one student shared:

I think it really helped me to think about what I am going to do. I have the flexibility to choose what type of social worker I would like to be. This part assisted me in thinking about whether I want to continue working in the practice area I am in or change to another one.

Another student agreed:

For instance, there was one part that helped us think about future directions. I have never thought about this before, as I just thought, no matter who hires me, I will take the opportunity. However, this assignment made us think about areas we felt interested in or the reasons behind our decision to study social work. This reminded me of my original reasons for studying this subject and which target groups I would like to serve. Through writing the mission statement and self-planning, it became clearer for me which area I want to develop in the future.

Another student echoed this sentiment:

It helped me to locate myself in terms of what field I would like to work in. For example, let's say one is determined to work in mental health or education, the Capstone project can help to consolidate his or her determination. Or, I am not decided which field to work in yet, so the capstone project can help me to think about what I'm interested in.

One student also shared how the portfolio experience helped her to see connections between how her past experiences may inform her future field of social work practice:

Another thing is, through reflection and sharing in the tutorials, we learn about our professional directions by understanding ourselves. For example, we look back at our past experience and see the reasons why we may be suitable or not so suitable for certain fields.

An instructor shared that, while the portfolio experience was not the only opportunity for students to clarify their professional directions, it was still important to have this structure at the end of the program:

These kinds of reflection are not exclusive in the capstone project. However, capstone provided a chance for them to integrate their understanding before they graduate. This arrangement will help the students to become better practitioners after they graduate. It is meaningful because the students have a better understanding of possible directions, the things that they value in practice, as well as their personal beliefs and the conflicts between their personal and professional selves. This allows them to better prepare physically and mentally before they become social workers. They know how to overcome the limitations they may face.

Another instructor echoed the same sentiment:

After this class, they recognized themselves and their development path, including their previous choices, whether that was impacted by theory, childhood experiences, or their sense of mission. They viewed their practice as being more comprehensive. There is no right or wrong. In practice, we talked about the use of the self. Whether it's through books or personal experience, they need to integrate their learning and their experiences like this. With busy work, they seldom make time for reflection. However, it is necessary. It grounds their professional development.

Theme: The Small Group Tutorials Were Essential to Students' Learning Outcomes

Students and instructors shared how the small group tutorials were instrumental in helping them with their in-depth reflection, integration, consolidation, and learning. It was the group sharing and reflections with their peers in the tutorial sessions and the feedback from

their tutorial instructors that had the most impact on their learning. As one student shared:

The most satisfying part was the group supervision tutorials. This mode of study is quite rare in a social work program. We usually have seminars with 15 to 16 students per seminar class. We had fewer students in a class in this subject so it was easier to ask questions, share, and discuss things with the class. It was easier for us to learn and reflect too.

Another student echoed this sentiment:

We can learn from each other. Hence, I think this is quite special. We need this kind of peer learning. I think the design of this course is great. When a topic was taught, we had two seminars to share our ideas about our learning experience and we would provide feedback for each other. I think this helped us to learn from each other. In addition, I think I have gained a lot from this sharing aspect of the class, and I have also learned from others how to do things in a better way.

The small group format also helped students to understand themselves more, as one student illustrated: “Also, you will learn different reasons why people want to be social workers and what they have learned in these four years, giving you a holistic viewpoint to understand yourself.” An instructor shared how she also appreciated the small group format:

One thing I gained was the interaction with students. There is a great deal of online teaching nowadays and sometimes I never see the students before the whole course ends. This group supervision allowed me to meet the students and chat with them. I think this is good.

Another instructor also discussed the benefits of group supervision:

During their placements, they have sharing sessions with no more than two participants. This group supervision has students from different fields, including those working with young people and the elderly. There are different impacts and more interactions. They may have similar interactions in placement workshops focusing on frontline experience, but the capstone project focuses more on academic integration.

Theme: Online Teaching and Learning Impact Learning Outcomes

Students of both cohorts were taking the subject during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which classes and tutorials were fully (or mostly) online. For both cohorts, the lectures attended by all students were conducted fully online, due to the number of students in the class. However, in 2021, this cohort had the option to meet face-to-face for the tutorial groups only, as they were a small group of six-to-eight students. Instructors and students expressed how engagement and the teaching and learning activities were difficult to carry out in an online mode. As one student shared:

I would like to point out the issues that can be improved for this course. Because of the pandemic, we were only able to have online lessons, there was less face-to-face interaction so we had to be more self-motivated, and when we have difficulties with learning, we couldn't really have any real-time communication with teachers. As a result, we might struggle with learning in this course.

