

THE CHALLENGES FOR FIELD WORK EDUCATION IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT:

Field work education is defined as a “component of social work education where students learn to practice social work through delivering social work services in agency and community settings” (Bogo, 2006, p. 163). The term “field education” is denoted as field learning, field instruction, fieldwork, and field practicum. These terms are utilized to describe the practical learning experiences of social work students within a supervised environment. Field work in social work education faces several significant challenges. These include inadequate preparation and lack of support and training for students. Additionally, students often bear the burden of multiple responsibilities and roles, which can be overwhelming. Communication and supervision challenges further complicate the field work experience, alongside administrative hurdles. The shift to online learning and practice introduces its own set of difficulties. Issues of equity, inclusion, diversity, and access also persist, along with competition and unfair placement selection procedures. This article aims to provide insights and recommendations for improving social work field education. Social work field education programs depend heavily on social service agencies and organizations to provide practical learning opportunities for students (Bogo & Globerman, 1995). Owing to staff shortages, agency pressures, demanding workloads, time constraints, and insufficient resources, there are significant rising challenges with recruiting high-quality practicum placements for social work students in agencies with field educators (Wayne et al., 2006).

Key Words: Field Work, Social Work, Social Service agencies

Introduction:

Social work education is a unique blend of theory and practice in the arena of social sciences. The theory taught in the class room is put into applicability in the field in the same week. Social work education usually has a four day class work theory and two day field practicum. Many NGO's, Govt. agencies offer field work for social work students. The faculty and students have

lot of difficulties in the field work. There is a growing feeling that field work is not adequately undertaken in the current scenario. The faculty are having hardships in allotting agencies for the students as few of the NGO's are demanding fee for the field work from students. The practical component of field work needs revamp of the program enabling the faculty and students to undertake field work in a more beneficial way.

The social work curriculum is structured to integrate both theoretical and practical components within a weekly schedule. Specifically, four days are allocated to theoretical instruction, while the remaining two days are dedicated to fieldwork. This combination of theory and practice is a distinctive feature of social work education at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The inclusion of fieldwork is particularly significant as it allows students to gain a deeper understanding of the practical application of theoretical concepts learned in the classroom.

Types of field work in Social Work education:

Fieldwork in social work education is broadly categorized into observation visits, concurrent visits, and block placements. At the undergraduate level, all students follow a common curriculum. However, at the postgraduate level, the first year consists of common papers, while the second year offers specializations. These specializations include community development, psychiatric social work, human resource management, family and child welfare, and criminal and correctional social work. Students can choose any of these specializations based on their interests and career aspirations, whether they plan to pursue higher education or work in a specific domain and they have to undertake field work in those domains only.

Observational Visits for Undergraduate and Postgraduate Students

First-semester students are taken on observational visits to various NGOs and social welfare agencies to familiarize themselves with the activities, services, and operational fields of these organizations. These visits are particularly beneficial as many of the students are new to the undergraduate course and several non-BSW students join MSW courses. They help students understand the course and curriculum, as it is purely an observational visit. Typically, students spend around two to three hours at the agencies.

The Concurrent field Work:

From the second semester onwards, both MSW and BSW students will engage in concurrent fieldwork. Students are organized into groups of three to six members and assigned to a single

organization for the entire semester. This consistent placement allows students to develop a deep understanding of the organization's activities and become familiar with the field settings. Such immersion aids students in effectively interacting with clients across various contexts and enhances their comprehension of social work theory.

In each semester, students will be placed in a new NGO to gain exposure to different agency activities.

Block Placement / Internship:

Following the final examinations of theory papers in the fourth semester, students will undertake a 45-day block placement. During this period, each student is assigned to a different organization. While concurrent fieldwork involves group placements, block placements require students to work individually.

The advantage of block placement is that it provides students with internship opportunities within NGOs, increasing the likelihood of students being absorbed into these organizations as employees. Fieldwork hones students' skills in planning, coordination, and organizing various aspects related to NGOs. The fieldwork examination is evaluated by both internal and external examiners, with internal examiners from the same university and external examiners from other universities to ensure an unbiased assessment.

