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Transforming Settlement Work: From a Traditional to a Critical Anti-oppression Approach with Newcomer Youth in Secondary Schools

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Abstract

Today, the concept of anti-oppression is prevalent in social work education, research, policy, and practice. However, it is a relatively new concept in the settlement sector, and little is known about its application in settlement work. In this article, two social workers provide their critical analysis and reflections of anti-oppression work with newcomer youth in schools. Drawing on the literature and their experiences, the authors contend that the current approach to settlement work with newcomer youth is rooted in colonialism and racism, and they propose an anti-oppression approach as a new way for settlement workers to work with newcomer youth.

KEYWORDS: newcomer youth, school settlement workers, anti-oppression, settlement services, anti-oppressive practice

Introduction

The concept of anti-oppression is prevalent in social education, research, policy, and frontline practice. However, it is relatively new in the settlement sector (DeCoito & Williams, 2000), and little is known about its application with newcomer youth in Ontario secondary schools. In recent years, Sakamoto (2007) offered an anti-oppression approach to working with skilled immigrants, and Healy (2004), Valtonen (2001), and Cemlyn (2000) provided international perspectives and frameworks for anti-oppressive practice. Other scholars have argued for an anti-oppressive approach to working with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels (Baines, 2007; Barnoff, 2005; Barnoff & Coleman, 2007; Barnoff & Moffatt, 2007; Sakamoto, Wei, & Truong, 2008; Solomon & Clarke, 2008). Our analysis of the settlement literature reveals that the concept of anti-oppression is not well discussed, nor is it taken up as an approach to practice in settlement work with newcomer youth in schools. We believe that it is imperative to integrate an anti-oppression approach into settlement work so that oppression and inequality can be alleviated,

equity and human rights can be realized, and oppressive structures can be dismantled to further the social change agenda (Baines, 2007; Dominelli, 2002).

We are two social workers who have worked for many years as settlement workers with newcomer youth in Ontario schools. In this article, we provide our critical reflections, analyses, and work experiences. We also draw on our social locations as immigrant women of colour. We contend that the current approach to settlement work with newcomer youth is rooted in the colonialism and racism that is implicated in the traditional, top-down, charity approach to the settlement and integration of newcomers to Canada. For example, like the Settlement House Movement of the early 20th Century, current settlement work aims to “Canadianize” newcomer youth who are perceived as different (O’Connor, 1986). In this article, the term *newcomer* refers to immigrants (not refugee claimants, visa students, or people without status) who have been in Canada for 3 years or less.

The article begins with a brief review of the province of Ontario’s Settlement Worker in School program and the anti-oppression social work literature. This is followed by a discussion of Sakamoto’s (2007) anti-oppressive framework for working with skilled immigrants. We see it as a way for frontline settlement workers to begin to think about their own work with newcomer youth in schools. The article concludes with implications for social work practice, given that in Ontario many social workers are employed as settlement workers by community agencies and school boards.

Settlement Worker in School Program

The Settlement Worker in School (SWIS) program is the federal government response to the settlement and education needs of newcomer youth. Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) launched the program in Ottawa in 1998 and later expanded it to other parts of Ontario (e.g., Hamilton, Kitchener, Niagara Region, Peel Region, Toronto, York Region, and Windsor). The program was recently expanded to the province of British Columbia (Vancouver School Board, 2010). The name of the SWIS program differs by location. For example, in Peel Region, the program is called the Multicultural Settlement and Education Partnership (MSEP), and in Toronto it is called the Settlement and Education Partnership in Toronto (SEPT). Settlement workers are either hired by community agencies to work with both Public and Catholic school boards or directly by the school boards with funding from CIC, to work with newcomer families in elementary schools and youth in secondary schools. Although each region and city has its own framework, from our practice experience each settlement worker is assigned between two and five Public and Catholic schools, depending on the percentage of the newcomer population.

