

Theory without practice is empty: An analysis on fieldwork training in social work education

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Abstract

Field work helps the students to apply their skills and knowledge into practice. Fieldwork in social work education refers to training and education. The training is repetitive and skill-oriented and education is imparted with broad perspectives. It is a dynamic process of observing, amassing and implementing creative and innovative ideas. Therefore, field work is considered to be learning through doing. Hepworth and Rooney and Larsen (2002) observe, fieldwork engages the student in supervised social work practice and provides opportunities to many theory and practice. The fieldwork programme of school of social work education is the most important and integral part of social work curriculum. This article moves through the importance of social work education and training. Important roles and objectives are also specified in this article. It is clear that fieldwork in social work education faces a number of challenges in developing programmes well. Certain challenges faced by multidisciplinary team of professional social work are also reflected with suitable suggestions.

Keywords: fieldwork, social work practice, challenges

1. Introduction

Social work education started in the form of apprentice by the charity organisation society of America and was initiated to impart training in social work as a profession in the year 1898. The nature of training was only practical and theoretical. There were neither theory classes conducted for the purpose, nor was there any assessment of the recruit's performance, based on theoretical understanding of the concerned field or job.

The idea of Dewey, which is learning through doing, has had a primary influence in the concept of field work. It is functional and technical in nature, and fosters learning in students. Moreover, it an integrated approaches, which goes concurrently with the classroom teaching process. It is a way to transform knowledge through certain skills and techniques into action. The significance of field work training in social work is consequential because of its nature of dealing with problems practically. It becomes very important in dealing with the dynamics of the human personality in the context of an individual's needs. In simple words it can be said that theory without practice is empty and practice without theory is meaningless.

The term fieldwork may be described as gaining experience by utilising knowledge by developing the skills to deal with the problems of human beings. The dictionary of sociology defines fieldwork as "social survey or process of collecting primary data from a population distributed geographically". Fieldwork in social work education means any kind of practical experience in a social organisation or agency, if this experience has been deliberately arranged, for the education of the students who are undertaking the courses partly or wholly designed for those who intend to become social workers.

Social work education comprises of a theoretical component taught in the classroom and field- based education involving integration of the academic aspect and practice. Fieldwork, which is also known as field instruction, field placement,

field education, practicum or internship is therefore an integral component of social work education. Though the definition of social work seems to be a contested terrain, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) (2004) ^[6] convey, its basic meaning quite concisely. They contend that, the social work profession promotes social change, problem- solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environment. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. From this definition it is clear that social workers follow a formal procedure in helping clients to cope with their life tasks and to realise their aspirations. Royse, *et al* (2007) ^[8] also observed that early in social work education, students spent about half of their academic time in field settings. This involves developing their ability to deal with their problems more effectively at any given point in time and also in the future. Mary Richmond, an early social work practitioner, teacher and theoretician, advocated for complementing field learning with academic education.

2. Objectives and role of field work in social work education and training

1. To develop professional skill through practical learning which helps in solving the problems in work at the micro level, family, groups and communities and change at the macro level.
2. To prove concurrent opportunity for the integration of classroom learning in fieldwork and vice versa.
3. To develop the skills required for professional practice at a particular level of thinking.
4. To objectively develop professional attitudes involving impartiality and non-judgemental attitudes.

5. To develop professional values and commitments such as respect for human dignity and worth.
6. To develop awareness of self and one's professional ideas and to offer purposeful learning experience to students through interaction with life situation under supervisory guidance for professional growth.
7. To foster attitude in the students towards professional growth in terms of knowledge, skills and attitude.
8. To enable students to develop and deepen their capacity to relate theory to practice and to relate experience to theory.

A theoretical framework is imparted to students about social work perfection, but students are confused with field work practice. We can find that there are shortcomings for students to gain knowledge about field work. They face problems regarding choosing an area and most of the time they are confused about the modalities that is how to begin a field work practice and how to complete it and do not understand the nature, scope, extension and magnitude of field work training. So naturally such trained professional social workers are unable to effectively solve the problem of people in this changing society as compared to the untrained voluntary social work practitioners and field activists. This is even threat to themselves, agency and to the community.