Another student echoed this sentiment:

Due to the format of online learning in this semester, the learning experience was inferior. It was difficult, although we switched on the camera, to interact. In social work, we emphasized face-to-face interaction but there wasn't much during this semester due to the online learning.

Another student shared how it was difficult to share more personal experiences and reflections in an online mode:

It could be more interactive. It might be impacted by the format of online learning. It was difficult for us to share personal issues on Blackboard Collaborate [the online teaching and learning platform used].

In contrast, there was one student who shared some positive outcomes of the online learning mode:

Previously the students were more unwilling to discuss things in the face-to-face settings. Only a few students would ask questions. In contrast, the online learning allowed the students to discuss things through typing. There were more students asking questions in text format, because it was less embarrassing compared with asking questions face-to-face.

The instructors also shared the challenges they faced with the online teaching mode, as one instructor stated:

The influence on the participation of the students was mainly from the online format. We all shared in front of the screen. We did not notice any feedback or non-verbal cues. We knew nothing. This is compared to the past, when we shared and had meal boxes together. There were many interactions. This year, everyone shared their parts and then muted their mics. Everyone shared and then the class was complete. It was the end. From the perspective of teaching outcomes, it is fine. However, for relationship building, it is unsatisfying.

Another instructor echoed this sentiment:

Some students did not feel it was convenient to turn on the camera. They were also unable to turn on their mics. I think their living conditions did not allow them to do so. So, once I allowed them not to turn on the camera and mic, it was difficult to ask them to do that at a later time.

One instructor shared how the change to online learning was probably more impactful than the change from a research-based project:

Yes, the online connection, I was worried about it too. I noticed students were in and out all the time. They missed some conversations. Once they had skipped part of the class, they got lost. There were advantages for sharing things though. They could complete it definitively. Whether they could respond and get involved, it depended. The impact of the online format was more crucial than the change of content. The comparison was different.

Theme: “An Insightful Experience of Reflection” and “Reflections are Limited”

Lastly, another key theme identified in both the instructors’ and students’ data was about reflection. However, unlike the previous themes, whereby the two perspectives agreed, the students and instructors had different opinions regarding the experience of reflection as part of the portfolio project.

Sub-theme: Students had “An Insightful Experience of Reflection”. Students shared that the portfolio experience fostered deep reflection and helped them to develop their reflective practice. As one student shared, “It helped me to sort some of my past experience. The process of sharing with students and guidance from tutors in the tutorials created an insightful experience of reflection.” Another student also shared how this reflection deepened as the course progressed: “Of course it is more and more in-depth when we are writing the portfolio, so I think it is good that we are having more and more detailed reflections throughout the whole capstone project.” Another student shared how the specific model of reflection (Rolfe et al., 2001) introduced in the capstone was particularly useful: “I think this mode of reflection is a great reminder at work. I think the “What? So what? Now what?” model is a very good way of thinking to connect all these ideas personally and professionally.” The following was shared by a student, who emphasized how building a reflective practice made them a “better social worker”:

I think it helps me to reflect deeply, just like what I said before—some reflections that I would never have thought of within the four years. Also, there were some things that I didn’t realize at first in my placements, but then I found inspiration when I thought back on them. This inspiration will be useful for my work in the future. For example, in “Personal and Professional Integration” and “Practice Integration”, the work let me think about my work experience as a social worker and reflect on myself. These experiences and reflections make me a better social worker.

A couple of students shared some hesitations about continuing the use of such behaviors revolving about reflective practice. As one student stated:

I would say this kind of reflection is very useful but, to be honest, I think not many people would make this extra effort. I would say it is about the social work culture in Hong Kong or even in Asia. Therefore, maybe I cannot continue with sharing and peer reflection.

Another student echoed this sentiment:

I can’t tell whether I have the motivation to continue doing reflections now. It really depends whether I have space and time to do so when I am actually working. It is a practical concern. You know it is exhausting to do so if I don’t even have time to rest. It is hard to predict.