Settlement workers’ main roles in schools are to orient newcomer youth and families to the Canadian education system, connect them to community resources, provide information and referral to appropriate social services, and to interpret, translate, and advocate as necessary. Settlement workers also work with school administrators, teachers, and guidance counselors to facilitate the social, cultural, and academic integration of newcomer youth in schools. Once a newcomer student is registered, the school administration notifies the settlement worker, who meets with the youth and/or family to assess needs, provide information, and make referrals to appropriate service agencies. Settlement workers also follow up with youth and/or families to

provide ongoing support and offer workshops on a range of topics (e.g., Finding a Summer Job, Applying to the Ontario Student Assistance Program,¹ and Summer Recreation for Families).

Social Work and Anti-oppression

The theory and concept of anti-oppression are widely debated among social work educators, researchers, practitioners, and students. As a result, anti-oppression is continually being redefined “addressing new tensions, social problems, as well as underlying structural factors” (Baines, 2007, p. 4). An anti-oppression approach is a constellation of strategies, theories, and practices that help people understand oppression and how to fight it (Baines, 2007). Dominelli (2002) describes anti-oppression as “a form of social work practice, which addresses social divisions and structural inequalities in the work done with ‘clients’ or workers” (p. 6).

Sakamoto and Pitner (2005) describe anti-oppressive social work practice as the “eradication of oppression through institutional and societal changes” (p. 436) and propose changes at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of intervention. Barnoff (2005) and Sakamoto, Wei, and Truong (2008) also identify individual and organizational change efforts in integrating anti-oppression principles and strategies in social work.

In this article, we use Sakamoto’s (2007) anti-oppression framework for working with skilled immigrants to examine how settlement work with newcomer youth in schools could be changed, in order to make the efforts of settlement workers more effective in helping newcomer youth settle and integrate into society. Sakamoto identifies six ways that anti-oppressive practice differs from the traditional approach to social work (see Table 1). Although traditional and anti-oppressive approaches are often viewed as opposites, we place them on a continuum of ongoing learning, of settlement workers becoming critical, reflexive, anti-oppressive practitioners. In applying Sakamoto’s framework to settlement work with newcomer youth in schools, we hope to expand current understanding of this area and contribute to the literature on the settlement and integration of immigrants to Canada.

¹ Which provides loans and grants for postsecondary education.

Table 1

Ideas underpinning the traditional approach and the anti-oppressive approach to social work with immigrants

	Traditional approach	Anti-oppressive approach
Social worker	Assumed to be from or have assumptions of culturally dominant group (e.g., middle-class, White)	Can be from any background and have intersecting identities
Immigrants clients/ service users	Cultural and/or dissimilar other, who may be traumatized	Service users with multiple identities, who may have transnational ties
Immigrant acculturation	Needed and promoted through information, education, and training	Goals of acculturation are discussed with immigrants, who are referred to corresponding services
Cultural competence	Dominant worker learning about the cultures of cultural minorities	Focus on intersecting identities and oppression. Culturally dominant service providers as well as cultural minorities need to raise consciousness, avoid “race to innocence”
Relationship between service provider and service user	Expert helping novice in the society. Reminiscent of the charity model	Service provider strives to become co-learner, catalyst, and ally in the process, while acknowledging that power differences between service providers and service users can be oppressive
Structural change	Not addressed	Advocacy and social action toward systemic changes to society in integrating immigrants

Note. Adapted from Sakamoto (2007).

The Social Worker–Settlement Worker

In the current neo-liberal environment, many social workers are employed as settlement workers due to limited job opportunities in the social services sector (Baines, 2007; Sakamoto, Wei, & Troung, 2008). Devolution, privatization, and public-sector management strategies have led many social workers to compete for the few jobs in the settlement sector. From our years of experience in settlement work, we know that wages in this sector are low, and most settlement workers are in part-time, contract positions with few or no benefits. Restructuring of the nonprofit and social services sector (Baines, 2010) has led to the “declassification of professional social work jobs, increased use of part-time, casual, and contract social work positions” (Mullaly, 2001, p.306), and recast social workers as settlement workers to act as bridges between newcomer youth and host communities. Settlement workers provide information and referral, adjustment counseling, mediation, interpretation and translation, and conduct monthly

workshops on a range of settlement related topics such as housing, employment, education, health care, and community resources.

