



## **SCOPE OF LIVE LABS IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE**

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### **Abstract:**

*Being an internationally accepted profession, social work education and practice also need to keep the international standards. It was comparatively easy when the social work practice and the number of professional training institutes were limited. However when the scope of social work practice increased and extended to many new areas and the number of training institutes increased, keeping the international standards for training and practice of social work has become very complex. Field work practice is an integral part of Social Work training, providing the opportunity to apply what we learn in the classroom and work with real-life clients under the supervision of a trained social worker. The live labs in social work practice have a major role in maintaining international standards of social work practice and training. Moreover it will become more students friendly and socially acceptable. Incorporation of live labs in new areas will not only interests the students but also useful to the clients. However it will be a new challenge for the social work trainers and teachers to identify these areas and to equip the students with necessary skills in handling such situation without compromising the basic ethics and values of social work practice. Field work agencies and live lab environments help trainees develop new areas of professional competence with their exposure to full range of functions, responsibilities, challenges and opportunities they get from these new areas. Observation and participation in providing various services to clients using different methods and techniques of intervention and assessing, developing and evaluating services that address the needs of a community will give them unmatched exposure.*

*According to the international standards around 1000 hours of training, in various social service agencies, government agencies, schools, hospitals, non-traditional settings etc is required to master social work qualification. The present paper is an attempt to understand how new live labs could be identified and social work training can be made more effective keeping the Indian challenges without compromising the basic ethos and principles of social work.*

### **1. Introduction:**

The formal training in social work is completing 80 years and this can't be considered as a short period. Being an internationally accepted profession, social work education and practice also need to keep the international standards. It was comparatively easy when the social work practice and the number of professional training institutes were limited. However when the scope of social work practice increased and extended to many new areas and the number of training institutes increased, keeping the international standards for training and practice of social work has become very complex. The absence of any regulatory body to monitor the quality and standards of social work education across the country, the general and political attitude towards social work and the laxity of social work teachers and students have a major role in the lack of acceptance of social work as a profession and in deterioration of its quality.

The International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) stated that the social work profession promotes social change, problem - solving in human relationships and the

empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being (2004). By effectively utilizing theories of human behavior and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environment. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.

Live labs and field work practice is an integral part of Social Work training, providing the opportunity to apply what we learn in the classroom and work with real-life clients under the supervision of a trained social worker. The live labs in social work practice have a major role in maintaining international standards of social work practice and training. Moreover it will become more students friendly and socially acceptable. Incorporation of live labs in new areas will not only interests the students but also useful to the clients. However it will be a new challenge for the social work trainers and teachers to identify these areas and to equip the students with necessary skills in handling such situation without compromising the basic ethics and values of social work practice.

Field work agencies and live lab environments help trainees develop new areas of professional competence with their exposure to full range of functions, responsibilities, challenges and opportunities they get from these new areas. Observation and participation in providing various services to clients using different methods and techniques of intervention and assessing, developing and evaluating services that address the needs of a community will give them unmatched exposure.

According to the international standards around 1000 hours of training, in various social service agencies, government agencies, schools, hospitals, non-traditional settings etc is required to master social work qualification. The present paper is an attempt to understand how new live labs could be identified and social work training can be made more effective keeping the Indian challenges without compromising the basic ethos and principles of social work.

Social workers follow a formal procedure in enabling clients to cope with their life tasks and to achieve their aspirations. This requires developing their ability to deal with their problems more effectively at any given point in time. In addition to that social work intervention helps people connect with needed resources and to negotiate problematic situations which might also involve changes to existing structures where these present problems to human growth and development.

In social work education theory and practice are equally important. Leading social work scholars like Mupedziswa (1997) and Osie-Hwedie (1996) state the importance of both field instruction and classroom instruction. Today a generally accepted understanding is that field work training and live labs are of equal importance to academic instruction. But the reality in social work training institutions in India is that fieldwork is marginalized when compared to its academic programs. However not much is written on this subject, leaving social work teachers, students and field instructors without any meaningful and comprehensive guide to field instruction. Social work institutions need to recast their fieldwork in order to give it equal importance to academic instruction.

Field work training enables the student in supervised social work practice and provides opportunities to integrate theory and practice. Fieldwork according to Hamilton and Else (1983) is 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.

In addition to academic knowledge, evidence-based knowledge, field- tested skills and hands-on-experience are essential to become a fully backed social worker.

Shardlow and Doel (1996) stated that 'these two contexts for learning about social work practice, class and fieldwork need to be integrated, complementary and mutually consistent'. The challenge for faculty, students and agency supervisors, is to make this integration a reality.