Sub-theme: Instructors Shared that “Reflections are Limited.” The instructors’ opinions about the reflective experience of the portfolio project were divergent from those of the students. One theme identified within the instructors’ data was that the reflections are limited. One instructor shared:

This capstone project requires students to use their personal experience. Some students encountered difficulties in expressing themselves and it made their reflections very weak. As a result, it was a bit hard for me to approach some students. Some students were unable to tell me about their personal experiences related to the topics. The content was quite bland, so they could not summarize their opinions and experiences during the project.

Another instructor suggested that the topics and structure of the portfolio could be adjusted to facilitate more in-depth reflection: “Perhaps we can base it more on students’ backgrounds, abilities, and needs in the lessons, and see which topics we could discuss more in-depth to make their reflections better.”

One instructor shared his concerns that the limited reflections from the students may reflect a gap within the program itself:

I am very worried. I think we did not educate the students well enough to carry out reflections like this. In the final year, students still do not manage to write reflections independently. I think that is a weakness of our program. Although there are many courses in the four years that require students to write reflections, based on my experience of guiding these six students this time, I found that their process and the output of their reflections were limited. Despite four years of study, they still haven’t managed to learn how to write deep, critical reflections.

Theme: Enables Us to Reflect on Our Teaching

A unique theme identified in the instructors’ data (which is also illustrated in the last quotation from the instructor above), concerns how the portfolio experience has enabled them to reflect on their pedagogy. As one instructor shared:

I think I can learn something too. Some students would give feedback about what they think about how we can improve the social work teaching. As teachers, I am glad to hear about their learning needs, and how we can create better learning experiences for them. As we are going to train practitioners, it is necessary to know what they need before they step into society. Although some subjects are not related to us, we can think about what we can do to facilitate them better. I can also improve myself while communicating with students.

Another instructor echoed this sentiment:

I have a better understanding of my students. This subject requires the students to share their thoughts and feelings about their learning, personal experiences, and professional integration. This subject allowed me to understand more about their progress within the learning. For example, there was a theme focusing on the integration of theory and practice. I acknowledged what the students have learned from the theory. As an instructor, it felt like I could understand the influence of my teaching and what the students have experienced within their four years of studying.

Theme: Sociocultural Implications

Another unique theme identified in the instructors’ data is related to their perspectives about the sociocultural implications of the portfolio experience as a capstone project. As one instructor shared:

I think there is something insufficient in this capstone subject and the portfolio experience. Maybe because of the current relationship of Sino-American diplomacy, I am discontent with American things, including our social work knowledge. They are shaped by the West. There is a term: the “decolonization of knowledge.” The thing is, students are going to graduate, they have obtained “foreign knowledge” for four years and they will start working soon. I think in the portfolio we should add a section about “contextualization” or “localization” so that, in our culture, in Hong Kong, or for some mainland Chinese students, they can reflect on whether or not there is something that must be changed or studied. Maybe there is no answer, but they should have this awareness and consider the contextualization and localization of social work knowledge.

Another instructor agreed with her colleague:

Exactly. This is a good point, because we follow the Western way completely. Next time, we can think about how this portfolio can be adapted for Hong Kong, and for China for mainland Chinese students. I think we need to be relevant to the context. Not only should the format of the portfolio be contextualized, but the purpose of the portfolio. The students said employers do not care much. I think it is important to think about that.

Another instructor noted how writing the portfolio in the English language also complicates the experience:

What I encounter is sometimes students can share and reflect very well by speaking but they can't write very well. It is about the language barrier between Cantonese and English. Also, some students are quite shy.

Discussion and Implications for Social Work Education

Overall, the Portfolio is a Positive Capstone Experience

When looking at the overall qualitative and quantitative findings, there are two key points to discuss. First, the qualitative findings generally suggest positive sentiments toward the portfolio-based experience among instructors and students. This finding is aligned with the literature on social work portfolios (Alvarez & Moxley, 2004; Coleman et al., 2002; Fitch et al., 2008; Jensen & Strom-Gottfried, 2018; Swigonski et al., 2006; Taylor et al., 1999). Second, the quantitative findings did not completely agree with the qualitative findings, in that there were no significant changes in students' overall performance across the research and portfolio-based projects, despite the qualitative comments that suggest students had experienced significant challenges in regard to the research-based capstone projects in previous years. At the same time, it is possible that, since the portfolio-based projects are a new teaching and learning method for instructors (and students), there is a period of adaptation that may complicate the teaching and learning outcomes. Further, the qualitative findings also highlight the challenges both instructors and students felt with the online learning mode (which both cohorts used) due the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the mandatory online mode of teaching and learning may have also impacted the students' performance.

