

Challenges of Practicum in Social Work Education

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Abstract

In social work education, practicum is a major vehicle for professional development. Practicum within the school of social work is critically important for increasing the quality of service provided by professional social workers. The quality of social work and of social workers depends in part on the availability and effectiveness of field education opportunities provided within schools of social work. This study tries to reflect and describe the availability and effectiveness of field education opportunities provided within schools of social work in Karnataka with the these objectives: to present the macro perspective of practicum training in social work education and to understand the challenges in implementing various social work practicum curriculum programmes. The study shows that the students have failed to show advanced competence during their courses and it also makes clear that present system of implementing practicum among schools of social work has various challenges. So the practicum fail to have a positive impact on the professional development of post graduate students.

Key Words: *Practicum, Social Work Education and Institutions of Social Work Education*

Introduction:

Field education is an experiential form of teaching and learning that takes place in a service setting. Learning is achieved through the provision and/or development of services to clients, communities, organizations, or the society. Field instruction is a process that involves the field instructor and the student in analyzing and integrating practice skills with the knowledge and value base of the profession. The goal is to develop the students' competence in the practice of social work. The attempt to forge a strong link between theory and practice remains a cornerstone of social work professional education. Through the practicum,

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graduate students are provided with significant integrative experiences in preparation for their professional careers. The supervised practice experience or practicum is referred to in many different ways including "field instruction," "supervision," "placement" or "internship. The practicum, field instruction and field work are different terms used to denote the same reality i.e., the practicum in social work education (D'Souza, 1978).

Field Instruction as Part of Social Work Education-Theoretical Frame Work

Apprenticeship Model

Field instruction has always been a major part of social work training. Its history goes back to the days of the Charity Organization Societies in the last quarter of the nineteenth century when students learned social work by apprenticeship. Through "applied philanthropy" students obtained firsthand knowledge of poverty and adverse social conditions. With this apprenticeship model, training emphasized doing and deriving knowledge from that activity.

Academic Approach

By the end of the nineteenth century, social work was moving away from the apprenticeship model. The first training school for social work was a summer programme that opened in 1898 at the New York City Charity Organization Society. In 1904, the society established the New York School of Philanthropy, which offered an eight-month instructional programme. Mary Richmond, an early social work practitioner, teacher and theoretician, argued that although many learned by doing, this type of learning must be supplemented by theory. At the 1915 National Conference of Charities and Corrections, presenters emphasized the value of an educationally based field-practice experience, with schools of social work having control over students' learning assignments. This idea put schools in the position of exercising authority over the selection of agencies for field training and thus, control over the quality of social work practice to which students were exposed. Early in social work education, a pattern was established whereby students spent roughly half of their academic time in field settings (Austin, 1986). This paradigm was made possible by the networking that emerged from the early organizational efforts of social work educators. For instance, in 1919 the organization of the Association of Training Schools for Professional Social Work was chartered by 17 programmes. Thirteen of the original 17 schools were associated with universities or colleges at the post baccalaureate level by 1923. The American Association of Schools of Social Work, in its curriculum standards of 1932, formally recognized field instruction as an essential part of social work education (Mesbur, 1991). During the first part of the twentieth century,

psychoanalytic theory dominated social work education. This influence tended to focus the attention of students and social work educators on a client's personality rather than on the social environment. The depression of the 1930s and the enactment of the Social Security Act of 1935 brought about major changes in the United States' provision of social services and need for social workers. Subsequent amendments to this act created several social welfare programmes and social work roles. From about 1940 until 1960, an academic approach dominated social work education. This approach emphasized students' cognitive development and knowledge-directed practice. Professors expected students to deduce practice approaches from classroom learning and translate theories into functional behaviours in the field (Tolson & Kopp, 1988). Educational standards for field instruction were refined in the 1940s and the 1950s, and field work became known as field instruction. The American Association of Schools of Social Work took the position that field teaching was as important as classroom teaching and demanded equally qualified teachers and definite criteria for the selection of field agencies. In 1951, the Hollis-Taylor report on the state of social work education in the United States asserted that "education for social work is a responsibility not only of educators but equally of organized practitioners, employing agencies and the interested public. Widely accepted by the profession, this assertion became the cornerstone of all subsequent developments" (Kendall, 2002). In 1952 the Council on Social Work Education was established and began creating standards for institutions granting degrees in social work. These standards required a clear plan for the organization, implementation and evaluation of both in-class work and the field practicum. Interestingly, it was not until 1970 that field work was made a requirement for undergraduate programmes affiliated with the Council.