When we were hired as settlement workers, our social locations as immigrant women of colour disrupted the traditional view of the settlement worker as coming from dominant, White, middle-class culture (Sakamoto, 2007). However, although we were professionally accredited social workers, as racialized women we were relegated to frontline settlement work and continued the highly gendered and racialized work immigrant women often perform (Carniol, 2000) in the social services and other sectors of society. Sakamoto's (2007) anti-oppressive approach expands the traditional understanding of the social worker/settlement worker to individuals who "can be from any background with intersecting identities" (p. 528). During our tenure as settlement workers, we observed great diversity among our colleagues on the front line (e.g., race, gender, source countries, and languages) but noted that diversity was lacking at the management level. Settlement work is both highly gendered and racialized, with White men occupying most management positions, although some men of colour and White women occupy key positions in the sector. These sexist and racist practices are also present in progressive agencies that espouse an anti-oppression framework: the people making policies, managing the day-to-day operation of agencies, liaising with funders, and speaking at and/or organizing conferences were mostly men and White women. An anti-oppression approach aims to change these oppressive structures, so that settlement workers can be from any background and can hold any position in an agency: frontline, middle, or upper management. Anti-oppressive hiring practices would enhance the settlement and integration not only of immigrant clients/service users but settlement workers, many of whom are immigrants themselves.

Immigrant Clients-Service Users

In the traditional approach to settlement work, immigrant clients/service users are perceived as "cultural and/or dissimilar other[s] who may be traumatized" (Sakamoto, 2007, p. 528). The discourses of deficit and pathology shape settlement work with newcomer youth in schools and communities, beginning with the training that new settlement workers receive upon entry into the sector (Settlement.Org At Work, 2004). This training focuses primarily upon the barriers, challenges, risks, and vulnerabilities of newcomer youth such as a lack of language proficiency, without recognition of their strengths and resiliencies, or an interrogation of the oppressive structures in which they must interact. Scholars such as Butler (2005), Cemlyn and Briskman (2003), and Kohli and Mather (2003) have all emphasized the strengths and resiliencies of refugee children and youth, and challenge the oppressive structures at the same time. Settlement work is also shaped by these discourses as workers often look for "the typical psychopathologies experienced by immigrants without mentioning the strengths that immigrants possess" (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002, as cited in Sakamoto, 2007, p. 518). Both settlement training and practice need to be critically examined if we are to integrate rather than assimilate newcomer youth in Canadian society.

The discourses of deficit and pathology were also evident in the narratives of some principals, teachers, and guidance counsellors with whom we worked. For example, we noted that guidance counsellors and teachers often referred some newcomer youth to English as Second Language (ESL) classes even when their first language was English. We also noted that

some groups of newcomer youth were referred more often than other youth to psychological services and discouraged from taking academic level courses that would prepare them for postsecondary education. Although there are times when life circumstances may require some students to seek psychological services, and receiving instruction in English may present challenges to some students' academic progress, we noted that newcomer youth, particularly youth of colour, were often identified as needing such services. Underlying these referral practices are racism and colonialism, which are deeply embedded in both Canadian society and the education system (Dei, 2006; Henry, Tator, Mattis, & Rees, 1995; James, 2003, 2005). Indeed, some settlement workers, teachers, guidance counsellors, and principals with whom we worked held assimilationist, racist, and paternalistic views of newcomer youth and these views were routinely used to justify referral and placement decisions for particular programs or services. These views were also practiced and used to maintain rather than challenge the Eurocentric curriculum, which further marginalizes newcomer youth in schools.