Key Impacts of the Portfolio Experience

The qualitative findings identified three key impacts of the portfolio experience. The first two are: It helped the students to integrate and consolidate their four-year learning journey and to clarify their professional directions and identities, both of which have been highlighted in the social work education literature as benefits of the portfolio (Alvarez &

Moxley, 2004; Coleman et al., 2002). The findings of this study reaffirm the importance of these two learning outcomes, especially for undergraduate students at the end of their social work program. Social work is a complex, multi-layered, and broad field with numerous practical contexts, specializations, practice levels/orientations (micro, mezzo, and macro), and diverse service-user groups/populations (Haynes & White, 1999). As such, social work education, especially at the undergraduate/generalist level, includes the teaching and learning of numerous and diverse theories, practical approaches (e.g., strengths-based, solutions-focused, narrative, etc.) and orientations, and specialized areas (e.g., addictions, domestic violence, child welfare, gerontology, and green social work) (Alvarez & Moxley, 2004).

Learning and embracing the diversity of social work is important, as it is what makes social work unique (Haynes & White, 1999). At the same time, for those new to the discipline (undergraduate students), learning and navigating through the vastness of what social work is (or can be) is a daunting and perplexing task. Having the time to integrate and consolidate learning regarding what social work is and can be, and locating themselves within the profession can help students build a foundation upon which to grow their social work professional identities. The portfolio as a capstone project may act as a pedagogic method to foster such a learning impact.

Another key impact of the portfolio-based experience is related to reflexivity—specifically as it relates to helping students to develop their reflective practice. This finding is important to discuss, as it contributes to the debate regarding a competency-based versus a reflexivity-based approach to social work education in Hong Kong (Chow et al., 2011; Leung 2007; Yip, 2004). The former focuses on, for example, “technical, procedural and managerial aspects of practice”, whereas the latter focuses on, for example, understanding and locating oneself in relation to practice (including service users, different cultural contexts, social problems) (Chow et al., 2011, p. 142). The trend to professionalize social work has led to a competency-based approach to educational programs, which was explicitly mandated by the Social Workers Registration Board in Hong Kong in 2005. At the same time, local scholars (Chow et al., 2011; Leung 2007) have critiqued this trend and advocate for a curriculum that fosters, promotes, and prioritizes reflexivity. For instance, Chow et al. (2011) argue that social problems are increasingly becoming more complex and ever-changing:

From the point of view of social work educators, transferring knowledge about existing social problems cannot adequately prepare students for this task. We have to encourage skills in students that facilitate critical reflection and generate sensitivity to the changing environment. (p. 142)

The findings of this study highlight an interesting point in this debate, as the students and instructors have diverging views in terms of this impact. From the students’ perspectives, the portfolio experience helped them to develop reflexivity, but from the instructors’ perspectives, the reflections were limited. So why this divergence? A possible explanation for this is that, since the curriculum is mandated and audited routinely to be oriented toward a competency-based model, there are not many opportunities for students to hone and develop their reflexive practice. Thus, when given the space for deep reflection, from the students’ perspective, it was impactful. Some of the students shared in this study that they seldom had time to reflect and/or never reflected as they did in the capstone course.

On the other hand, instructors may have different and greater expectations of students' capacity for reflective practice, especially if their pedagogy aligns more with social work education that prioritizes reflexivity. In fact, within the program documents there is an explicit statement that the theme of the final year is "becoming a reflective social worker" (Department of Applied Social Sciences, HK PolyU, 2021, para. 6).

This divergence invites us as educators to revisit and discuss how we may still promote reflexivity among our students through a curriculum that is mandated to be oriented toward a competency-based approach. The portfolio-based capstone project illustrates students' areas of competence gained throughout the program, by inviting students to practice reflexivity vis-a-vis individual and small peer group reflections. As such, it is a pedagogic method that aligns with both the competency and reflexivity-based approaches to social work education. Leung (2007) rightly posited that it should not be an either/or paradigm: "Social work in the postmodern era, however, requires its practitioners to have not only skills and competence, but all the professional sensitivity to make sense of their practice and be aware of their subjectivity and bias" (p. 633).