Challenges to field work education:

Fieldwork, a crucial component of social work education, presents numerous challenges to social work educators, faculty, students, and agency supervisors. For social work educators, the placement of students poses significant challenges, including the scarcity of NGOs in the operational area of colleges, non-cooperation from NGOs, student absenteeism, and financial constraints faced by students, as many colleges and NGOs do not provide allowances for travel and lunch expenses. Additionally, NGOs often do not offer sufficient learning opportunities due to limited projects, and some demand fees for permitting students to undertake fieldwork in their organizations. NGOs may also be unable to devote time to students due to their own workload and understaffing issues.

Students may lack interest in fieldwork, perceiving it as a less important element of social education. Faculty members, engaged in their academic activities, may also struggle to devote adequate time to students.

The impediments faced by students during fieldwork are multifaceted. Students often experience stress due to the high work demands from understaffed NGOs, which lack adequate guidance and supervision. The scarcity of agency supervisors further exacerbates this issue. Financial constraints also pose significant challenges, as many students reside in hostels and incur additional expenses for lunch both in the field and at their hostels.

Insufficient Training and Support in Field Education

Students and field educators reported receiving inadequate training, support, and resources from schools and field agencies. Field agencies sometimes failed to offer students the necessary preparation and support for their work. A few students felt unsupported by their field educators. “Field educators have high expectations but do not train or guide students and are looking for students to help them in their overwhelming job as opposed to designating time to train students”. The field educators regarded students “like additional helping hands, with minimal support from educators”. This lack of support concerned students, who felt unprepared to work independently in the field.

Students often prefer to form groups with their friends for fieldwork, prioritizing social comfort over learning opportunities. Absenteeism is a major challenge, compounded by NGOs providing ad hoc daily plans, which diminishes student interest. The dwindling number of NGOs leads to overcrowding of student groups, limiting the quality of learning experiences.

Many NGOs utilize students for routine activities rather than imparting essential skills. Additionally, the demand for fees by NGOs for allowing students to undertake fieldwork is beyond the financial means of many students. NGOs typically do not offer travel allowances or lunch provisions, despite students working from morning to evening. Furthermore, students are often deployed for office work, which does not encourage their engagement or learning.

Challenges for NGO's :

Many NGOs face financial constraints and have limited projects, making it challenging for them to train students effectively. To raise internal resources, some NGOs charge fees from students, which has become a significant source of income. Understaffing is another major challenge, as agency supervisors are often unable to devote sufficient time to students due to their extensive responsibilities. Additionally, student absenteeism further complicates the situation.

Field educators more frequently cited student unpreparedness and readiness for placement as major challenges. These issues included students not showing enough initiative to improve or complete tasks. One respondent shared, “I find that sometimes the students are not prepared and do not take the initiative to help grow their knowledge.”

While observation visits generally do not pose significant issues, concurrent and block placement fieldwork present major challenges. After theory examinations, hostels are closed, requiring students to bear the additional burden of accommodation and food expenses during block placements.

Communication and Supervision Challenges:

Lack of communication or ineffective communication was one of the most significant challenges participants consistently reported as negatively impacting field education. The channels of communication included those between faculty and field educators, between faculty and students, between the external field educator and their field agency (where the supervised students do their placements), and others. Many students expressed that they lacked a clear understanding of the processes of field education because they perceived the university did not provide enough information. Similar sentiments were expressed by field educators, indicating they found it difficult to supervise students since the tasks and expectations were not adequately explained.

Suggestions

Fieldwork is an integral and essential component of social work education. Faculty members need to dedicate more time and effort to fieldwork activities and engage with a broader range of NGOs for student placements.

Students must recognize the importance of fieldwork and its significance for their professional development in social work.

NGOs should facilitate learning and training for students without levying fees and, if possible, provide lunch for students.

Educational institutions should consider providing allowances to both faculty and students involved in fieldwork. Additionally, social work educational institutions could arrange transportation facilities to support students in undertaking fieldwork.

There is a need for social work education institutions to develop sustainable social work field education models that considers supporting the financial needs of students and faculties in the form of allowances, transportation facilities.

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