PROTECTING CHILDREN

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Mai Le, a young Vietnamese social worker, had recently transitioned from the role of student to field instructor. As a student, she had grappled with conflicts between her academic learning, personal beliefs, and field experience at an orphanage where the house supervisors, called "Mothers," sometimes used corporal punishment to maintain control of the children. In her new role, she had the additional burden of helping her students reconcile professional ethics, indigenous cultural values, agency policy, and personal values. This case was written for the orientation and training of social work field instructors and field liaisons. It may also be useful for graduate level social work field seminars, courses on social work field supervision or administration, child welfare, international business and management, or anyone experiencing tension between personal and professional values.

REMEMBERING

Field liaison Mai Le recently graduated with her social work degree. She was fortunate to be hired as a new member of the faculty at her university. She remembered her time as a field student at the Child Save orphanage, and her concern about the way staff sometimes treated the children. Her concerns were prompted by what she learned in the social work program. Now, as she considered her current role as a teacher and liaison, she thought of how her perspective had changed.

She felt caught. Her University of Hanoi field students were upset about things they observed in their field placements. The day before, Mai had met with the Head Mother at Child Save to discuss the students' concerns and today, she was to report what happened. As the meeting with the students drew closer, Mai wondered what she could say. She knew they were frustrated and eager to make change. They would ask if she had told the Head Mother what was right, if she was able to correct the Head Mother's thinking.

Now, the field students had gathered in the conference room. As she walked down the hall, Mai could hear them talking and whispering to one another. She took a deep breath and entered the room.

SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION IN VIETNAM

Social work education in Vietnam was first established in the southern part of the country in 1957; however, support of public social work education ceased following the Vietnam War. Although some private schools in the southern region of the country continued to provide social work training after the fall of the American-supported government in 1975, there was no public social work education offered for nearly three decades.

In 2004, public social work education was re-introduced when the Vietnamese government approved a social work syllabus. That year, the Ministry of Education and Training granted permission for four schools of higher education to hold social work classes.

UNIVERSITY OF HANOI AND THE SOCIAL WORK PROGRAM

The University of Hanoi (UH) was a large, highly-respected university. Considered the leading research and training center in Vietnam for the social sciences, it included the Colleges of Anthropology, Political Science, Psychology, Sociology, and several more. UH was one of the four schools approved to provide social work education.

To begin, UH's new Social Work Program had 21 professors; however, few of these professors had any formal social work education or training and most were from the UH Colleges of Anthropology and Sociology. In an effort to provide more focused education, some adjunct professors, who had worked in the field of social work before the Vietnam War, were called out of retirement to teach a new generation of social workers.

Near the end of the Social Work Program's first year, UH approved an expansion for the following year. To accommodate this growth, UH recruited additional professors to teach social work classes. Many of these visiting professors were from countries with a longer history of social work, including the United States and Australia. The second year of the Social Work Program included classes and an introduction to field work.

In their second year, students were assigned to field practicums in organizations which served vulnerable populations, but placement choices were limited. Because social work practice had been largely absent from Vietnam for nearly thirty years, it was new to many people. Some people were suspicious and thought social

workers would try to change customs and norms. Lack of familiarity with the needs of social work students, coupled with the novelty of the program, resulted in few organizations that would accept social work students in a practicum and even fewer where social work students could observe social work practice-in-action. In addition, students were encouraged to participate in field placements within close proximity of the university. As a result, there were far more students than available placements. Most placements hosted three or more students, and some had as many as ten students.

Many students in the Social Work Program were interested in working with children and some of these participated in field placement at the nearby Child Save, one of the few organizations which accepted social work students.

CHILD SAVE

Founded in 1947, Child Save, International was a global association of orphanages. The association supported the operation of numerous orphanages and children's homes throughout the world and provided housing, medical care, and schools for orphaned and abandoned children, supporting children's homes in more than 100 countries. Many of the homes supported by Child Save were based in Asia and worked toward the mission of "providing loving homes for all children."