Key Attributes of the Portfolio Experience that Contribute to the Positive Experience

The findings suggest an overall positive view and three important key impacts of the portfolio-based capstone experience, but what are the specific attributes/elements of the experience that contribute to these impacts? The findings suggest that the small group tutorials are key to the learning impacts. Portfolios are an individual endeavor; however, the findings indicate that the small group tutorials helped the students to gain deeper reflections and insights. The social work education literature on portfolios does not explicitly identify or discuss this key attribute as being essential to the portfolio experience. However, there is literature highlighting the utility and value of peer-centered activities, which include: fostering and building collaboration, creating diverse group contexts in which learning can occur, improving critical thinking and evaluative skills, creating further investment in students' own and others' learning, and enhancing learning impacts overall (Badger, 2010).

Further, the small group format (which enables a deeper level of trust, rapport, and understanding to develop between students), when used to share and reflect on practice, mirrors a community of practice (CoP) that may continue beyond graduation. Continuous professional development is an integral part of the social work profession, and the CoP is one method to "create and hold a space for reflective practice" (Ceatha, 2018, p. 85). A CoP is defined as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger, 2000, p. 1). Ceatha (2019) argues that a CoP can foster relationships between social workers and enable social workers to critically reflect on their own practices and learn from each other; in this way, she suggests that a CoP may be an indicator of the well-being of our profession and a key factor in supporting transformative social work.

The small group tutorial format was an essential attribute of the portfolio experience in this study and may have the potential to build a CoP early on, at the undergraduate level. This finding invites educators to consider this format when implementing a portfolio-based capstone project, which is usually discussed in the literature as an individual endeavor only. There may be human resource challenges in replicating this format, as it does take 10-to-11 instructors to facilitate this capstone course. A question remains: Without the small group experience, would the learning impacts be the same? Future research should compare and

contrast these two methods in regard to the learning impacts of a portfolio-based capstone project experience.

Decolonization and Localization of Social Work Education

Another important finding to discuss is related to the sociocultural implications expressed by some of the instructors in the course. The portfolio can be seen as another “borrowed” pedagogic tool/method from the West and the findings suggest that discussions about the adaption/localization of this method to the sociocultural context of Hong Kong are necessary to ensure that all the instructors (or teaching and learning facilitators) are receptive to the purpose, utility, and value of this pedagogic method. This theme also contributes to the wider discourse regarding the localization and decolonization of social work education globally (e.g., Kleibl, 2020) and in Hong Kong specifically (e.g., Yip, 2004).

Hong Kong has a unique sociocultural, political, and economic context and is rapidly changing; thus, the field requires a greater focus on and further discussions about the localization and decolonization of social work education. While, in the present format and structure, the portfolio project is not explicitly attuned to the localization and decolonization of social work education, it can be altered (as recommended by one of the instructors interviewed), which may offer an opportunity to invite students (a new generation of Hong Kong social workers) to reflect deeply on the localization of social work.

Conclusion and Limitations

The findings of this study suggest that the portfolio-based capstone project is generally a positive experience for both instructors and students, and that there are three key learning impacts of this pedagogic method: i) the consolidation of students’ learning throughout the program; ii) professional identity development; and iii) enhanced reflexivity. Importantly, the study indicates that the small group tutorial format is a key attribute of the course that contributes to these learning impacts, which is not something that is identified and discussed in the current discourse on portfolios in social work education. Further, the study has also shed light on gaps or critical points of review and discussion regarding the program and the professionalization of social work in Hong Kong—specifically, the need to debate and discuss the decolonization and localization of social work education.

This study has some limitations. The qualitative findings are limited to only two cohorts of the program, and the students interviewed represent a small sample of the total number of students. Only the students’ overall grades from the previous two cohorts, which were research-based capstone projects, were accessible, limiting a more fruitful comparison between research and portfolio-based capstone projects. Nonetheless, the findings of this study offer important insights and questions for discussions about social work education. For instance, what are the different learning impacts between research and portfolio-based capstone projects? What are the different learning impacts between a purely individual vs individual and small group-based portfolio experiences? What are the impacts of the portfolio experience if we emphasize a focus on the localization and decolonization of social work?

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