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Exploring Ways of Strengthening Fieldwork Training in Social Work

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The quality of fieldwork practice provided to social work trainees is one of the major challenges of Social Work training. This paper attempts to look at the strengths and gaps in the fieldwork training practices. The paper is based on available literature, the author's experience and feedback received from postgraduate social work students of Manipal University. It discusses various factors that need to be considered to strengthen the fieldwork training and the significant role of the Social Work educator in strengthening the fieldwork training component.

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INTRODUCTION

The Social Work profession has a number of distinctive features. One significant feature that makes Social Work training unique is its fieldwork component. Social Work being a helping profession, its core focus is to enable and empower people in their psychosocial functioning. This therefore requires very intensive, well planned and structured training in fieldwork. The lack of competency as demonstrated in social work graduates has raised questions on the quality of education and training imparted. One of the reasons attributed to this is the commercialisation of the profession, which has led to the mushrooming of numerous social work education institutions. Consequently, with the increase in institutions offering the Social Work programme, organisations are flooded with trainees of various competencies; the agencies are thus burdened with the responsibility of training a larger number of graduates and, hence, fail to provide quality training.

At the same time, the quality of classroom instructions and fieldwork supervision rendered by the teaching faculty is also a matter of concern. Certainly, theoretical inputs with sub-standard fieldwork training can hardly develop required competencies in the trainees. The learning experience through classroom instructions and field practice should rather complement each other. However, this is not the case in most institutions due to lack of congruency in classroom teaching and field realities. Besides, there is a dearth of knowledge on models of effective fieldwork training.

This paper, therefore, attempts to look at the strengths and gaps in fieldwork training practices. The paper is based on available literature, the author's experience and feedback received through focus group discussions from the MSW trainees of Manipal University. Attempts are made to contextualise some of the effective fieldwork training strategies followed in the West to the Indian setting. The factors that need to be considered to strengthen the fieldwork training are discussed below.

The Orientation Programme

As the Masters programme in Social Work attracts trainees from various disciplines, the students take a longer time to understand the nature of the Social Work programme—concepts, theories and fieldwork. Even trainees with a Bachelor of Social Work background sometimes find it hard to understand the concepts taught at the Masters level. A structured orientation programme for a week or 10 days in the first semester would help students to understand the basic concepts required to start fieldwork training and thereby build their confidence. The orientation programme could focus on values and attitudes, self-awareness, self-esteem, working in teams, social consciousness and relationships, motivation, leadership, reaching out to vulnerable population, stigma and discrimination. As these areas are significant to the Masters Programme, it is imperative that these topics are discussed early and the trainees develop their knowledge and skills with regard to self, social relationships, structures in the society and social systems. The participatory nature of the orientation sessions will enable the trainees to start thinking critically, creatively and rationally, and overcome their inhibitions.

Partnership between Fieldwork Agency and the Institution

The IASWR (2007) states that the challenge is for social work education to become a knowledge translation and implementation enterprise, building on existing field/academic partnerships to bring existing

science to “real world” practice. Integration of theory and field practice experience is integral to social work education. This can be achieved through establishing strong partnerships between the teaching institution and the fieldwork agencies. The IASWR (2007) has emphasised in their report that there should be a strong focus on communication between the academic institution and the field placement agencies to develop a mutual understanding of the needs.

In a way, it could be understood that the fieldwork practicum should be designed not just by the institution, but in consultation with the field placement agencies. The fieldwork guidelines and requirements could be developed by the academic institution and the agencies. As the professionals in the agencies have a deeper working knowledge of the areas of intervention, such collaborations would enhance the possibility of trainees developing appropriate skills. This also fosters a more conducive working relationship between the agency and the institution.

Linking Classroom Instructions to the Fieldwork Practice

The fieldwork training should be supported by well planned classroom instructions to strengthen the knowledge base and skills of the trainees. While providing practical and realistic field based examples supported by a theoretical framework is significant to understanding social work concepts, making use of participatory methodologies in the classroom helps trainees to link theory with field practice. It is therefore critical for social work educators to assess whether their classroom instructions is only a traditional monologue or a didactic lecture or a live theatre performance with enough room to discuss and trigger critical and creative thinking among students of social work. Classroom instructions should include a right blend of lecturing, power point presentations and documentaries, role-plays, and group activities, followed by discussions and creative group games. The use of multiple teaching strategies can also be considered as a participatory mode of training wherein the faculty member is not the only key player in teaching, but the trainees are also engaged in the teaching-learning process.

Wrenn and Wrenn (2009) found that learning is best achieved when students are actively involved in a cyclical process which includes observing, applying, reflecting, and sharing of personal experiences. From the social and pragmatic constructivist literature, we see that students learn best as active learners who integrate thinking and acting, who reflect on the act, and who share their reflections and observations with others.