Following the Vietnam War, Child Save made an agreement with the Vietnamese government to establish several orphanages and children's homes throughout Vietnam, including Child Save in Hanoi. The local organization had a large compound, fenced off from the outside world by a high, iron fence which surrounded the entire property. There was only one way in and one way out, with visitors entering through the security checkpoint. A large sign on the gate labeled the home as an orphanage but inside the fence, the orphanage resembled a small neighborhood. Buildings were newly constructed and the large headquarters building, where administrators and senior staff worked, sat in the center of the complex. Surrounding the headquarters, were twelve houses that lined the streets of the complex.

THE FAMILY MODEL

The houses were organized on a family model. Most of the children were young when they arrived and typically remained in the same house during their entire stay at the orphanage. Nearly all of the children came from poor families. About 80% of the children at the orphanage had no parents, but the remaining 20% lived at the orphanage because their families had to work remotely or because they displayed behavioral issues.

Each two-story house had a kitchen, a large living room, separate bathrooms for boys and girls, and several bedrooms. The children shared bedrooms, with three or four children in each room. Every home had a garden in a central courtyard, where the "family" could raise vegetables and grow flowers.

At least ten children lived in each house and, in an effort to further approximate family life, included children of different ages. Younger children usually attended a school on campus, while high school children attended schools in the surrounding neighborhood. Each house had a full-time female staff member who lived with the children. This house supervisor was known as the "Mother."

THE MOTHERS

The role of the Mother was demanding. The Mother was responsible for helping the children become adults. She supervised the welfare of the children and the tasks assigned to them. One mother lived in each house and worked full-time, remaining in the house except for the Lunar New Year holiday when many returned briefly to their home communities. Many mothers did not have families of their own. Most had been widowed or divorced. None were currently married and none had birth children living at home. The women hired as Mothers were generally not well-educated. They lacked social work training and were not well-paid, by conventional standards; however, jobs were often scarce and it was difficult for these women to find other positions outside of the orphanage.

MAI LE

Mai Le was a vibrant young woman in her mid-twenties. The older of two children, she lived with her family on the outskirts of Hanoi. Mai's parents owned a small bookstore and worked together to create a successful business. Mai's parents encouraged her to continue her education after high school. Like many Vietnamese parents, they believed the only way a child could survive was to have a college degree. They believed society looked down on people who did not have formal education.

One day, a family friend who taught at UH asked Mai about her future after high school. "What are your plans, once you graduate?" he asked.

"Well, I enjoy psychology and I am interested in research," Mai responded. "I'm just not really sure what to do at this point."

"Perhaps I can help you," he offered. "The University of Hanoi recently received approval for an undergraduate Social Work Program. Social work just might be a good fit with your personality and interests."

Mai was puzzled. "What is social work?"

"Well," the professor explained, "social work is a helping profession, and individual professionals are called social workers. Social workers engage people in their environments to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. For example, social workers may be employed in child welfare, mental health, disabilities, or community development."

"That sounds interesting to me," Mai responded. *Okay, I'll just do that*, she decided. *All I need is a degree*.

"And, later," he continued, "if you decide you do not like the program, you can take an entrance exam for another program. I'm sure this decision will please your parents."

Although Mai was not familiar with social work, she decided it would give her a chance to learn and, more importantly, it would make her parents happy. It would also allow her another year to decide what work she wanted to do.

Mai applied to the Social Work Program and was accepted for admission to the inaugural cohort of 75 students. Every student followed the same schedule and attended classes together. "We got to know each other very well. We saw each other every day!" Mai explained. "After my first year of study was completed, the family friend who had encouraged me to apply asked me if I was planning to stay. He seemed surprised when I told him I enjoyed the program."