An essential element of Sakamoto's anti-oppression framework is reframing immigrant clients/service users "as competent individuals with agency . . . multiple identities and . . . transnational ties" (p. 528). From an anti-oppression perspective, settlement workers should critically interrogate the traditional approach's pathological assumptions about immigrants and its construction of difference as deficit rather than as an opportunity for transforming society. As settlement workers, we deliberately promoted the strengths of newcomer youth to teachers and school administrators by involving newcomer youth in social and political activities inside and outside of school. We created opportunities for them to use their multilingual skills as interpreters, note takers for research projects, and speakers at youth conferences. We also recognized the fluid and multiple identities of newcomer youth and tried to work differently by engaging them authentically; that is, by "being present, being fair...being real, being non-judgmental, being honest with regard to who you are, and being truly open to all of who your service users are" (Barnoff, 2005, p.17) and by helping newcomer youth to navigate the various systems, educating them about their rights, and educating school staff and other providers about the settlement process, the issues and needs of newcomer youth and how they can support them to be successful (Barnoff, 2005). Although these anti-oppressive strategies were not always easy to implement, we were committed to helping newcomer youth become empowered in order to facilitate their settlement and integration into school and Canadian society.

Immigrant Acculturation

As school settlement workers, our practice was largely shaped by the traditional discourse of acculturation, specifically the processes of "*integration* (accept old culture, accept new culture), *assimilation* (reject old culture, accept new culture), *separation* (accept old culture, reject new culture), and *marginalization* (reject old culture, reject new culture)" (Berry, 1990, 1997, as cited in Sakamoto, 2007, p. 519). We promoted newcomer youth acculturation through such services as "information, education, and training" (Sakamoto, 2007, p. 528). We also provided after-school activities, such as the English Conversation Circle, which not only helped newcomer youth learn English and expand their social networks but also facilitated the acculturation process by teaching youth how to be "Canadian" in speech, dress, and behaviour. Although we promoted the discourse of integration, our everyday work was grounded in the discourse of assimilation: we helped newcomer youth adopt the values of the dominant society,

with little or no regard for their own cultures and ideas. Rather than engaging authentically with newcomer youth to help them identify their needs and the services required to meet those needs, we were complicit in reproducing the oppression that they experienced in school and Canadian society. In other words, we participated in their assimilation under the guise of integration.

Sakamoto's (2007) framework challenges settlement workers to critically reflect on their practice by asking questions about power, privilege, and oppression and how to individually and collectively challenge oppressive structures and individual practices, and developing critical consciousness about immigrants and the goals of acculturation. Sakamoto challenges settlement workers to openly discuss these goals with newcomer youth and have them decide and select the services that meet their needs. Rather than predetermining the needs and goals of newcomers and then delivering top-down, generic, standardized settlement services, we advocate that newcomer youth should be consulted on a regular basis about how services for them should be designed and implemented in schools. This anti-oppressive approach will offer newcomer youth a route to empowerment and enable settlement workers to deliver more responsive and more effective settlement services. When settlement workers critically think about and reflect on their practice, they will also see how they are implicated in reproducing the discourse of assimilation in their work with newcomer youth.

Cultural Competence

In the traditional approach to settlement work, settlement workers from the dominant culture attempt to become culturally competent by learning about the cultures of other minorities (Sakamoto, 2007). Interestingly, although in Ontario most frontline settlement workers today are cultural minorities, the discourse of cultural competence persists, and diversity training remains common in many agencies. Like the settlement workers before us, we embraced this training because schools expected us to be cultural interpreters when they had difficulty communicating with newcomer youth and we thought that diversity training would prepare us to do the job. But after attending several of these training workshops, we realized that it is difficult to be culturally competent given the multiple and intersecting identities of newcomer youth. We also realized that cultural competency "promotes an absolute view of culture and is a form of new racism" (Pon, 2009, p. 60).