Active and constructivist learning models also stress multiple teaching modalities, including learning by doing and having the student serve as a teacher of what they are learning. Therefore the social work educators need to be open for learning from the trainees.

The MSW trainees of Manipal University have also shared their views on the teaching-learning process.

Lecturing with power point slides improves learning and acts as a main tool of learning through auditory and visual sources – A 2nd Year - MSW trainee, Manipal University (January 2011).

Use of role-plays enhances our confidence levels and clarity over the concepts and provides an experience to get a feel of what it is to be a social worker and also as a client – A 2nd Year - MSW trainee, Manipal University (January 2011).

Role-play increases our abilities to analyse situations and find out alternative ways of handling issues – A 1st Year - MSW trainee, Manipal University (January 2011).

Group activities help us to build our skills through working in teams, interpersonal relationships, coordination and overall leadership abilities – A 2nd Year - MSW trainee, Manipal University (January 2011).

Social work students interviewed by Wilson and Kelly (2010) expressed that: “Role-plays were useful in identifying and developing communication skills/weaknesses”.

As part of an ongoing class work assessment, trainees should be encouraged to work on tasks that provide suitable exposure to the application of knowledge rather than being made to write assignments on various topics. For example, regarding an assignment situated in a school: The students can be asked to choose an area/issue of concern affecting the school and explain the approach/approaches used to tackle the issue. The faculty can assist the students to access available literature and other resource materials and, consult school social workers, if available.

At a NACSW (North American Association of Christians in Social Work) National Convention in the US, Boyer (2006) stated: “*teaching social work is an art; each new class allows you to be creative and try different things. I always tell my students that they will learn some things from me, some from their readings, films, speakers...but that they will learn the most from each other. The classroom is a small piece of our society and great change can start there*”. He emphasised the importance of conducting small group activities, and using films, guest speakers to enhance the learning experience.

Actual Fieldwork Practice and Guidance

Wilson and Kelly (2010) evaluated the effectiveness of social work education in the UK and found significant levels of disjunction between academic and practice learning. Barring a few social work institutions in India, most institutions do not have dedicated field work instructors. The faculty members instruct and guide students placed for fieldwork. Therefore, to better integrate academic and practice learning, academicians must visit the field along with the students and coordinated with the field supervisors in training the trainees. This will result in better modelling of social work principles and strategies. While this method enhances effective student learning, it also aids academicians to integrate theoretical concepts with current ground realities during classroom discussions.

Trainee students greatly appreciate faculty members accompanying them to their fieldwork agencies.

You came to the field and explained to us the application of theory into practice which helped me to get more clarity on approaching and intervening with client's difficulties – A 2nd Year MSW trainee, Manipal University (January 2011).

In addition to the guidance provided in the field, the faculty supervisors also need to give adequate feedback on the weekly reports submitted by students. These reports can be discussed at individual and group conferences to optimise trainees' learning. As report writing is an important skill of documentation, the trainees should be trained in language skills, content writing, and application of theory into fieldwork practice.

Another significant factor that plays a major role in trainees' fieldwork training is the interpersonal relationship that s/he establishes with the fieldwork instructor. The ability to understand concepts, and instructions given by the fieldwork instructor is to a certain extent dependent on the quality of relationship established between the student and the instructor. Initial contacts and interactions between the trainees and the instructors are very crucial in laying the foundation for a good professional relationship. The trainees can develop the requisite skills and potentials by following the verbal instructions given to them by the concerned instructors and also by observing how they deal with the concerns of individuals, groups and communities.

As the core area of fieldwork training and intervention is methods oriented—case work, group work and community organisation, the other secondary methods of Social Work like research, administration and social action are given least priority.

Practicing Different Methods of Social Work in the Field Setting

Learning the direct or primary methods of Social Work is important; but how far are these methods used in actual practice is a big concern to social work educators. Just having an understanding and field exposure in practicing the direct methods of Social Work is not adequate, the secondary methods also need to be given importance as some of the national and international organisations require social workers to take up administrative, research and advocacy positions. The fieldwork training requirements stipulate that the trainees should complete a particular number of case work cases, group work sessions and community oriented activities in their academic programmes. In addition to these, other activities such as conducting a small study, designing some Information Education Communication (IEC) / Behaviour Change Communication (BCC) materials, developing short videos or documentaries and designing training modules would certainly strengthen the fieldwork training programme.

In Manipal University, students are mandated to conduct a study on an area of concern and mobilise resources for the fieldwork organisation they are associated with in their first year of practicum. For example, two Social Work trainees designed a study on the health needs of a tribal community in Udupi District in their first semester of fieldwork in consultation with the fieldwork supervisor. The trainees were guided to carry out a literature search to develop the right design, sampling method and tools to conduct the study. In the second year, the trainees are expected to develop training modules, short videos and conduct evaluative assignments. The trainees specialising in medical and psychiatric social work participate in school mental health programmes. They are encouraged to design policies for schools on anti-bullying methods, prevention of tobacco consumption and other relevant health concerns.