Articulated Approach

The articulated approach characterized the third phase in the history of social work field instruction (from about 1960 to the present). This method integrates features from both experiential and academic approaches. It is concerned with a planned relationship between cognitive and experiential learning and requires that both class and field learning be developed with learning objectives that foster their integration. It does not demand that students be inductive or deductive learners but expects that knowledge development and practice will be kept close enough together in time to minimize these differences in learning style (Jenkins & Sheafor, 1982). Students may not be aware of the tensions and strong disagreements that have existed in previous years over the purpose of field education. When social work programs were housed in other disciplines, academically minded social scientists sometimes argued that the function of field instruction was to allow

students to observe and collect data on poverty and social conditions first hand. The emphasis was often on the study of social problems. Students were not expected to provide services or assist clients. Agencies, of course, wanted students to roll up their sleeves and pitch in and help with the work that they were doing. As social work has matured as a unique discipline, a view of field education has emerged that blends both the academic and experiential perspectives.

The 2008 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards highlight the role of field education as "to connect the theoretical and conceptual contribution of the class room with the practical world of the practice setting" (CSWE, 2008). Both classroom and field are of equal importance for the development of the requisite competencies of professional practice. Social work programmes are free to use creativity in ensuring that their students develop the required competencies. Therefore, there may be differences in the design, coordination, supervision and evaluation of students' field experiences.

The Patterns of Practicum

The nine learning opportunities in practicum are designed to provide varieties of opportunities to develop and enhance professional practice skills. They are:

- 1. Orientation:** provides information regarding the importance and place of the practicum in the educational programme and the purpose, functions and ethics in professional practice.
- 2. Visits:** provide an exposure to and understanding of the services provided in response to people's needs.
- 3. Structured Experience Laboratory:** is a classroom activity, to provide in the games/activities, from the involvement of self in various practice skills. These laboratory experiences are designed in small groups to encourage participation, sharing of the experience and aid in examining learning and application of skills. These sessions have a specific objective of experiencing self and applying/using self in practice.
- 4. Rural/Tribal Camps:** provide opportunities to experience rural life analyze rural dynamics and observe the functioning of local self-government and voluntary organizations. This experience aids peer participation in planning for activities for own group and those for local people. It also helps develop skill to carry out, evaluate and report the experience.

5. **Study Tour:** urban and rural, provide an experience to study and appreciate innovative efforts by individuals and groups towards meeting people's core needs and initiate development.
6. **Workshops: Skills Development:** help learners acquire skills for situations encountered during practice and acquire skills for intervention. These may be for problems concerns, issues or situations like, work with alcoholics, HIV/AIDS affected persons, adolescents for life skill development, youth for leadership development and couples for marital relationship and enrichment, work with elderly.
7. **Concurrent Practice Learning:** ongoing learning of practice is an opportunity to develop intervention skills in reality situations. This entails learning social work practice for two or two and half days or its equivalent, each week of the semester. The learners may be placed in agencies or in communities to initiate and practice in direct service delivery.
8. **Summer Placement:** provides an opportunity to experience day-to-day work in a setting. The learner gets involved with direct practice with the client system and with the ongoing management operating of the setting. The time frame recommended for this experience is about three weeks, after the first year of the post-graduation programme.
9. **Block Placement:** enables learner integrate learning and generate newer learning by participating in the intervention processes over a period of four to six weeks continuously, in a specific agency. Usually, block field work is provided at the end of the two year programme. Some educational institutions offer such an opportunity at the end of the third or the prior the examinations of the fourth semester.

The future of social work profession has become a serious concern for every social worker. The alarming rise of schools of social work, especially in the recent past, has become a problem by itself; not because of its number but because of its unsystematic plan of expansion with regional imbalance; unhealthy competition among the schools of social work and lack of concern for normative standards. In this process, the quality of education is the victim in general and quality of practicum in specific.

Objectives of the Study

To describe the macro perspective of practicum training in social work education in Karnataka.