Fieldwork is an instrument of socialization as it prepares the student to be a social work practitioner. 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. Fieldwork also develops student's skills that will enable them to respond appropriately to the needs of clients. It is through observation and doing the job and feeling responsible for the job of helping clients to cope with their problems, that social work students acquire skills. Similarly, fieldwork is designed to give the student exposure and experience on the functioning of social welfare agencies and social welfare provisioning.

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. Thus the fieldwork helps the students to develop practice skills by applying classroom theory to real life situations, determine which approaches work in practice and how they must be adapted to specific situations, understand the effect of the organizational context on professional practice while developing skills in agency-based social work, learn to use supervision and consultation appropriately, begin to engage in self-assessment and develop a professional identity.

## **2. Types of Fieldwork:**

Generally there are four forms of fieldwork: 1.concurrent, 2.block, 3.a combination of both concurrent and block and 4 in service placements. A block fieldwork placement refers to a continuous full-time engagement of a social work student at a fieldwork agency for a period ranging from 1 - 3 months depending on the institution. Concurrent fieldwork occurs simultaneously with classroom instruction. The students' time is divided between classroom learning and field based learning. Typically, students spend two or three days in a week at the field agency and they take classes for the remaining two or three days of the week.

The importance of concurrent fieldwork arrangement lies in the simultaneous and immediate application of theory learnt in the classroom into practice. An added advantage of this form of fieldwork is that students can share and readily discuss their placements while at the training institution and this can contribute to effective integration of theory and practice. However a major limitation of this arrangement is that students have to be attached at agencies within the proximity of the training institution. Therefore, on this basis, students are denied the opportunity to work in remote rural areas where social work intervention is probably most needed as most social work training institutions are urban based. Furthermore, this arrangement may not work well as the student has to reporting to both his or her training institution and the agency supervisor.

It is also difficult to come up with a structured program for a student working on a part-time basis. There is also the risk of agency supervisors neglecting or forgetting

about their students as they only meet them twice or thrice in a week. It appears the rationale for using concurrent placements initially at first or second year levels or both levels and then blocks at higher levels is to offer students an opportunity to gradually acquaint themselves with the profession. This is so considering that in the first or second year of the course expectations are not very high. Students are required to observe the supervisor in action and to perform tasks befitting their level. Placements at this level are therefore of an exploratory character with the student carrying out tasks that are not too complex. However, at higher levels the student is expected to be active at a practical level, carrying out tasks that have considerable scope for increasingly independent execution of duties and skills.

While the block placement allows students to actively participate in the work of an agency and is more conducive to the pursuit of intellectually and professionally stimulating tasks, it also has its weaknesses. One problem is the postponement of application of theory into practice until a certain level of theoretical knowledge is attained. Additionally, there is a clear separation of the timing and context in which theory and practice take place as students are away from the training institution for a period ranging from one to three months.

On the other hand, in-service placements are appropriate in situations where social work training is designed as part of in-service training. Students go back to their places of employment, for fieldwork experience in the context of their existing jobs. However this form of field work training is not very common in India. In certain specialized settings like mental health care and school social work such methods can be tried out.

The most appropriate form or combination should be based on the demands of classroom instruction in terms of course configuration and the amount of time required for each subject. Each institution is different in terms of existing circumstances and conditions but it is important to settle for the most effective form of fieldwork that ensures professional growth and development for the student.

### **3. Nature of Fieldwork:**

The nature of fieldwork should be reviewed in accordance with the norms of IASSW and IFSW (2004) Global Standards on Social Work Education. Considering the standards related to the duration of fieldwork, expectations and agency supervision as well as the fieldwork curriculum, most of the schools of social work in India follow more or less similar fieldwork practice. There are however significant differences in the structure of fieldwork in terms of form, level at which it takes place and the duration of fieldwork at least in some schools.

Being the largest democratic country with different religion, language, culture and socio-economic issues, India has many areas wherein social work can be effectively practiced. The rapid economic growth, cultural disparities and intolerance bring in additional challenges for social workers with scope for social work practice in many emerging areas. Urban migration, uneven development, economic disparity, religious and political intolerance, disaster management, sustainable development and environmental issues, unstable employment, farmers plight, issues related to women and children, social security etc are some of the areas social workers should pay immediate attention.

### **4. Fieldwork Duration:**

The duration of fieldwork should be sufficient and challenging enough to prepare students for professional practice. While it would be difficult to prescribe the form and duration of fieldwork as training institutions are different, some consensus is required

to keep the standards and for students to develop and consolidate their skills. The US Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) requires that undergraduate students do fieldwork for a minimum of 400 contact hours (Royce, Dhooper and Rompf, 2007). This amount to a minimum fieldwork period of three months. Thus if we go by the CSWE standard to measure the adequacy of the duration of fieldwork, most of the Indian institutions meet this requirement.