During the summer between her first and second year of studies, Mai volunteered at a children's summer camp in Hanoi. "I loved it. It was kind of like a practice course," she recalled. "I visited a lot of the slums and other poor areas of the city. There were many different people from many different places at the camp. A lot of the instructors were Australian and some were American. They taught us more about the NASW values of social work and practice in communities. The experience at the summer camp helped show me that I loved social work. I really wanted to stay with it."

FIELD EXPERIENCES

Mai began a field placement during her second year in the Social Work Program. Due to her interest in child welfare, she was assigned to Child Save. Mai spent time in different houses at the village and learned a great deal about the organizational structure of the orphanage, but she was often conflicted about the placement and

her role there. Some of the Mothers assigned Mai to mop the floor or clean. "But I thought I was there to be with the children," Mai explained, "to understand the children better."

More concerning, however, were times when the children did not behave. Many of the older children, especially the boys, would cut school or try to run away. When this happened, the Mothers would often use corporal punishment to correct and control them. It sometimes seemed abusive. As Mai recalled, "My own family would use corporal punishment with my sister and me but it was a rare thing. I know it is a common way to discipline children but it is not right. The things I had learned, the social work values, seemed to conflict with this kind of treatment of children . . . but I felt like I could not say anything. If I said anything, I would damage the relationship between the orphanage and the school."

Nevertheless, one day Mai decided to discuss her feelings with Professor Anderson, one of the visiting American professors.

"Professor," she began, "I have been having some conflicting thoughts about my field placement. I would like your perspective on something. It really bothers me that the Mothers sometimes hit the children. It is very unethical."

Professor Anderson sat silently for a few seconds and then asked, "Mai, could you tell me more about why this troubles you so much?"

"Well," Mai shared, "I know that it is accepted for adults to slap or hit children. It is a common thing, here in Vietnam. We have all grown up with it. My own parents would slap me when I misbehaved. I had teachers who would slap me, and the other children, when we made mistakes."

"So, you are saying that corporal punishment is common in Vietnam?" the professor asked.

"Yes," Mai replied, "but there are problems in Vietnam, today. I hear a lot about abuse. In class, we learned that we should remove this kind of punishment from our culture. Just the other day, there was a story on television about a teacher who had done great harm to a student. It is the way we raise our children. Parents ask teachers to be strict with their children."

"Mai," Professor Anderson leaned toward her, "I hear you saying that corporal punishment is a common thing in Vietnamese culture. You said it was expected. You also said it was unethical. I'm wondering if you could tell me a little more about why you feel this way?"

"Well, it is just hard to know when it is too much," Mai continued. "In class, the professors say such punishment is wrong."

The professor looked at her, and said gently, "Mai, we also teach that it is important to try to understand what the other person is experiencing. Empathy and the ability to 'start where the client is' are essential parts of social work practice. People do not always do what we might believe is the right thing. In social work practice, it is important to try and walk in the shoes of the other person, to ask them about their world, to try and understand their perspective. There is always another story."

FACULTY ASSISTANT

Following her graduation from the BSW program, Mai and two other members of her cohort were asked to join the Social Work Program as faculty assistants. They had performed well and the school needed additional instructors. During that year, Mai taught assigned classes, recruited field placements, and served as a field liaison with students participating in field placements.

With the expansion of the program, it was challenging to find field placements for social work students. Mai and her fellow field liaisons worked hard to develop and maintain relationships with organizations willing to take on field students. Because of Mai's experiences at Child Save, she had reservations about the organization as a learning environment for social work students. "The people who supervise the students are not professionals," she confided to her coworkers. "They do not have social work education or skills . . ."

"Yes," another field liaison responded, "but they are willing to take our students and we don't have many options."

As a field liaison, Mai wanted to help her students work through issues in their internships. She found that her students experienced some of the same anxieties she had experienced as a student, especially those in child welfare. Mai and the other field liaisons often met to discuss the field program and their students' progress.