To understand the challenges in implementing various social work practicum curriculum programmes.

Materials and Method

The main aim of the study is to identify the new facts and realities of various schools of social work with regard to the implementation of practicum in postgraduate social work education in Karnataka emphasizing on challenges. So the design adopted is descriptive in nature. The universe of the study constituted of schools of social work in Karnataka, the Head of the departments and students of these institutes. In the first phase of sampling, the researcher collected the list of schools of social work with post-graduate departments of social work from the University websites, ministry of higher education and college development council and personal visit to different Universities/ colleges. There are total 85 schools of social work with post-graduate departments of social work. In the second phase the researcher visited the department of social work in the University main campuses and collected the list of faculties and total number of second year students of various Post Graduate Departments/colleges in their respective University jurisdictions. There are totally 73 heads of the departments and 2190 students.

In the third stage of sampling, the final selection of colleges for selecting the 23 HOD and 606 students were done on the basis of purposive sampling technique. Questionnaire prepared by the researcher was the tool of data collection. Questionnaire was personally distributed by the researcher to the respondents. The collected data was scrutinized for error, edited, coded and put in a master chart. Data collected were tabulated and analyzed using descriptive statistics generated by the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Discussion

Social work education programmes strive to integrate knowledge acquired in the classroom with practice through the field education experiences. This chapter presents findings from a larger study in which practice of practicum in Karnataka is studied.

Profiles of Respondents

The respondents who participated in the current research comprised of head of the departments, and students. There was no significant difference in professional experience of head of the departments. Majority (45.8%) of them had only 1-10 years of professional experience. Inadequate professional experience increases

teachers' sense of isolation; fails to meet their professional learning needs; reduces opportunities for teachers to collaborate and learn from each other; and gives them little time to assess and make use of the extensive range of curricular materials available. Department with generic type of course have HODs without any professional experience. 355(58.6%) are from departments with specialization and 251 (41.4%) are from departments with generic type of course.

Challenges of practicum

Institution related factors:

This study makes clear that only 20.8 percent of colleges offer under graduation in social work education. The second UGC review committee has suggested that it is better to complete much of social work education at a lower level in the educational ladder pointing to the need for introducing more bachelors' programmes and other training programmes.

62.5 percent of the institutions providing post-graduation in social work are affiliated private colleges. It is the curriculum and instructional strategies which really determine the quality. Appointing qualified teachers and ensuring that appropriate methodologies are used are both within the purview of individual colleges. Data clearly indicates that post-graduation in social work is offered with other courses by private colleges. The second UGC Review Committee asks to reconsider the general tendency for mixing up other courses with social work education as it tends to dilute the academic atmosphere bringing down the value of social work values.

Maximum students get exposure to specialization pattern of education and it clearly indicates that student don't have clarity about the concept of specialization and generic. 70.3 percent of students agree that type of course affects interest to work in practicum.

Policy Statement on Practicum in Schools of Social Work

Policy making is a cornerstone of educational planning; these policies serve as guidelines and reflect the common interests of all parties involved in practicum. They are subject to modification as needed, but the guiding principle in their modification must be the "best educational interests of the student". The finding indicates that majority of departments don't have policy statements, in case of having, the students are not satisfied with the policy statements. In some departments they have statements but students are not aware of it, in some cases students say that there is a statement but in reality departments don't have

statements. The problem is that in most the departments, the implementation of administrative matters are not transparent and systematic; so students are not able to learn about the administrative part of learning in social work profession.

Administrative Functions

This study clearly shows that lack of formal structure for implementation of practicum makes the role of practicum substandard. Social action is one of the important methods which whole the nation is in need of it, but faculties don't teach this method.

The study clearly shows that the basis for framing objectives for institution vary a lot from each other ($p=0.069$).

41.6 percent of departments have one faculty for 30 students for supervision.

62.5 percent of departments have permission to admit more than 30 students to the course.

45.8 percent of departments of social work don't have formal committee to coordinate whole system of practicum and students are also not aware of the committees.

Planning for practicum is entirely an internal affair with no agency involvement of non-faculty personnel in 76.9 percent of the departments.

