
Social Work Field Practicum: Opportunities with Challenges

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INTRODUCTION

The field of social work is concerned with the welfare of others and with social change that promotes social justice. Taking a client-oriented and solution-focused approach, social workers improve individuals' and families' social functioning. This approach requires social workers to remain aware of the connections between the individual and societal structures, of the importance of practicing at multiple levels, and of the ways in which theory and practice inform one another.

A professional practice is informed and guided by the societal goals and that of the profession concerned, its mission to contribute to the creation of a better society based on professional ethics and code of conduct adopted to regulate practice, the constitution and law of the land, international trends and covenants, challenges facing the society, commitment to address them and the development of new knowledge, method and technology. This implies that no professional practice remains static and confined within a national boundary. Its focus is both local and global. It may be noted here that social practice, which can include citizens' initiatives, social praxis, movements, protests etc., is broader than any professional practice and social work practice for the matter. A practice-whether professional or otherwise-changes the self of the practitioner, the field and the practice process itself. To illustrate: one can take the example of agriculture before the green revolution and after, subsequent mechanization, state policy on agriculture, contract and commercial agricultural practice, support process, subsidies, import and export, food security, indebtedness and farmers' suicides in different states. Since social change is occurring constantly, a vibrant profession cannot remain static if it has to adequately

respond to the challenge of change and to give direction to society or concerned groups to manage it.

Social work, like other human service professions, is a practice profession. It may be research - or practice-led (or based) which is not happening. While the vision and the goals stated in the Prospectuses of the social work institutions are lofty, the reality on the ground is not so.

FIELD PRACTICUM IN THE CURRICULUM OF SOCIAL WORK

The curriculum structure and the number of courses offered at an institution of social work may be quite impressive but hardly there is a standard document or Practice Guide according to semester, listed courses and practice requirements which links theory to practice and reflection thereon. A practice is being assumed to occur by “applying theory” but it can hardly be seen in the weekly field work reports which are submitted by the students. For an outsider, it will be difficult to give proper guidance or comment after reading them. Whether these reports are carefully read, commented upon in term of theory-practice linkage, and scheduled conferences are regularly held is anyone’s guess. As an evaluator, the author came across field work reports of an institution which were only initialed without any comment at all! The number of such supervisors was more than those who had taken the trouble of making helpful comments. In the same institution, a faculty was reported to have remarked in an informal group meeting that “field work should be taken out of social work programme”. Even though such a remark may be casual, it does show a mindset or a split identity. If field work is taken out of social work, it has serious implications in that such a Department then will become a Department of Social Studies. And therefore some staff and faculty appointed as per approved UGC norms (which include field work) may either be retrenched or leave the institution on moral and professional grounds. A University may also decide then whether it should have a Department of Social Studies at all when there are well established Departments in various disciplines under the Faculty of Social Sciences. But continuing in service and giving short shrift to field work is unethical and amounts to professional misconduct. The question arises as to how can one teach professional ethics and human rights by perpetrating

human wrongs? Therefore, how to arrest the decline of field work is the greatest challenge before the profession. But social work practice and supervision of practice learning does not remain central in the delivery of social work curriculum in most social work institutions. It needs to be clarified here that completion of field projects should not be mistaken for supervised practice learning.

The 2nd Review Committee of the University Grants Commission (1980) has prescribed a faculty-student ratio by giving central place to field work in the undergraduate and post-graduate curricula. While many Universities have created faculty positions based on this recommendation, the attention given to field work and supervision leaves much to be desired. In connection with field work, the UGC Review Committee Report mentions that there should be a simultaneous emphasis on class and field learning followed by feedback for discussion and problem-solving in the class-room. Concurrent and block field work, use of case studies, laboratory stimulation techniques for teaching inter-personal communication, role play and games also find mention in the Report. Fifteen hours of field work is the minimum per week or 300 hours per year which is prescribed. Camps and study tours are recommended as ways of supplementing students' learning as essential elements. The National Assessment and Accreditation Council has specially brought out a publication on Social Work Education, among others, which is an update over the UGC Report (1980) and UGC Model Curriculum Guideline 2001.

The history of evaluation of fieldwork in social work institutions shows a graduation from the "satisfactory performance certificate requirement" of the forties and fifties to "graded" performance of subsequent years ranging from 200 marks for field work to 400 or above in two years. But whether the increased weightage has improved the quality of field work is quite uncertain. This can be known only by a study based on the students' and supervisors' work in each institution by the faculty itself or through an external assessor. Another study could be based on the activity profile of the faculty with special reference to the time devoted for field work along with content and quality. This is both a challenge and an opportunity. It is generally claimed that the time spent on class work and field work in social work institutions comes to 50:50 or fifteen hours per week for 16 weeks per semester. The weightage, however, in terms of marks or credits varies from 20% to 30%

or more for field work. Since a minimum number of theory courses in different domains are to be included in the social work curriculum, the yardstick of hours of field work is rather more realistic than marks or credits because making calculation based on around 40% weightage has reduced the inclusion and teaching of essential theory papers such as social work research or methods of social work. Courses on Methods of Social Work have generally been combined or finished in one semester only.

CURRICULUM: A MIRROR IMAGE

Courses in social work designed with a vision and a set of objectives serve only a limited purpose if social and developmental contexts do not inform them. This requires continuing exercise for evolving, developing, structuring and updating the curricula. An institution therefore has to move from initial borrowing to developing a curriculum of its own which may accord the challenge of growing knowledge and its application to meet the aspirations of the people in a region. A curriculum is thus a progression from a static and mechanical orientation to a dynamic, innovative and integrated one.

