"Invisible in a visible role": A Photovoice Study Exploring the Struggles of New Resident Assistants

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Past studies revealed that Resident Assistants' (RAs) behavioural patterns are related to experiences and life outcomes of student residents. In this paper, the researchers aimed to investigate the struggles that new RAs encounter in university residential halls in Hong Kong, and to provide practical recommendations based on the findings. Photovoice was adopted to facilitate the participatory approach of the study; and six new RAs were recruited from different residential halls in a university for one semester to co-construct reliable knowledge. Four domains of struggles were identified in the study; difficulties to blend in, levels of involvement, workloads and performance, and role ambiguity. Further research is needed in different contexts to provide more insights to refine policies and approaches for better RAs' residential environment, as it is believed that by improving their residential experiences, it can further enhance students' residential experiences and foster positive residence life outcomes.

Keywords: resident experiences; resident assistants; higher education; participatory research; educational policy; educational practices

Introduction

In the last decade, governments such as the US (Inkelas, 2008), Hong Kong (The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China, 2017) and Macau (Chen, 2017), decided to allocate more funding to increase the number of university residential halls and organise more educational residential programmes. With the increasing development in universities' residential settings, such as designing residential setting into a learning cohort for students (e.g. Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Choy et al., 2015) and organising many 'residence-hall based undergraduate programmes' (Inkelas & Soldner, 2011, p.1), the need for hiring more new resident assistants (RAs) is becoming evident.

Universities usually appoint a team of RAs ~~among the graduate members of the university~~ and provide them room in exchange for overseeing the life of students in residential halls (O'Hara, 2001). This study was conducted within a university in Hong Kong in which residential halls advocated the creation of educational residential experiences. In this university, only current full-time postgraduate students or full-time university staff are eligible to apply for the RA positions. Taking up this part-time position means that he/she is expected to assist the hall warden in providing pastoral care and hall-life education to student residents (e.g. organise hall-based cultural /learning activities, and handling discipline, moral and social welfare of the student residents), as well as collaborate with the hall administration team to oversee the day-to-day operations of the hall (e.g. monitor student accommodation arrangement, and review hall budget).

This paper targeted to explore the university residential experiences of new RAs to understand difficulties and challenges they encountered in the residential halls. The recruited RAs used their mobile phones to take pictures of their residential life for one semester. The captioned pictures were then discussed ~~with~~ among RAs during the monthly focus group meetings to address and scaffold their struggles in their respective residential halls.

Literature Review

Resident assistants and residence life outcomes

The importance of residential experience for students' overall development has been well-established in the literature (Cheng, 2019; Schudde, 2011). Resident assistants are support staff in the operation and management of student residents (Blimling, 2014), and are believed to play a significant role in moderating students' positive outcomes herein. According to Smith (2018), RAs can affect "aspects of growth in the students on their floors through serving as programmers, mentors, counsellors, mediators, and policy enforcers" (p.5), therefore, they are likely to contribute to students' residence life outcomes. Yet, 'what learning outcomes did RAs gain?' has not been sufficiently documented by research.

The available line of inquiry relating RAs to residence life outcomes has a partial focus on how being an RA may benefit his/her personal development. Benjamin and Davis's (2016) longitudinal case studies with 87 RAs found a positive relationship between the job and five primary residence life outcomes including teamwork, problem-solving, interpersonal skills, self-efficacy, and helping skills. Despite gaining these residence life outcomes, RAs also encountered different challenges and had to struggle to tackle them.

Residential assistants and challenges confronted

Several studies have elaborated the challenges encountered by RAs as part of their residential life experiences. Labelled as having a "24-hour per day job" (Hardy & Dodd, 1998), RAs are involved in a wide range of responsibilities such as mediating conflicts, enforcing policies, responding to emergencies, performing administrative tasks, and offering academic support (Blimling, 2003). The nature of high-demand work has put RAs at risk for role conflicts (Everett & Loftus, 2011) as they struggle to balance the competing tasks. Further, with a lack of clear working guidelines (McConnell, 2018), the role conflicts can eventually cause burnout, stress, and low motivation among RAs (Paladino et al., 2005). Previous studies also reported that RAs encountered a general absence of student respect (Ketchum, 1998) that might even lead to verbal and physical abuse towards this position (Schuh & Shipton, 1983).