Mai also met with her students several times, especially during the second year of studies. Sometimes she met with students individually, but she usually met with them in groups. The students sometimes complained about their field placements, especially at the orphanage. One day, they began to complain that they were assigned housework duties in the houses.

"Professor Le," Quy Tran began, "we do not feel we are learning what we are

supposed to be learning. When we are at the orphanage, the Mothers treat us like staff. We are often assigned to wash dishes or mop the floors."

"We cannot disagree with the Mother," Ha Lê added. "We are not to intervene between the Mother and a child. The Mothers want us to only observe. What do we learn by watching them hurt the children?"

"The other day," Quy spoke again, "an older child was beaten with a cane when he had skipped school. We could only stand by and watch as the Mother hit the child, over and over again."

Other students nodded in agreement.

"Some children are slapped when they make mistakes or perform badly at school," Cong Hoang said. "They become very upset."

As Mai looked around the room, she noticed that several students were tearful as they related things they had observed at the orphanage.

"What should we do when we see these things?" Cong asked. "We don't know what to do."

Later that day, Mai reported this discussion to her fellow field liaisons. "This was a very bad time for me," Mai said. "The students witnessed the Mothers disciplining the children. Some of the things the students related sounded abusive."

"What did you say?" field liaison Linh Nguyen asked.

"The students wanted me to tell them what to do," Mai responded. "They wanted me to give them answers. I did not know what to tell them."

"What *can* we tell them?" Linh asked.

"I remember how hard it was to do the field work," Mai continued. "It was hard to feel as though you had to keep the social work values to yourself when you were in the field. It was hard to be in a position where, as a student, you knew what was right and ethical. I knew what I had learned about the way children should be treated. I learned the NASW ethics and I knew that I should apply them to my work. It was hard to do that during field placements. As a student, I felt like I had no power to say anything, even when I knew something was wrong. I remember that . . . and now my students are experiencing the same anxiety. I want to be available and supportive for our students."

A few days later, Mai revisited the subject of abuse with her fellow field liaisons. "As you know, some of my field students spoke about the level of corporal punishment used at the orphanage. We are Vietnamese. We understand our culture . . . but the things we teach our students sometimes conflict with the way our culture sees child welfare, and child discipline.

"It can be very distressing," Linh replied. "It was hard to understand when I was a student. I am sure it is hard for our students, as well."

"Yes," Mai answered, "but we are responsible for helping students learn how to apply social work education to real-world problems. Corporal punishment is just not in line with social work values."

"But, Mai," Linh reminded, "we must maintain positive relationships with the few organizations who accept our students. If we fail to maintain a positive relationship with the Mothers, we may lose the opportunity for students to learn from field placements at all."

How do we balance the needs of the University, the needs of the students, and the needs of the organizations? Mai wondered.

Mai continued to ponder ways she could address the concerns of her students. She decided to contact the orphanage and request a meeting with the Head Mother. Mai made several phone calls before she was able to speak with the woman who was senior to all other mothers at Child Save. They made an appointment to meet the next day. Mai spent the remainder of the afternoon compiling the concerns of her students, reviewing the NASW Code of Ethics, and studying the Field Office's agreement with Child Save. As she prepared, Mai felt some anxiety about the meeting. *I hope I can make the Mother understand the way children should be treated.*

MEETING THE HEAD MOTHER

The next day, Mai made her way to the Child Save. She arrived at the orphanage fifteen minutes before her appointment. The guard at the entrance gate recognized her from her own field placement, two years before. He provided her with directions to the house where the supervising Mother lived. *I remember when I was a student here,* Mai thought as she walked through the streets of the Village. *Even then, I questioned the ways the Mother had disciplined the children.*

Mai knocked on the door and a small woman welcomed her. She was less than five

feet tall, very slight of frame, and appeared about fifty years of age. She welcomed Mai to step inside.