We all know that practical training in social work education is offered through the different methods of field work like orientation visit, concurrent visit, study tours, social camps, participation in social function and social movements. These are the integral part of training programme today. But, apart from these a new method of training programme has been found very attractive and effective in developing the critical and analytical thinking of students.

It is critically important for social work students to acquire, in a classroom environment, practice principles, values and ethics and the scientific basis for practice. Equally important is the need to apply the theoretical content covered in the classroom, to real life situations as part of a student's preparation to become a professional social worker. It takes more than academic fitness, but also evidence-based knowledge, field- tested skills and a wealth of hands-on-experience to become a fully backed social worker.

"A meaningful fieldwork placement is one that enhances the students understanding of the social work profession and the nature of the problems the profession addresses itself to" (Kaseke, 1986)^[4]. Fieldwork also develops in students, skills that will enable them to respond appropriately to the needs of clients. Furthermore, Safari (1986)^[9] observes that, "In the field, the student comes into contact with needy people, their problems, their reactions to the problems and their attitude towards social workers and thus the student discovers his or her ability to help". It is through observation and doing the job and feeling responsible for the job of helping people to cope with their problems, that social work students acquire skills. Likewise, fieldwork is designed to give the student exposure and experience on the functioning of social welfare agencies and social welfare provisioning. The general purpose of fieldwork is therefore, to acquaint students with actual social work situations, in preparation for professional social work practice. It is an instrument that is used to initiate students into the profession through among others, inculcation and assimilation of social work ethics, principles and values.

3. Challenges of Field Work

3.1 Social work students

A student who comes with a lack of interest and chosen the field of social work can create a negative impact. So they may not be able to create an interest, which is one of the major hurdles. The lack of taking initiatives on the part of students in the field and also the improper communication about their interest also stands as a supporting problem. Finding suitable agencies is also another challenges faced by students. Their lack of social attitude, disinterest and Improper guidance from faculty members and placed in an agency without any proper goals or objectives. The students also lack proper field work manual due to which students are often confused as to what kind of work is to be carried out in agencies during training. Studying in unhealthy work cultural institutions, where field work is not practised rigorously.

3.2 Faculty supervisors

Untrained supervisors appointed in some institution of social work find it difficulty in guiding students. Trained faculty members also face difficulties in guiding students due to their lack of experience. Allotment of the number of agencies to the supervisors, their time in visiting each of the institutions. Sometimes personal money is spend in paying visit to agencies because some of schools of social work do not reimburse the same and so avoid visiting the agencies allotted to them. Highlighting the importance of supervision visits by school supervisors, Raphael and Rosenblum (1987)^[7] observe that even the planning of these visits, has an energising effect on the placement. They assert that: "Knowing that a faculty member who represents the School will be coming on a specific date to review progress stimulates the field instructor and student to assess their progress. The heightened energy available at such times should be consciously used to facilitate change for educational purposes" (1987:158). Failure by school supervisors to assess students on fieldwork can have a very damaging effect on the morale of the student and agency supervisor and the placement in general. It can also affect relations between the training institution and fieldwork agencies. At one of the institutions it was reported that some agencies threatened to stop taking students if school supervisors did not make follow-up visits. The lack of infrastructure and facilities in the schools reduce faculty's interest in developing and implementing field work practicum and also the lack of getting cooperation and appreciation for putting effort and spending their valuable time and energy.

3.3 Agency supervisors

The shortage of qualified and experienced agency supervisors was found to be a common problem. Invariably, qualified and experienced social workers should handle practical training in social work. Resultantly, there is an infiltration of the profession as some of the social welfare agencies are employing workers from other disciplines to carry out social work roles. However, as social work is practiced in a variety of settings, it is inevitable that non- social workers will have to supervise social work students. Furthermore, in spite of this crippling shortage of qualified agency supervisors, it needs to be acknowledged that non-social work agency supervisors have contributed significantly to the survival of the fieldwork programme at institutions covered in the study.