Despite the considerable number of studies that explored RAs' struggles in university residential halls, many of these studies were conducted more than a decade ago. Nowadays, universities are accommodating a more diverse student population. The recommendations of previous research about refining training sessions for RAs (e.g., Elleven et al., 2001; Jaeger & Caison, 2006) may be less relevant in the current situation as the RAs are confronted with various nature of challenges, different from those years ago. It is unavoidable that RAs are susceptible to new challenges (Paladino

et al., 2005; Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2011), therefore, a more recent investigation of the difficulties that RAs encounter is needed to inform a more effective support system. To eventually benefit the co-construction of a better residential hall community, the purpose of the current research is to investigate the difficulties that RAs encountered. A fine-grained understanding of RA's role would not only be conducive to mapping out practical recommendations, but also cultivate a more impartial recognition of this role among student residents.

The Photovoice Approach

Photovoice is based on a concept that images are powerful and able to influence policy, and people in a specific community responsible for shaping better policies by participating in the creation and definition of images (Wang, 1999); there were three main goals when Wang (1999) created the concept of photovoice: (1) representing the everyday realities of the community member(s); (2) promoting dialogue and knowledge regarding the strengths and concerns that discovered in the images; and (3) reaching policymakers. Photovoice is a participatory action research method that can be adopted by different communities and groups, particular in educational development (Lehtomäki et al., 2014; Phelps et al., 2014). In this study, photovoice was used to understand the challenges encountered by the RAs in the university residential community. Photovoice promotes sharing of thoughts and first-hand experiences using

visual images as a form of evidence that trigger discussions among participants of the community. Taking pictures allows participants to capture the instant view and share their experiences with others vividly in facilitating their discussions. Accordingly, the photovoice method was adopted to investigate the challenges that new RAs face in university residential halls in an attempt to enhance student residential experiences and inform the relevant stakeholders and policymakers.

Method

Participants

A total of six newly employed RAs (three males and three females) in a university in Hong Kong were the participants of the study. Half of the participants were staff members and the other half were postgraduate students. Table 1 displays significant background information of the participants. The identities of the participants are anonymized using pseudonyms. Ethical approval was granted in 2017 as part of a doctoral research project.

[Table 1 near here]

In the current study, new RAs refer to those who did not have prior experiences as RAs in any residential settings, and had just begun to serve as RAs in university residential halls in the 2018/19 academic year. This study only involved new RAs, considering that they are likely to experience more difficulties and adjustments when

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they first start their positions. The new RAs did not know each other beforehand, as they were randomly recruited from different residential halls by the first author, who was also an RA in the same university at that time. It was the sixth year for the first author to live in that university hall community; therefore, the researcher could approach and recruit the new RAs into this study through her network with the hall community.

Procedure

The researchers arranged an induction meeting before the official data collection took place. During the induction meeting, the researchers explained the aims of this study and sought consent from the participants. The participants were encouraged to freely take pictures under the theme, "challenges and struggles of being a resident assistant in a university residential hall" for one semester. Past photovoice studies provided disposable cameras for their participants to collect data (e.g., Teti, Murray, Johnson, & Binson, 2012; Tang et al., 2016), but participants from Tang et al.'s study (2016) found the device inconvenient as they were not familiar with how to use the given camera. Therefore, participants in this study used their smartphones to take pictures. If third parties were involved in their pictures, participants were reminded to seek consent from them. By the end of the induction meeting, the researcher initiated casual conversations among with the participants to build rapport in order to facilitate the focus group

discussions between the researcher and the participants (O'Toole & Due, 2015), that were going to take place in the succeeding months.