An anti-oppressive approach disrupts the discourse and practice of cultural competency and challenges settlement workers to "pay a closer attention to understanding individuals' intersecting identities and multiple oppressions" (Sakamoto, 2007, p. 528). We argue that settlement workers must "not merely reaffirm difference but also interrogate it" (Giroux, 1992, p. 5, as cited in Solomon, Khattar-Manoukian, & Clarke, 2007) and must avoid "falling into the trap of the 'race to innocence'" (Fellows & Razack, 1998, as cited in Sakamoto, 2007, p. 529). For example, settlement workers who come from cultural minority groups must think critically about the oppressions they share with newcomer youth, as this does not exempt them from oppressing newcomer youth. Settlement workers need to understand how power sustains oppressive relations in the service user-service provider relationship and must challenge and resist using power in their work with newcomer youth in schools (Fook, 2002). Rather than receiving cultural competency or diversity training, settlement workers must learn how to recognize the heterogeneity within themselves and their clients. An anti-oppression approach is

therefore an effective theoretical concept and approach than can transform settlement workers, and settlement work with newcomer youth in schools.

The Service Provider–Service User Relationship

In the traditional approach to settlement work, settlement workers are experts who provide services to help newcomers settle and integrate in society (Sakamoto, 2007). As experts, we held the power in the service provider–service user relationship, and our power was legitimized by sharing office space with school staff, having access to student information, and imparting knowledge produced by Citizenship and Immigration Canada, school boards, and settlement agencies on how to settle and integrate into Canadian society. The traditional top-down, charity approach reinforces the expert power of settlement workers and ensures that they remain agents of the state who carry out directives from government and their school-board or agency employers (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). In this neo-liberal, managerial environment, on many occasions we had to abandon our goals of advocacy and social change to spend time on routine everyday tasks: filling out forms, tracking services for statistical purposes, and making case notes. These managerial tasks also had a devastating impact on our relationships with clients. For example, there were times when we had to slash the time we spent with clients in order to meet report deadlines, submit electronic timesheets, and send statistics to funders.

An anti-oppression approach calls on settlement workers to engage in ongoing reflection about their work and the role of expert that has been assigned to them by their profession and employers. By examining their own subjective identity and power in their relationships with newcomer youth, settlement workers can begin to practice differently, “regard[ing] those utilizing immigrant services as co-learners and allies in the process of locating necessary services rather than seeing them as dissimilar other” (Sakamoto, 2007, p. 529). Sakamoto and Pitner (2005) argue that settlement workers must constantly be “addressing the needs and assets of service users, challenging the oppressive structures and, most importantly, critically challenging the power dynamics in the service-provider/service-user relationship” (p. 435). To this we add that settlement workers must interrogate the role of expert ‘knower’ and the authority of professional knowledge and be comfortable with “not knowing” what is in the best interests of newcomer youth. A prerequisite for this engagement with the anti-oppression approach is an open, honest dialogue with newcomer youth about the availability of services and involvement of youth in locating resources. Settlement workers must also actively engage in ongoing learning, questioning, and reflection about power, privilege, and oppression and must develop the skills necessary to bring about needed changes in their practice, in the practices of agencies and the settlement sector, and structural changes in Canadian society.

Structural Change

The traditional approach to settlement work ignores structural change and does not recognize that individual newcomer needs are rooted in broader systems of oppression. Instead, the traditional approach focuses on newcomers and their immediate needs, not on structural oppression. For example, when settlement workers meet with newcomers, each receives a copy of the Newcomer Folder, which has information on school registration, summer employment, housing, health, recreation, and other services. This information does not discuss the gaps in

services, user fees, or the long wait times for some services. Although settlement work involves some individual-level advocacy, workers are not required to advocate for social change inside schools or outside their employing agencies. While it is important to provide direct services to newcomers at an individual level, this is not sufficient to bring about transformation in school boards, state agencies, and other oppressive social institutions.