### **5. Curriculum of Fieldwork:**

In most of the schools of social work in India the fieldwork curriculum is fragmented. However, when compared to classroom instruction taught courses have a well-organized structure based on a clearly defined curriculum. This makes the learning and teaching manageable and focused. Shardlow and Doel (1996) suggest the following advantages of having a fieldwork curriculum:

- ✓ The requirements of social work practice can shape the content of what is learned by students through a practice curriculum
- ✓ Students are empowered through the existence of an explicit written practice curriculum; they can have an understanding of required learning at the start of the placement
- ✓ Practice teachers are empowered through the development of a curriculum and will give an opportunity and a reason to become connected with each other
- ✓ It is possible to organize field work learning so that simple or core skills, basic knowledge or fundamental values are learned before the more complex elements are attempted
- ✓ It is possible with a practice curriculum to know when learning has been achieved in given areas, and then to move on to other components of the curriculum or to find ways to compensate for deficiencies in the learning environment – for ex, live practice with clients is not generating appropriate learning experiences, other methods of learning can be used
- ✓ The curriculum allows for a range of different learning opportunities and learning methods to be used: this can be well-organised and planned before the start of the placement
- ✓ The examination of field work competence can be structured and organized to fit with the pace of learning.

However, an analysis of the fieldwork course materials in India reveals that the documents in use are fieldwork placement forms, that is, background information forms, assessment forms, guidelines for writing fieldwork reports, contract forms in the case of the School of Social Work, and letters of introduction for students. In some institutions even these are not available. Fieldwork Manuals provide valuable reference material for students, agency supervisors and social work educators and it should be updated periodically.

### **6. Selection of Fieldwork Agencies:**

Students are placed in a wide range of agencies including government, local authorities and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), indicating flexibility in the criteria used to select fieldwork agencies. Unlike in some of the foreign countries, the Indian agencies usually do not pay any allowances or incentives for field work practice. As most students did not get allowances for fieldwork, the need to minimize costs on transport and other expenses prompted them to choose agencies within close proximity to their places of residence and not necessarily those with the greatest potential for provision of learning.

However on the part of training institutions, the main consideration is to minimize the costs involved in fieldwork assessment and follow-ups visits. Based on this reality, most placements were in urban settings. Royse et al (2007) stipulates that fieldwork should occur in settings that reinforce students, 'identification with the purposes, values, and ethics of the profession, fosters the integration of empirical and practice based knowledge and promotes the development of professional competency'.

Establishment of live labs will have several advantages. The faculty members individually or in groups can identify the local needs of the community and prepare the projects. The UGC and various other state government and central government bodies can also be approached for financial assistance. When the teaching faculties are directly involved in establishing such live labs based on the local needs, the commitment, regular and effective supervision of students and local participation can be ensured. It would further the acceptance of social work profession and minimize the expenses on the part of students as well as the institution.

### **7. Quality of Field Work Supervision:**

Though the use of qualified and experienced supervisors is quite critical in any professional training, at present in India the supervision of students by non-social workers is a very common practice. In addition to that most of the training institutions do not provide them with any guidelines and hence quality training is not provided. Majority of the students have their program informal. It is clear that without a guide or curriculum to follow, it is difficult to achieve the objectives of fieldwork, mentoring for students, particularly in the case of unqualified supervisors. Regular interaction among the faculty, supervisor and trainees based on clearly written guideline will further ensure a quality field work practice.

### **8. Support for Agency Supervisors:**

Field supervisors play an important role in the training of social workers. They are partners in the training process with responsibility to manage the transition from the classroom to the field and this requires support and continuous interaction between the training institution, the agency supervisor and the agency. Fieldwork manuals and orientation to agency supervisors would considerably enhance the quality of supervision. This helps the supervisors to be aware of their roles and to ensure that students are given opportunity to develop professional knowledge and skill. The training institutions are constrained in their efforts to empower agency supervisors to perform their roles effectively.

The agency supervisors experience problems completing students' assessment forms at the end of the placement as some of them are not social workers and they also do not understand what is expected of them. As a result most of the assessment forms are returned to the training institution incomplete or filled mechanically. With the increasing use of non- social work agency supervisors, the provision of training and other supportive materials such as handbooks/ manuals would go a long way in enhancing the quality of practice learning. Since the number of social work students is coming down, Indian Schools should try to place the students only to such agencies where qualified social workers are present.

Though the IASSW and IFSW stipulate the need for training institutions to capacitate agency supervisors, most of the Indian institutions do not provide training or fieldwork materials prior to the study. Even when fieldwork-training manuals are present, lack of interaction between the institution and agency supervisors make it impossible to use it effectively.