All the participants attended four monthly-organised focus group meetings in the first semester. All meetings were held at the beginning of each month in a study room of the university residential hall to discuss the pictures taken by the participants. Each group meeting lasted approximately for two hours and were conducted in English. All the meetings were audiotaped and later transcribed for data analysis. During the meetings, each participant selected and showcased one picture from the previous month, and shared it with the rest of the group following the structured guiding questions modified from SHOWeD (Wang, 1999): (1) what do you *s*ee here? (2) What is really *h*appening here? (3) How does this relate to *o*ur lives? (4) *W*hy does this concern, situation, strength *e*xist? (5) What can we *d*o about it? Then, the researcher invited other group members to freely give comments or thoughts on the shared picture to promote active discussion dialogues. The same procedure continued until everyone finished sharing their pictures and received comments from other members of the groups.

Data Analysis

Given that previous studies are relatively old and lack comprehensive investigations on the struggles that RAs encountered, we adopted an inductive coding approach based on the analysis procedure suggested by Joffe (2012). Key themes were identified after

analysing the focus group discussions.

To ensure the reliability of the analysis, transcripts from the monthly discussion groups were sent to the participants for checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) within one week after the meeting. In addition, preliminary results obtained from thematic analyses were also sent to the participants for review and feedback. ~~Not only the discussion dialogues were analysed, but the researchers also found that the photographs provided an additional source of evidence to support the participants' dialogue.~~

Results

The participants generated twenty-four pictures in the first semester from which four major themes were identified: difficulties to blend in, levels of involvement, workload imbalance, and role ambiguity. The staff structure of the residential halls was listed in Table 2. The hall warden is supported by two teams of staff: a tutorial team formed by RAs and a local administration team formed by hall office staff. The tutorial team is led by a senior resident assistant, while the hall administration team is led by a hall manager. Although staff structure is different among residential halls, these sets of background information are provided to better understand the analyses below.

[Table 2 near here]

Difficulties to Blend In

During the first meeting, all participants shared similar difficulties to involve

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themselves in the hall environment. Most participants agreed that they were treated like strangers and some students failed to recognise them as RAs in the hall. It was difficult for the new RAs to build relationships with students. Figure 1 exudes this theme as experienced by Ron.

[Figure 1 near here]

"This is the floor map drawn by the students on my floor. The chairperson in each floor was responsible for creating a floor map to locate the resident(s) of each room. The chairperson drew either student nicknames or their characteristics on the whiteboard. I lived in room 919 (circled in yellow colour), however, it was written as '冇人識' (means 'nobody knows' in English). I was very disappointed that day as I felt like I was excluded. I really wanted to be their friend and be involved in the floor, but I found it difficult to blend in. The hall did not provide any help to integrate us (RAs) into the hall, the transition was tough and I did not know what I could do about it."

Similar thoughts were also shared by Clara who tried to find alternative ways to promote communication between the new RAs and the fellow residents:

"I entered the hall half a month already, but I still found it hard to let residents know who I am. Students in halls had very different timetables and living approaches. But I could only stay in [the] hall after working hours, this had greatly reduced my time and opportunities to meet them. I think my hall also didn't help new RAs to blend in the hall.

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Instead of doing nothing, I created a poster to introduce all RAs in my hall to the students.

I don't like being invisible in a visible role."

The transition of new RAs could be difficult, especially for those who did not have any prior living experiences in university residential hall. As suggested by Rose,

"The social part, in particular, is difficult for me. I used to live at home, but now I am living with strangers with different backgrounds and cultures. I just didn't know what I should say to approach the students. Although I wanted to be involved in their social circle, it is challenging to become an insider here."

Apart from having difficulties to build relationships with students, the unique culture of each residential hall also hindered RAs to integrate into the hall life culture. This was encountered by Simon as illustrated in Figure 2.