Community Extension Activities

Besides the usual exposure that the trainees receive through the fieldwork training, community extension activities could be added to build the capacities of both the trainees and faculty members. As professionals involved in the development and service sectors, social work trainers/educators are equipped with skills in understanding the needs of vulnerable people, designing relevant intervention packages and evaluating outcomes of interventions. It is therefore imperative for faculty members to take up need based community extension initiatives that cater to the felt and implied

needs of the neighbouring society. These activities provide an opportunity for the faculty members and trainees to sharpen their skills and abilities. For example, as a response to various newspaper reports on the high rate of suicides in Choolaimedu, Chennai, in 2004, the Department of Social Work of Loyola College, Chennai, in partnership with “The Banyan” began a community mental health initiative catering to the mental health needs of the local community. The intervention team comprised a faculty coordinator and students specialising in medical and psychiatric social work from the department, and the mental health team from The Banyan. The engagement of faculty members and trainees enhanced the process of understanding the community mental health needs and designing the relevant service package in partnership with a local organisation.

Social Work Administration is an area of exposure that is given least importance in fieldwork training in India. The Rutgers University Centre for International Social Work in their report (December 2008) has recommended that the social work curricula be expanded to address administrative and management skills such as needs assessment, programme development, strategic planning, and programme evaluation. The Department of Public Health, Manipal University, takes up health programmes and evaluation studies as part of the community extension projects. The MSW trainees at Manipal have been involved in seven such projects since September 2009:

1. Evaluation of pulse-polio immunisation in collaboration with National Pulse Polio Surveillance Programme, World Health Organisation;
2. Evaluation of mass drug administration for filariasis supported by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of Karnataka;
3. Social auditing of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme as a joint venture with Udupi Zilla Panchayath;
4. Performance evaluation of solar home lighting system in a rural community funded by the Bharatiya Vikas Trust, Manipal;
5. Health seeking behaviour of a tribal (Koraga) community in Udupi District, Karnataka;
6. Mental health status and social networks of older people in Udupi District, Karnataka; and
7. Evaluation of child protection systems in Udupi District, Karnataka.

Chui and others (1997) in their evaluation of a community work education programme found that the acquisition of interpersonal and

communication skills was particularly significant among students who had the opportunity to meet and interact with real clients. The MSW trainees at Manipal University are regularly provided with opportunities to interact with diverse populations through community extension activities. As a result, students have acquired skills in programme planning, organisation and overall management of projects.

Skill Development Sessions

Skill development sessions need to focus beyond the development of soft skills like organising programmes, communication strategies, and presentation of papers, reports and, so on. As an ongoing training activity, the Manipal University conducts weekly skill development sessions for students. Students are given opportunities to work in teams, take part in participatory training programmes with structured modules and resource materials. The sessions are supported and supervised by the faculty members.

“One thing I learnt from these sessions is managing time efficiently” – 2nd Year
- MSW trainee, Manipal University (January 2011).

These sessions enable them to practice group work interventions in a systematic and organised fashion. In turn, it also makes the fieldwork practice more meaningful and relevant.

Role of a Social Work Educator / Trainer

Social Work educators have a significant contribution to make in strengthening the fieldwork training. Therefore, the social work trainers themselves need to be equipped with adequate potentials to render quality fieldwork guidance and supervision. As some fieldwork agencies are busy with their regular work, they may consider the trainees as a burden or additional responsibility. In order that such trainees get optimal learning opportunities in fieldwork training, the social work trainer's role in this context could include:

- Social work educators need to act as ‘role models’ for trainees when practicing social work values and ethics. The trainees can internalise these values through observation. Congress (no date) expressed in her paper that the teachers should also serve as role models for professional practice.
- Faculty members should function as ‘field trainers’. The faculty supervisors need to accompany trainees to the field at least once a fortnight or once a month to integrate theory and practice.

- Academicians need to be ‘practitioners’. Besides being academicians, they need to practice social work methods and intervention techniques. This can be achieved by association with nongovernmental organisations or through community extension activities.
- Social work trainers also need to be active ‘researchers’ and study social phenomena. Various interventions carried out should be tested for feasibility, acceptability and overall effectiveness. The data gathered should be published for public dissemination of knowledge.
- Social Work educators are also ‘innovators’ in terms of building knowledge and skills of trainees by developing IEC / BCC materials and documenting specific social work interventions.

CONCLUSION

It is high time that Social Work institutions looked towards redefining fieldwork training. Perhaps, all the factors that are highlighted in this paper may be relevant to certain institutions. However, it is important that Social Work trainers maximise field based learning opportunities for students. One significant area that the Social Work educators need to seriously consider is the identification, evaluation and documentation of the various training components.

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