

PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF FIELD WORK TRAINING IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION: A REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Social work students generally considered field work training as the most important component in their professional education. In social work curriculum, practice and knowledge (theory) are two integral components in the curriculum, and yet they are often regarded as separate and so some extent antithetical (the “theoretical” vs. the “practical”). A unique feature of fieldwork training is that training and practice take place in the same place. Hence, students are not learning “about” a practice as is the case in classroom instruction but learning “in” practice. Field placement is one of the most exciting and exhilarating parts of a formal social work education. It is also one of the most challenging. More than anything else, it requires students to look inside themselves and examine themselves as future social workers. However, most of the time, the students will feel better equipped for their professional career after finishing their practicum. The field work goal is to develop the student’s competence in the practice of social work. Field education is an experiential form of teaching and learning that takes place in a service setting. Field work practices offered the most opportunity to understand the requirements of the people in the background of prevailing cultural traditions and values and thereby, offered opportunities to indigenize practice. It also gave opportunities for innovation. Thus, the present paper highlights and reviews on the challenges and prospects of field work training in Social Work education.

Keywords: Problems, Prospects, Challenges, Field work training, Social work.

INTRODUCTION

The term “fieldwork” may be described as gaining experience by utilizing knowledge and 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.” Social work education started in the form of apprenticeship by the charity organization society of America and was initiated to impart training in social work as a profession in the year 1898. This organization started social work education for providing training to newly recruited employees. The nature of training was only practical and not theoretical. It was just a 5-week programme for the practical training of the newly recruited employees; the method of training was also simple in nature, i.e. observation of the work performed by their senior employees during office hours in practical situations. 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. Thus, social work education emerged out of practical field training. The credit goes to Mary Richmond, one of the officials in the charity organization, for projecting the concept and ideas of social casework and social work education. She is, therefore, known as the pioneer or mother of social casework and the organization is considered to be the successful projector of social work education [13]. A few definitions of fieldwork training in social work education as defined by professional scholars are given under:

1. Fieldwork in social work education means any kind of practical experience in a social organization 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.
2. Fieldwork in social work education is a guided interactive process between a student and a social life situation. In this, social work as a profession has an abiding and deep concern that needs to be addressed, remedied, improved or changed for a fuller (a richer) development of human environmental potentials.
3. Fieldwork in social work is carried out in and through social welfare agencies and communities, where the student learns skills, tests out

knowledge according to an educational plan. The whole programme is student and field specific. Fieldwork training is a supervised practice of student social worker under the guidance of a trained social work educator or field personnel. It has been defined as educationally sponsored attachment of social work students to an institution, agency, or a section of community in which they are helped to extend their knowledge, understand and experience the impact of human needs. Such an experience is deliberately arranged on a whole or part time basis.

PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES IN FIELDWORK TRAINING

The schools of social work in India face many problems which begin with the evaluation of their performance. The problems can again be classified into three specific groups, viz., schools specific, student specific and agency specific. The major problems of the schools of social work in India in general and impact on training are as under:

School specific problems

1. Finding suitable agencies and developing them as workshops for the students of social work education thereby restricting the scope of fieldwork training.
2. Lack of practical-oriented faculty, due to which the schools are not in a position to impart training in social work education in a professional and practical sense.
3. Lack of suitable content of fieldwork training due to which the training cannot be imparted as per the expectations of professional social work.
4. Lack of a fieldwork manual, due to which students are often confused as to what kind of work is to be carried out in the agencies during the training period throughout the academic year.
5. Dearth of literature on fieldwork, due to which students are unable to understand the concepts clearly from a practical point of view.
6. Lack of the required work culture in the schools due to which fieldwork is not practised rigorously.
7. Lack of healthy competition in the field due to which the schools are not able to maintain a standard of fieldwork training in social work education.

Agency specific problems

1. Lack of required work culture in the agencies due to which fieldwork is not practised rigorously.
2. Lack of trained social work man power in most of the agencies, thus affecting the nature of the training in social work education.
3. Semi-trained persons either as the head or as a supervisor due to which the quality of the fieldwork training gets affected.

Student specific problems

1. Non-availability of meritorious students opting for social work as a profession, due to which the products coming out of the field of social work are poor and weak.
2. Examination-orientation of the students due to which professional approach is not developed in the field.

These are the general problems identified. These and a host of other smaller ones together have today paralyzed fieldwork training in social work education. Unless all these are addressed systematically, there lies little hope for the future.

PROSPECTS IN FIELDWORK TRAINING

A widely used definition of fieldwork is one by Hamilton and Else (1983) who view it as, "a consciously planned set of experiences occurring in a practice setting designed to move students from their initial level of understanding, skills and attitudes to levels associated with autonomous social work practice." As the social work curriculum is based on both theory and practice, the provision of sound theory is critical as is fieldwork experience. With fieldwork training social work students acquire, practice principles, values and ethics and the scientific basis for practice. They get an opportunity to apply the theoretical content covered in the classroom, to real life situations as part of the 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. As Shardlow and Doel [12] observed, "these two contexts for learning about social work practice, class and fieldwork will be integrated, complementary and mutually consistent" turning this into a reality. Kaseke [7] had observed that "fieldwork is an instrument of socialisation since it prepares the student for a future role as a social work practitioner", further he asserting that, "a meaningful fieldwork placement enhances the students understanding of the social work profession and the nature of the problems the profession addresses itself to". Learning therefore takes place at various levels, that is, intellectually, emotionally and practically. Furthermore, fieldwork is an opportunity to align theoretical knowledge and learning, with the needs of society and the market place. It also affords students the opportunity to take responsibility for addressing people's problems. Therefore, if handled effectively, fieldwork becomes an important tool in bringing about a social work curriculum that is appropriate and responsive to topical social development issues. Safari [10] felt that "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". Fieldwork also develops in students, skills that will enable them to respond appropriately to the needs of clients. Furthermore, Safari [10] 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. Hall [5] asserted that, "a generally accepted view today is that field instruction is of equal importance to academic instruction". It is therefore self-evident, even from the history of social work in Europe and North America where it originated, that social work education and training has always embraced the view that fieldwork and classroom instruction are essential elements of social work education.

CONCLUSION

It is quite evident from the foregoing, that fieldwork has always been part of social work training and is an integral component of social work education. As Hepworth and Rooney and Larsen [6] observe, "fieldwork engages the student in supervised social work practice and provides opportunities to marry theory and practice. 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". It is widely accepted that it is a basic requirement of all professions to have a knowledge base, principles, values and ethics that guide and inform practice. Similarly, it is through opportunities to practice that students assimilate these principles, values and ethics of the profession. 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 reality at social work training institutions as Kaseke (1990) [7] observes, "is that fieldwork is marginalized when compared to its academic counterpart". Kaseke asserts that, "there is very little written on this subject matter, thus leaving social work educators, students and field supervisors without any meaningful and comprehensive guide to field instruction". Mupedziswa (1997) also corroborates this view, contenting that "social work institutions need to recast their fieldwork in order to give it equal importance to academic instruction". As Shardlow and Doel [12] observe, "these two contexts for learning about social work practice, class and fieldwork need to be integrated, complementary and mutually consistent". They further point out that the challenge for the student and agency supervisor, is to make this a reality". Kaseke [7] also observes that "fieldwork is an instrument of socialisation since it prepares the student for a future role as a social work practitioner". He further asserts that, "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". Learning therefore takes place at various levels, that is, intellectually, emotionally and practically.

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