"The photo showed the hall song lyrics. I took a photo of it because it was the first struggle I encountered in the hall. RAs in my hall were expected to have good relationships with students and to be familiar with the hall culture. I needed to memorise many things such as [the] hall song, hall motto, and different hall teams and residential activities that were already available. There was too much information I needed to find and process. I hope the hall can provide a briefing session for new RAs to know more about the hall. Despite having hall experience during my undergraduate study in another hall, I am still new in this hall!"

[Figure 2 near here]

All RAs found it challenging to blend in halls because of several identified reasons.

First, there was a lack of support from the residential halls. The RAs neither received

any induction training sessions to learn how to approach students, nor any orientation

sessions to get introduced into the hall culture. Two of the participants did not have any

prior residential experiences and felt frustrated when they started to serve in halls.

Second, the RAs lacked opportunities to interact with the students. There were little to

no residential activities that invited the new RAs to engage with residents, so the

participants find it difficult to integrate themselves into the life and culture in the halls.

Levels of Involvement

In the second monthly meeting, the participants had an in-depth discussion regarding

their levels of involvement in various residential activities. Most RAs were aware that

their involvement had an impact on student involvement and personal growth. Angel

shared,

> *"Students on my floor used to be less active in joining hall activities. However, when I*
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> *organised various functions and invited them to join, they were eager to help and*
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> *participate. Sometimes, I think they want to be involved in various hall activities, but they*
>
> *need us to push them to step out of their comfort zone."*

However, some resident assistants struggled between whether they should lead students

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to organise events or to wait for students to seek help from them. During the discussion, Tom asked the other participants about the extent of involvement in the residential activities. Tom further said,

> *"I lived in a hall when I was an undergraduate. I was very involved in organising different activities and motivated others to participate. But I am confused now as I am not sure if I should do the same anymore. I felt like if I took the initiative to do so, this might exploit students' chances to grow and learn. But if I did not do such things, then what should I do to help them?"*

Tom was divided between whether to be involved or not and if he should be involved, then how much involvement would be beneficial for him and his fellow residents as well. Rose also encountered similar confusion. She went to the hall office to ask for the regulations concerning RAs on the day she commenced her duty. However, she did not find the guidelines useful as the content was vague and written a long time ago. Therefore, she tried to find the descriptions of the RA's duties through the job advertisement. Rose further shared her thought (Figure 3),

> *"I am frustrated that our job duties were not concretely stated. Although I know what administrative work I am responsible for, the regulations won't teach you how to place yourself in the hall. I really did not know if students wanted me to be involved in their activities or not."*

[Figure 3 near here]

Most participants struggled with how much they should get involved in the residential halls. Ron also shared a similar thought.

"Doing too much may limit student potential, as they should learn to lead others instead of following our instructions. But if no one demonstrates to them, students may not know what to do and eventually not organise or initiate anything."

Half of the participants believed if they were highly involved in organising residential activities for students, the efficiency and quality of the events can be guaranteed. However, if they are involved too much, student residents would have less chance to learn how to initiate, design, and organise activities. Given such a dilemma, several participants doubted if they were well trained to be RAs.

The third and fourth monthly discussions focused more on the RAs' workload and roles. Prior identified issues were persisting, but all participants found themselves unable to solve those problems, so they preferred to discuss other emerging issues.

Workload and Performance

The third struggle that the participants encountered was the imbalance of workload among RAs. According to the participants, each RA is responsible for the specific floor(s). Apart from the regular administrative works, RAs also handled student-matters that took place in the floor(s) they were responsible for. This explained the variation of

RAs' workloads, as it depends on personal dynamics of each student and floor. This was demonstrated by Tom,

> *"In the past three months, my floor had students who violated hall rules and had unresolved conflicts between roommates. I was so busy having meetings with these students every night. I knew some RAs on other floors were less busy, as their respective floor(s) did not have troublesome students like mine."*