"When we spoke yesterday," the Mother said to Mai, "you mentioned you were here as a social work student two years ago. I still don't remember you but I talked with the mother where you worked.

What did she tell you? Mai wondered nervously. *Did she mention that I thought she treated the children too strongly?* "Thank you for allowing me into your home," Mai said.

In response to Mai's questions, the Mother explained that she was a widow with adult children. She began working at the orphanage after her own children had left home and after completing two years of business school. After five years at the orphanage, she was promoted to supervisor because of her education and work experience.

While they became acquainted, Mai noticed the house was tidy, but busy. Two small children were playing in the living room and the smell of *pho* was in the air. Mai could hear the sounds of the clothes washer.

"Mother," Mai began, "I wanted to meet with you because my students have some concerns." Mai waited for the Mother to reply but she remained silent, so Mai continued, "The students feel that some of the children are treated in a rough manner. One of my students reported a child being beaten with a cane." Mai removed a copy of the NASW Code of Ethics from her satchel and handed it to the Mother. "We use this at the university to help guide our students."

The Head Mother looked at the booklet and placed it on the table. "And you, Mai, what do you feel about these things the students have told you?" she asked. "What does your book tell you?"

"I don't know the situation directly," Mai responded. *I need to be respectful,* she thought. *I need to maintain a good relationship with this woman. We have so few places the students can learn. The orphanage is one of the only field placements we have!*

"When I was a student here, I saw the Mothers being severe, at times, to the children. They would sometimes pull the hair of the children or slap them very hard. This is not ethical. It is not correct. It is not what we are teaching in social work education."

"Does your social work education teach you to come into the home of another person and decide for them what is right and what is wrong?" the Head Mother asked. "Your students are here for a few hours, for a few weeks. The Mothers are with the children, all day, every day. Your students do not know the children. They do not know the dangers these children face. They do not know how hard the mothers work to keep these children from harm all day, every day."

Mai raised her hand to interrupt, but the Head Mother continued. "For instance, the boy who was caned has very bad behavior. He makes choices which put him and the other children in danger. How do you expect the Mother to control him and the other nine children in the home if she cannot command respect? The children who are slapped are disrespectful. You, yourself, know the danger to children who are disrespectful. Do you not agree that it is important to teach children how to conduct themselves in a way which helps them to get on in the world?"

Mai nodded in agreement and the Head Mother continued, "The children here are broken. They do not always respond to softness. All of the Mothers here work very, very hard. They are here every day and have almost no relief for themselves. If they are sick, they must take care of the children. If they are tired, they must take care of the children. They work very hard and get very little respect." With this, the Head Mother rose and straightened her spine, saying, "I will not allow your students to be disrespectful to these women who work so hard and are the only ones who really take care of these children. You have training but you do not work here. Your books cannot tell people what is best. What is best is what is best at the time."

"Mother, I hear what you are saying. Please, understand that my role is to help the students grow in their knowledge. I am very grateful that you allow them here so that they may learn from you, but . . ."

The Head Mother raised her hand to silence Mai. "Your students are children themselves. You should ask your students to walk in the shoes of the Mothers before they make pronouncements."

With these words, Mai remembered the advice of her American instructor. "Mother, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me."

As Mai walked back through the streets of the orphanage, she reflected on the conversation and remembered the advice of her American instructor who encouraged her to put herself in the place of the other person. *We are experts*, Mai acknowledged to herself, *but maybe the real experts are the people who do the work, the people who do the work directly. It is important to learn things, but maybe social work students can learn the most about children from the people who are*

with the children. What do I tell my students?

MEETING THE STUDENTS

The following day, as the meeting with the students drew closer, Mai wondered what she could say. She knew they were frustrated and eager to make change. They would ask if she had told the Head Mother what was right, if she was able to correct the Head Mother's thinking.

Now, the field students had gathered in the conference room. As she walked down the hall, Mai could hear them talking and whispering to one another. She took a deep breath and entered the room.