Congested amount of time given to the students for field work training because they have to shoulder this training in addition to the responsibilities of agencies. Agency supervisor faces problems in the agencies in terms of imparting training to students. They have to function as supervisors of students without any additional remuneration and also lack of appreciation. Students as learners do not morally associate themselves with the field work agencies, due to which it becomes difficulty for supervisors to keep the students closely related to agency services. The students are in the agencies on specified they only work for a few hours in a week due to which proper guidance and training cannot be given.

3.4 Agency

Some of the agencies will not have experienced and trained supervisors to guide students and do not allow students for field work training in their institution. Even if allowed also they do not give enough time and attention to beneficiaries because they do not have a well set programs and good standard of services. Many social welfare agencies feel that students are sometimes quite critical about the workers services towards community. So the complete or relevant information about the institution and its practices is not divulged to students. Since students are new and the agencies cannot utilise their services, they feel imparting training to students is but a time consuming and fruitless job. They cannot afford audio-visual equipment for imparting training, due to which effective training cannot be given.

3.5 Social Work School

Insufficient infrastructure and poor facilities available in schools to develop a proper training is one of the main challenges in field work practice and training. More number of students with less supervisors or faculty members stands as a major issue in schools of social work to deliver a good field work. Hence all this problems are to be addressed and considered to solve with equal responsibility from the part of all members who are key foundations of fieldwork.

4. Recommendations and Suggestions

- Maintaining proper uniformity in fieldwork system, though number of days and duration of time seems to vary from school to school, a proportionate ratio should be maintained.
- Attitude of faculty supervisors towards students should be changed. Most of the time supervisors visit the agencies only when they find time. They visit mostly to check whether the students are present or absent and not with a view of helping the students learn or solve their problems.
- Introducing approaches like humanistic, environment, integrated, and right based approaches to fieldwork training to enhance its high quality.
- A proper presentations and discussions of fieldwork should be emphasised. This would allow experience sharing, knowledge imparting and risk undertaken by students.
- Maintaining proper records about fieldwork, which will be more useful in future.
- If students have conducted a study or research during fieldwork, provide opportunity for further studies and encourage publishing it.
- Help students in choosing the agencies according to their

interest and scope so that they are able to contribute and work honestly in the training period.

- A proper objectives or work plan or manuals should be given to students, to reduce confusion.
- Make students analyse the importance of studying about the agency before they go for training.
- Setting up of different social welfare agencies with the help of associations of trained social workers, funding agencies and ministry of social welfare. This will not only generate job opportunities but also increase the scope for imparting training to students of different institutions.
- Developing community or rural development projects, so that students can be placed in these projects for undergoing training.
- The agency supervisor who renders services to the schools for fieldwork training of students should be given compensation in terms of money for making their service effective.
- To impart fieldwork training to students, the schools should delegate authorities in charge of.
- Providing certain facility to faculties to undergo training in fieldwork and this will enhance their practical knowledge and in turn they will become effective supervisors.
- Schools should have their own magazines or periodicals, so that students can contribute their field experiences and such collection is also helpful for students in future to boost their self-confidence.

5. Conclusion

There is a need for development of an expanded community oriented focus in social work education and more specifically in field instruction. The process of developing new social workers within this conceptual context in community based field experiences. Development of alternative learning experience will provide greater opportunities for social work students in their preparation and entry into the professional roles as social workers. Hence fieldwork contribute to the high process of creative and innovative ideas. So an extensive well planned fieldwork programme is inevitable. So new innovative methods should be developed to make the fieldwork fruitful which enable the students to develop a high standard of professional education. And an equal contribution should be necessary from all. While it is evident from the study that fieldwork in social work education is marginalised, there are very indeed very promising prospects of raising its effectiveness and quality of training.

Furthermore, while the challenges confronting the fieldwork component in the training of social workers require intervention at the highest level, that is government and management at training institutions, it is also necessary that those involved in fieldwork execute their roles and responsibilities effectively. Specifically, the fieldwork coordinator, agency supervisors should be competent and resourceful in discharging their roles and responsibilities. It is imperative that schools of social work develop their own fieldwork manuals, covering the teaching and learning content for fieldwork. This is particularly important considering that each institution is unique in terms of the prevailing socio-economic conditions, challenges and experiences, the social work education curriculum in a given country.

6. References

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