Tom worked independently for one floor only (single-sex floor), with a resident-to-resident assistant ratio of 32:1. Similarly, Rose also discussed the workload imbalance among RAs in her hall,

> *"In my hall, we had a shortage of RAs. Therefore, I was assigned to handle three floors, around 70 students in total. Some RAs in my hall only need to look after two floors; these arrangements were so unfair. I needed time to study too, why can't we equally split the workloads among all RAs?"*

Apart from the imbalanced workloads, the participants also discussed the lack of a monitoring system to evaluate RAs' performance. Rose shared a picture which was a screenshot of WhatsApp's conversation between two RAs in her hall. Rose used a photo editing app to replace the RAs' name to Tutor A and Tutor B before submitting the pictures to the researchers. Rose further elaborated (Figure 4),

[Figure 4 near here]

"Tutor B skipped several hall activities and was unable to submit meeting minutes on time. Therefore, Tutor A reported these to a WhatsApp's group that had the hall warden and other RAs. I believed this was an exceptional case because most RAs would not destroy their work relationships with other colleagues. This incident made me realise that RAs in my hall were not being evaluated on our performance, and there were no probation or appraisal systems for RAs in my hall. This was a problem because it could not motivate us to work more or prevent people from freeriding. I think it would be necessary to evaluate RAs performance."

Other participants also reported that there was no appraisal system or probation period for RAs in their hall. The lack of performance evaluation contributed to the imbalance workload and freeriding culture among other RAs. Some participants believed that having an evaluation system in residential halls can create a better and fairer working place as shared by Ron:

"Although studying full-time and working as a part-time RA could be very busy, I had no problem with my time management. However, it was difficult to keep on realising certain RAs remain as freerides while not being able to report them."

Angel further demonstrated similar thought,

"We were responsible for all kinds of work here already, such as killing rats for students, or comforting residents who were very frustrated and anxious about their studies. It could

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be very demanding if works are unfairly distributed. I signed up for a part-time job, but it

took a lot more time than that."

From the RAs' experiences, the current hall practice of delegating RAs to be responsible for the assigned floors was unfair due to uneven distribution of workloads, and that resulted in low-level participation of them in hall activities. Many participants believed their RAs' responsibilities were too heavy for a part-time position. Also, there was a lack of appraisal system to evaluate RAs' performance and monitor the equal distribution of works among RAs. Participants also believed that it was necessary to have proper work divisions and monitoring mechanisms to better utilise human resources and maintain a harmonious working environment.

Role Ambiguity

Role ambiguity was the last struggle shared by the participants. RAs have many roles, and these roles change frequently. For example, RAs need to serve as student counsellors when attending students' mental problems; as security officers when students break hall rules; as colleagues of the hall management teams; and as friends with hallmates. However, sometimes there might be role conflicts. As illustrated by Simon,

"One of the students on my floor was being accused of stealing his roommate's property.

I needed to interrogate the suspect. I hung out with these two kids quite often since I

lived here, I felt uncomfortable to cross-examine them. I didn't want to play the good or

bad cop routine all by myself."

The participants found it difficult to be friends with the students and be a rule keeper at the same time. Role ambiguity creates confusion to the RAs, similar thoughts were shared by Clara (see Figure 5),

"Last week, a student on my floor broke the hall rule by bringing a male guest overnight, therefore she was being suspended from the hall for two weeks. Although students were encouraged to open their doors and interact with others, her room was closed most of the time since the incident. We used to have some interactions, but now she purposely avoids me. It is difficult to take up the role of pastoral care and rule keeper at the same time."

[Figure 5 near here]

Apart from role ambiguity with students, it also applied with the halls' administrative office staff. This was mentioned by Ron.

"As a postgraduate student, in most cases, we can be regarded as the capable ones. But some hall office staff see us less capable as we are junior part-time staff. This can be frustrating. Under the hall structure, RAs seems not to be in a very high position. I am irritated that our work did not receive the recognition from the university."