Pattern of practicum

75 percent of departments adopted field based training method for training students in practicum even 71.9 percent of students agreed that they are undergoing field based training method but in contrast the study of Philomina (1978) clears that effective functioning in social work depends upon the practice of methods.

79.5 percent of HOD's stated that the content and training approach of two schools are similar but the degrees of skill demonstrated by the students are entirely different. So, quality of practicum is of great concern, however uniform field instruction methods have not been established (Caspi & Reid, 1998) and many field instructors use a personal and unstructured practice approach to their teaching (Larsen & Hepworth, 1982).

Students (65.3%) do agree that practicum prepares them for the role of change agent and helps in development of the students' capabilities and capabilities as a realistic worker but they do agree that practicum practiced presently in their

respective department only rewarded for the growth rather than for mastery of knowledge or skill.

The study found that the institutions covered in the study did not have a comprehensive fieldwork curriculum. The Second UGC Review Committee also recognizes that field work faces another set of problems when it comes to recognizing it as a valid component of the professional curriculum. Practicum with nine learning opportunities is designed by the UGC to provide variety of opportunities to develop and enhance professional skills. The tasks are need to be organized to help the learner acquire beginning skills, practice those already acquired and master them from simple to complex. So faculties and students were asked to rank the opportunities both ranked concurrent field work has been one with 63.71 and 57.52 garrets mean score. The ranking by students clearly shows that concurrent field work as most important one in practicum and they ranked structured experience laboratory as nine because in most of the college it has not been part of their practicum curriculum.

Components of Practicum

This study identifies, lack of professional interest among students, lack of proper orientation about agency to students, adjustment problem among students and mismatch between the students' interest and the agency were severe problems faced by the students.

The study indicates that 39.6 percent of students are not comfortable to inform clients about their status as students.

There is overcrowding of students from other colleges of social work so majority of students (72.3%) responded that number of students placed in agency affects learning.

Majority (67.2%) of students neither initiated new activities nor pioneered new services in practicum setting.

The result of study shows that students (78.2%) feel that theory knowledge is inadequate to learn in practicum.

Only in 41.7 percent of departments, all the agency supervisors are considered as practicum supervisors but when it comes to evaluation of students agency supervisors are not considered.

Study clearly shows majority of agency supervisors are not paid for supervision and they are not qualified. These findings are perhaps not surprising considering that there is an acute shortage of suitable fieldwork agencies.

45.6 percent of students opined that supervisors are not serving as professional role model.

48 percent of students opined that agency supervisors are not able to give time for students' learning.

It clearly indicates that in Karnataka departments of social work are facing problems to place students in the agencies because they are not able to find organizations with trained social workers.

The practicum manual help students to understand what they are going to learn. 58.3 percent of the departments don't have practicum manual.

90.2 percent of the students are not provided with any kind of instructions to maintain their records.

Present study shows that even single college doesn't have evaluation assessment tool to measure the performance of students in practicum.

Implications of the Study

Field programmes are finally capturing the limelight in social work education as the "signature pedagogy," a form of education that integrates theory and practice. However, to fulfill this promise, social work education field programmes will need to develop alternative methods for field instruction to recruit, train and pay field instructors.

A well considered design of the programme and curriculum can be of great help in providing students with learning opportunities regarding practicum.

Schools of social work need to consider the possible benefits of creating rotating field sites, developing new agency forms for the purpose of education, and modifying existing agency structures to integrate service, education and research more effectively.

Faculty need to consider the benefits of participation in action research other than conferences and workshops and weigh the benefits that may result versus the cost of that activity to provide experience to students and providing chance to become role models for budding professional social workers.

Study to identify the indigenous needs of India and formulation of scale to evaluate performance of students.

Conclusion

Social work is mainly 'invisible' work (Pithouse, 1998:5). The deeply contextual nature of the social work differentiates it from other professions (Healy 2005:4). The results of this study have implications for teaching, research and the overall approach to field education. The study validates that the practicum, the signature pedagogy (CSWE, 2008; Shulman, 2005) of social work, is critical in helping the students to find themselves and to enhance their development as social workers. As a result social work education should continue to focus on the overall quality of the field education through a number of current and specific ways. Thus, effort for further exploration and examination on field instruction should be continued to ensure our standard and quality in teaching students in social work and also bring about substantial benefits to the development of the profession.

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