Approach to Social Work Practice

In the history of socialwork professionand education, development of methods led to the identification of individual and social needs and problems which could be dealt with by their application. Methods of social work then were grouped as primary and secondary – the former included social casework, social group work and community organization and the latter social work research, social welfare administration and social action. But such a classification is problematic because the demand of a situation ought to determine the primacyof the application of a method or group of methods. The primacy of a method therefore is contextual and not rigid. Interpreted thus, any method or a group of methods can be regarded as primary with reference to a situation.

In delineating any area for practice, the following approaches and sources deserve due consideration: observation, mapping and transact walk, research, census data, sample survey, media reports, public documents on the level of development and gaps, schemes under the social and economic sectors in the Five Year / Annual plans, poverty (BPL)

survey, data on malnutrition, social provisions in the District and Block Plans, Millennium Development Goals, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Human Development Report (State/ District level), local problems, a profession's perception of problems and the University's priority, its social concern And capability. In designing practice, it needs to be ensured that a particular intervention will cover a specific area, a social group, a service or programme, follow a method and produce an outcome within a time frame. Participation of both the students and faculty as practitioners will yield better result. Theoretically, if one takes capability deprivation as an example, which is reflected in inclusion or exclusion as an area of practice, it may be seen in terms of inequality or relational poverty, labour market exclusion, gender-related exclusion, or exclusion from health care and food market as also re-distributive policies and their impact. Different indices are available in the social and human development sector which can serve as bench mark for action. The Human Development Reports of the UNDP can be the point of reference.

The publication of the Planning Commission, Government of India, Faster, Sustainable and More Inclusive Growth: An Approach to the Twelfth Five Year Plan - 2012-17 states that "inclusive growth should result in lower incidence of poverty, broad-based significant improvement in health outcomes, universal access of children to school, increased access to higher education and improved access to education and skill development, better opportunities for both wage employment and livelihood, improvement in the provision of basic amenities (water, electricity, roads, sanitation and housing; attention to SC/ST/OBC, women and children, institutional and attitudinal change, accountability and public service system". Several plan and programmes have been listed including sustainable management of natural resources and national action plan for climate change.

The Millennium Development Goals reflect global commitment for action at the national and local level. They focus on poverty and hunger, achievement in primary education, promotion of gender equality and improvement, reduction in child mortality, improvement in maternal health, global initiative to control HIV-AIDS, Malaria and other diseases, environmental sustainability and lastly global partnership. Reports of progress in each area are available which can be referred to by the faculty and students in their work.

Community Focus in Field Practicum

One of the important principles of social work is begin where the community is which may incorporate these aspects wherever relevant. Services are therefore to be linked with the communities, neighbourhoods, households and individuals to facilitate the process of participatory social development, innovations, skill upgradation, education and training, healthcare and expansion of new work opportunities etc.

Needed Resources for Action

Educational support activity requires prescribed text books, maps, educational aids, pictures and clippings from newspapers, posters etc. Text books from the 1st standard to 8th standard are needed for reference and in order to select themes of interest for interaction in the groups. Again in ESP, groups may be formed or re-formed according to the age, interest and level of learning in the school. Marginal or slow learners, average learners, fast learners and those with disabilities or poor support from their families due to various reasons may have to be approached differentially in a group, and even individually. In order to sustain interest, resource materials may be developed by involving children at times on a competitive but more on a cooperative basis. Demonstrations and role plays are liked by children most. Poems, group songs, drama, debates, games etc. may be used to create interest and a few lessons may also be taught in this way.

Plan for Professionalization of Educational Support:

The programme of educational support will evolve in due course so that laboratory work is done on the campus and demonstration or facilitation is done in the community. Orientation of MSW students, the practice of individualization and group work in education, home visit, site visit, duration of interaction and outcome, re-orientation of support programme, mobilisation of community support-expected and received- as also parents and teachers' support, continuing work during vacation through retired teachers under the Village Education Committee etc. are matters under consideration. Periodic report of this work to Education Committee and other stakeholders will generate more interest among them. Tracking of a child's progress over time and review of targeted intervention is also proposed.

Case records and group work records are planned for teaching purposes to help students appreciate the context, problem, efforts and outcome. Relationships established through this programme may contribute to the development of other programmes in the social and allied sectors at the micro level.

Learning by Social Work Students:

Students' weekly reports showed more activities performed by them than the process of action or efforts to change the situation through planned group interactions. Some reports were stereotyped which showed gaps or blocks in the students' learning, use of creative approaches and even in their personality development. It needs to be realized that a professional social worker under training can bring about change in the pattern of relationships in a group, but correspondingly the group undergoing change may also challenge and contribute to the creativity of the student workers and their professional development.

CONCLUSION

Any properly planned field action is both a challenge and an opportunity. Whereas success builds confidence, and strengthens commitment, failure leads to review of one's approach, renewal and re-orientation of strategy. A practitioner therefore needs to own the field and be ready to be owned and even disowned by it. One may experience a "throwback" and "throw out" in the field. There is no smooth and linear progression because there are forward and backward movements. The dynamics of the field (or practice) thus calls for introspection, retrospection and prospection. A Manual for Social Work Practice (or Field Work) should capture these processes in order to impart rich learning and meaningful experiences to students.

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