RAs needed to work with different types of people, such as students, hall office staff, other RAs, parents, and wardens. All participants agreed that RAs had multiple roles in residential halls, and most participants found it challenging to shift between these roles.

After the first semester, all participants hoped that more recognition and support could be given to RAs, as they had experienced lots of challenges in this position.

Discussion

In this study, the research sought to understand the difficulties, challenges, and struggles experienced by RAs in university residential halls using the photovoice method. Given that most studies are relatively outdated, this study attempted to address the research gap by conducting a recent investigation that identified four main challenges faced by RAs, including the difficulties to blend in, unequal levels of involvement, less-justified workload and performance, and role ambiguity.

First, RAs found themselves difficult to blend in as they were new to the halls and did not know how to approach students. There are RAs' trainings that focused on how to handle students' undesirable behaviour such as suicide prevention (Swanbrow Becker & Drum, 2015) and alcohol or drug abuse (Thombs, et al., 2015). However, this study revealed that the recruited RAs lacked training in relation to hall orientation and student engagement. This informed us of the varied and pressing challenges encountered by RAs across time and spaces, and they needed training to deal with such challenges. This suggested that not every residential hall community is providing adequate professional support and materials to new RAs. To address this actual concern of RAs in different residential halls, it is important to provide tailor-made orientation

programmes and training materials for RAs to equip them with the relevant knowledge and skills needed in the hall.

Second, RAs struggled in balancing their levels of involvement in the residential halls' activities. The residential halls in this study promote a student-centered approach, therefore, student residents are highly encouraged to initiate and participate in residential activities (Cunich, 2012). As a result, RAs are worried that their involvement may influence student participation in halls, which is a challenge that the researchers did not come across in past studies. These findings demonstrate that different residential cultures might lead to different struggles encountered by the RAs. Surprisingly, RAs in this study did not encounter difficulties that were reported in past studies, such as absence of student respect (Ketchum, 1988) and verbal or physical abuse (Schuh & Shipton, 1983). One possible explanation is that there are different cultural values among countries and/or contexts, and our study was conducted in Hong Kong where respect for seniors is a core Chinese value. In light of these, the content of the RA training materials should also consider the differences across cultural identities that each student or student groups bring to the respective residential halls.

Third, RAs struggled with heavy workloads, which is aligned with the results of a previous study that described RAs as a "24-hour per day job" and listed a wide range of RAs' responsibilities (Hardy & Dodd, 1998). Our investigation further found that the

problem of heavy and imbalanced workload can be is worsened by improper work

divisions and lack of monitoring systems in residential halls. All the RAs in this study

were either full-time staff or full-time postgraduate students. Hence, most of the

participants considered the workload assigned to RAs to be too much. With such heavy

and imbalanced workloads, it is not surprising that previous studies found that RAs

reported burnout and emotional exhaustion (e.g., Paladino et al., 2005).

Fourth, RAs struggled with role ambiguity as they had various roles to perform in

the residential halls. Thus, consistent with past studies, RAs found it hard to find their

identity and the demanding workload also seemed to create role conflict (Everett &

Loftus, 2011). This study elucidated the role conflict resulted from interacting with

different stakeholders in residential halls, including different student residents and

administrative staff etc. However, this issue remains untackled since the past.

Additionally, the participants in this study reported that RA positions were not

adequately recognised by neither the residents nor the hall staff, which is an important

issue that should be further investigated in future studies.

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations. First, this study only lasted for one semester, a

more comprehensive longitudinal study is essential to better address the challenges

experienced by RAs in university residential halls, because RAs are likely to experience

different challenges over the academic year. Second, as a qualitative study, the small sample size makes the findings hard to be generalisable. Thus, this research is considered as a first step to shedding light on the difficulties that RAs encountered in the current university residential hall settings. Future studies to explore more on this concern may be conducted longitudinally and include data obtained from quantitative methods to make comprehensive understanding of the challenges that RAs encountered.