Most of the agency supervisors do not receive any training or orientation prior to the commencement of fieldwork. Training and workshops need to be carried out regularly. Learning for a student on placement, does not just happen. It requires effort and planning by both student and practice teacher.

### **9. Management of Fieldwork & Challenges:**

Shortage of qualified and experienced supervisors, suitable fieldwork agencies, inadequate funding and timing of fieldwork were the major challenges the social work institutions should meet.

#### **(a) Lack of Qualified Agency Supervisors:**

The shortage of qualified and experienced agency supervisors is a major problem. Qualified and experienced social workers should handle practical training in social work. But in many social welfare agencies, where students can do their fieldwork do not employ social workers. Some of the social welfare agencies are employing workers from other disciplines to carry out social work roles. Even in some agencies that are primary social work settings, students are supervised by non- social workers. The timing of fieldwork is also important as most schools send the students at the same time. The available supervisors are not able to spare their time. However, as social work is practiced in a variety of settings, it is inevitable that non- social workers will have to supervise social work students at least for the time being. Furthermore, in spite of this crippling shortage of qualified agency supervisors, it needs to be acknowledged that non-social work agency supervisors have contributed significantly to the survival of the fieldwork programme.

#### **(b) Lack of Suitable Agencies for Fieldwork:**

Due to various reasons it is difficult to find appropriate agencies for the field work practice. Financial constraints make it difficult for schools to follow up students on fieldwork located far. Many schools are short-staffed and not well resourced in terms office space and transport. The students from other programs like management, international business, hospital administration, engineering etc pose another challenge for social work practice. Organizations that traditionally took only social work trainees are now extending their facilities to students from other areas.

### **10. Inadequate Visit by School Supervisors:**

While school supervision visits provide opportunities for students and agency supervisors to get guidance in pursuing the objectives of the placement and also to assess their performance such visits are rare and erratic. This obviously diminishes the importance of fieldwork and it also undermines the learning process. Highlighting the importance of supervision visits by school supervisors, Raphael and Rosenblum (1987) observe that even the planning of these visits, has an energizing effect on the placement. They assert that: knowing that a faculty member who represents the school will be coming on a specific date to review progress stimulates the field instructor and student to assess their progress.

Failure by school supervisors to assess students on fieldwork can have a very damaging effect on the morale of the student and agency supervisor and the placement in general. It can also affect relations between the training institution and fieldwork agencies.

### **11. Financial Support for Students on Fieldwork:**

In India a large number of social work students are now coming from economically weaker background. The economic constraints often prevent them from selecting more useful and effective agencies and to undertake various social work training programs and visits.

## **12. Suggestions to Improve Field Work Practice:**

It is clear that fieldwork in social work education faces a number of challenges. While the primary responsibility for addressing these challenges lies with the social work department or unit, there are issues that need the intervention at the higher level. Sufficient funding for fieldwork related activities, clear learning content for field work, proper training for agency supervisors etc can go a long way in improving the quality of field work training.

There is need to allocate and to increase the budget for fieldwork and develop fieldwork manuals. Each institution is different in terms of the prevailing socio-economic conditions, challenges and experiences. Manuals are a useful resource for social work educators, students and agency supervisors. Introduction of a taught course on fieldwork theory and practice will address two concerns. This would prepare students for actual practice and also facilitate the learning process during fieldwork. Secondly, a taught component on fieldwork would contribute towards generating research interest on fieldwork issues among social work scholars.

## **13. Duration of Fieldwork:**

While the duration of fieldwork varies among the social work institutions, it is desirable to have a total 1000 contact hours for Masters level. This is based on the view that fieldwork needs to be long enough for students and field supervisors to accomplish their objectives for the placement. At the undergraduate level also sufficient training at different agencies, which gives students varied experience should be provided. While considering the block field work it is also important that trainees should be placed in agencies related to their focus of study.

## **14. Conclusion:**

Although the fieldwork in social work education is marginalized, there are indeed very promising prospects of raising its effectiveness and quality of training in India. As of now fieldwork is a compulsory course. It is also important that IASSW and IFSW came up with qualifying standards for social work education and fieldwork. It would go a long way in improving the quality of fieldwork practice. The qualified and experienced agency supervisors, orientation and training to such supervisors, fieldwork manuals, specific timings and duration will further ensure quality of fieldwork.

The challenges in fieldwork training of social workers require intervention at the highest level. It is also important that those involved in fieldwork perform their roles and responsibilities effectively. Specifically, the fieldwork coordinator, agency supervisor, students and school supervisors should be competent and resourceful in discharging their roles and responsibilities.

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