Sakamoto (2007) calls for structural change and challenges settlement workers to engage in “advocacy and social action toward systemic changes of the society in integrating immigrants” (p. 528). We add that taking an anti-oppression perspective requires settlement workers to move beyond direct service provision (e.g., information, referral, assessment, and intake) to advocacy and social action with and/or on behalf of newcomer youth. This includes having critical discussions with newcomer youth about systemic and structural inequalities in schools and Canadian society, involving them in settlement work, and continually seeking their input. As settlement workers, we tried to listen to newcomer youths’ changing needs and to raise their consciousness about oppression and strategies to change it. Using the anti-oppression approach, we believe that settlement work can be transformative for both settlement workers and newcomer youth and that settlement work can itself be transformed by the involvement of newcomer youth in program planning, development, policy making, and implementation of programs in schools. From our experiences, an anti-oppression approach allows newcomer youth to be empowered, to become conscious of the ways that they are oppressed and of the importance of getting involved in struggles for social change.

Concluding Thoughts

In this article we have shared some of our experiences of and reflections on settlement work with newcomer youth in Ontario secondary schools. In our experience of settlement work, we found that using the traditional approach can be marginalizing because it ignores and excludes important aspects of the life of newcomer youth. On the other hand, using the anti-oppression approach can be both empowering and challenging for settlement workers and newcomer youth. At the same time, we contend that, if newcomer youth are to fully settle, integrate, and become productive members of Canadian society, taking an anti-oppression approach to settlement work is the way forward. To move settlement work from a traditional to an anti-oppression approach, Sakamoto identifies six key factors: (a) social workers, (b) immigrants clients/service users, (c) immigrant acculturation, (d) cultural competence, (e) relationships between service providers and service users, and (f) structural change. These factors have important implications for social work education and practice because they challenge social workers to know differently and practice differently.

In the current neo-liberal climate, settlement work in schools reproduces the inequalities that exist in society. We contend that the time has come to transform settlement work from the current traditional approach to an anti-oppression approach, in order to address the structural barriers that youth experience in school and Canadian society. Sakamoto’s (2007) anti-oppression framework can help school settlement workers understand how their work is shaped by school bureaucracies, and the governance strategies of Citizenship and Immigration Canada and employing agencies. The framework can help settlement workers understand how they knowingly and unknowingly reproduce the oppression of newcomer youth in the courses of

action they take in their daily work. It also encourages settlement workers to work with newcomer youth as co-learners and allies in challenging oppression in Canadian society.

The above discussion on settlement work in schools and the anti-oppression framework have important implications for social work practice and education. In many schools of social work, anti-oppression is already a theoretical and practice framework. However, there are some schools that continue to prepare social workers for traditional social work practice, which ignores structural changes and thus maintain structural and systemic oppression of large groups of people. As is clear from the discussion above, there is a need for social workers and settlement workers to develop a new understanding about their work and the actions required to advance the integration of newcomer youth in Canadian society. Moving from traditional settlement work to an anti-oppression framework is important if we are to “address the deficiencies in social services provision for immigrants” (Sakamoto, 2007, p. 530) and engage in the “eradication of oppression through institutional and societal changes” (p. 528). We challenge social work educators and practitioners to ‘work’ from an anti-oppression approach and to model its transformative possibilities for social work students in classrooms and field placements.

An anti-oppression framework provides social workers and settlement workers with an approach to practice that is critical, reflexive, and transformative at the personal, professional, and structural levels (Solomon, Khattar-Manoukian, & Clarke, 2005). Schools of social work have a responsibility to prepare social workers for critical anti-oppressive practice – a practice in which linkages are continuously being made between personal struggles and broader structural issues, between theory, policy and practice and the micro, mezzo and macro levels of intervention so that they understand the ethical dilemmas and contradictions that are embedded in everyday social work practice. An anti-oppression framework offers hope to traditional settlement workers as they begin the journey of becoming reflexive practitioners who challenge structures of oppression, continuously reflect on their practice, and combine critical reflection with consciousness-raising and political action for social transformation. An Anti-oppression framework offers a vision of what settlement work could be, regardless of the cuts to programs and services, and the repositioning of social workers as settlement workers in the current neoliberal environment.

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