Implications

This study adds to the literature on the challenges that new RAs encountered in Hong Kong university residential halls based on empirical data obtained from photographs and group discussions, where participants were required to reflect their hall-life experiences. Some studies have also reported that RAs influenced student involvement in residential halls significantly (Arboleda et al., 2003), and student involvement is positively correlated with student learning outcomes (Astin, 1984; Cheng, & Chan, 2020). This study also suggests a need for creating a better working environment for RAs through active engagement of the university residential community. A supportive working environment among colleagues is an essential factor in the recruitment and retention of quality staff (Wiskow et al., 2010), which is to be considered as one of the important aspects for the new RAs in the university. Based on the findings, recommendations have been made at the policy and practice level as below.

Policy Implications

The study suggests following policy implications.

1. Open more RA positions for each residential hall to prevent RAs from work overload, and reduce the RA-students ratio.

2. Organise an induction workshop for new RAs: introducing the hall characteristics and cultures, sharing of good practices regarding how previous RAs balanced their hall involvement, and illustrating how to deal with role ambiguity. The induction workshop is essential as new RAs would feel more equipped and fully informed before they start taking up their roles.

3. Set up RA appraisal system, which includes all related stakeholders in halls (such as hall warden, other RA colleagues, student residents, and office staffs) to provide evaluations for all RAs on their overall performance and prevent freeriding.

4. Create full-time RA positions and designate them to the hall management hierarchy to increase the recognition of RAs and prevent role ambiguity.

Practice Implications

The study suggests the following practice-level implications.

1. Organise residential activities that encourage interactions between RAs and students to facilitate the integration of new RAs into the hall life.

2. Encourage regular meetings between RAs and students to let RAs get feedback regarding their involvement in hall-life activities.

3. Integrate new RAs and current RAs in a team to enhance mutual support between colleagues and balance the workload distribution among them.

4. Delegate varied responsibilities to different RA teams regarding diverse student affairs in the hall (e.g., hall discipline team, internal welfare and recreation team, etc.) to reduce role conflicts or ambiguity.

Conclusion

This study was conducted in one-semester, to investigate the challenges that RAs encountered and struggles they experienced in university residential halls. The participants generated pictures and discussed them during monthly group meetings. The present study filled the research gap by identifying four domains of struggles that RAs encountered; difficulties to blend in, levels of involvement, workloads and performance, and role ambiguity. After presenting some of the current difficulties experienced by RAs in university residential halls, this article forwarded some recommendations for further practice and policy initiatives to improve the current university residential system for RAs. Since this study took place in the Hong Kong context, replicating it in different contexts is essential to provide more insights to refine approaches for better residential environment for RAs, and may lead to better residential experiences for students.

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(Overall word count: 6636)

Table 1. Participants' demographic information

Pseudonym	Full-time Status	Age	Gender	Place of birth	Prior hall experiences as a student?
Tom	Staff	25	M	Malaysia	Yes
Ron	Student	23	M	Hong Kong	Yes
Simon	Staff	24	M	Hong Kong	Yes
Rose	Student	23	F	Hong Kong	No
Clara	Staff	25	F	Malaysia	No
Angel	Student	23	F	Hong Kong	Yes

Table 2

Staff structure in residential halls

Position	Status	Role
Warden	Part-time	One in each residential hall. Overall responsibility in student development, pastoral care and overseeing the administration of the residential hall
Resident Assistants	Part-time	Assist the warden in keeping discipline and promotion of the general moral and welfare of students.
Hall Office staff	Full-time	Provide administrative support for the residential hall.

Figures

Figure 1. The floor map (Ron)

Figure 2. Memorising the hall song can take quite some time for me. (Simon)

Figure 3. The "not-so-clear" job advertisement (Rose)

Figure 4. A screenshot of the hall warden and resident assistants group (Rose)

Figure 5. A locked door (Clara)