

## FIELD WORK IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN INDIA

### Dr. Mohd. Husain

Assistant Professor (SG)

Department of Social Work, Institute of Social Sciences

Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Agra, Uttar Pradesh-India-282003

Email: [husainmsw@gmail.com](mailto:husainmsw@gmail.com)

### Introduction

Field practice is an integral part of social work education and it is an approach to instruction and learning through which social work as a profession facilitates students to become practitioners through community involvement activities. All over the world especially in developing countries, social work education requires field practices that are recognized as that of medicine, law, education, agriculture etc. discipline. Social work education does not end in class room instructions, guided group interactions and interchanges of ideas are also applied to practice on professional ownership. To complete social work education and to be a professional social worker, field practice is essential for the students of social work.

The professional social work education like ours, besides its class room instructions, provides a kind of favourable and professionally desirable practical situation wherein persons being matured in the profession, learn how to exercise experienced theoretical instructions in a guided professional order so as to allow them to develop professional qualities and true art of dealing with professional issues. The opportunity of such training and promotion of right kind of professionally capable person are generally determined keeping in mind the quality of men being demanded in a profession to be able to carry out the professional responsibility decided by the people for whom professional experts are produced. Field practicum has been considered an important and integral part of social work education which is based on Dewey's philosophy of learning by doing (Pathak, 1987). Definition of field work, given by Srinivas is quite comprehensive and clear which says that field work is an educationally planned and professionally guided programme of interaction of a student with the real situation experienced through welfare, institutional, multi-organizational and people based system in order to help him / her perceive, understand, appreciate existing human conditions and work to bring about desired improvement and change in them (Srinivas, 1979).

In the beginning, schools which came into existence under the auspices of Christian Missions were proceeded by years of practical experiences. Later, the schools and colleges of social work did not have the benefit of traditional practices. Further, sub-committee of 2<sup>nd</sup> Review Committee appointed to draw up course contents on field work did not provide adequate guidelines. It was left to the professional association and schools of social work to give serious thought to the matter (Singh, 1984). The present paper is an attempt to highlight different issues related to field work practice as well as the present situation regarding the field work, which has been considered as an integral part of social work education.

### **Ground Realities of Field Work in India**

It is the biggest handicap of most of the Social Work colleges, institutes and departments that they are not able to explore adequate and appropriate learning opportunities and to exploit them for the benefit of social work students in the field areas. Hence, they are deprived of varied field work experiences. The agency staff from other disciplines has been found utterly reluctant about learning needs of our students. Secondly, the NGOs are also found indulging in number of malpractices and hence are afraid of being exposed. Dr. R.R. Singh (1984) has rightly suggested in his paper on “Field work in Social Work Education: A Developmental Perspective for Human Service Professions”, that the criteria for identification of “field” in developing countries, should be evolved and the agencies should not be considered only to lie within the four walls of the multi-storeyed buildings. I think there won't be disagreement regarding the common experience of Social Work that residential government welfare agencies as well as the residential institutions run by NGOs, show excessive indifference. They do not extend necessary co-operation in providing adequate learning opportunities for social work students. Hence, open community may be the best option.

The process of selection of field work agencies in most of the social work institutions and colleges located at semi urban places is not guided by field work objectives, students' interest or inclination etc.,but by the situational forces. Simply we can say that these institutions have no choice. Thus, majority of them have been making field work placement of their students in residential institutions. Their field work practice is method oriented, as well as target oriented and is largely influenced by non-availability of appropriate field work setting for social work practice.

At the beginning, the concepts such as ‘field’, supervision, evaluation etc. was not clearly defined, there were no clear cut guidelines regarding the nature, content and objectives of field work practice as per specialization, total hours to be devoted by social work students for relating theory of the field. Thanks to those social work educators who worked hard and provided with some concrete guidelines, which could help us to have clarity about definition, nature, content, objectives and methodology of field work practice.

The social work professional could overcome this situation only after the recommendations of review of committee on social work education in India were received and accepted by University Grants Commission (UGC). The committee has mentioned following objectives of social work education:

- (i) Development of skills in problem solving at all levels.
- (ii) Integration of classroom learning with field practice.
- (iii) Development of skills required for professional practice.

The UGC (1980) emphasised to provide the following aspect of students learning in the field work:

- Understand the relation of knowledge, values and skills;
- Understanding to develop self-awareness and self-discipline in professional relations;
- Ability to work knowingly and effectively with agency structure, function and philosophy;
- Knowledge of multiple factors in behaviour to acquire skills in the use of professional knowledge;
- System of effective use of community, state and national resources;
- Capacity of social work practice with professional compliance;
- Understanding the need of social action and capacity of leadership;
- To become professional worker;
- Compliance in systematic study, assessment and treatment in different fields of social work intervention.

In fact, these guidelines did not provide us adequate opportunities to train students within the available resources to make them competent worker for addressing emerging social issues. Therefore, the matter of social work became an issue for introspection in conferences and meetings held from time to time. Nevertheless, we have not yet arrived at clear cut conclusion to know whether we should impart our students the training based on emerging specialised branches of knowledge or the knowledge on generic field of social work. Because of this and some more day to day emerging demand in a new perspective of our intervention, Indian Schools of Social Work, by and large have developed their own kind of field work training programme based on the quality of educational resources and field work opportunity available with them. However, National Workshop organised on field-work in 1981 has recommended following objectives of field-work:

1. To offer purposeful learning experience to student through interaction with life situation under supervision / guidance for professional growth in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes.
2. To foster attitude in the students towards professional self-development, increasing self-awareness, appreciation of both capacities and limitations.
3. To develop in the students, the required skills in helping the needy through organizational work, use of social work methods, that is listening, participation, communication and so on.
4. To enable the students to develop and deepen capacity to relate theory to practice and also to relate experience to theory.

Further, it is also expected that in this way our field-work programme will provide following inputs of learning to the students-

- (i) Participation in the process of help and change.
- (ii) Development of positive attitudes towards self and others.
- (iii) Acquisition and development of skills in collaboration, team work planning and organization and so on.
- (iv) Experiences of taking responsibility to deal with critical situations.
- (v) Experiences of confrontation with one self as a means to self-growth and its use in action.

Even after having all the above mentioned guidelines and some more introduced from time to time in different forms, we have not yet developed uniform, strong and recognized training / field work programme in all Indian schools / departments of social work. Some schools are doing good but many are yet to start several important things. Because of this, fields such as labour welfare, industrial relations, counselling and guidance, social welfare etc. developed by schools of social work are also taken up by other disciplines such as psychology, sociology, M.A. (HRM), DPM, MBA etc. the ensuing discussion in this regard provides some reflections on our field work programme.

### **Field-Work in Schools of Social Work**

In order to provide different areas of field exposure and working opportunity to the students as per the objectives of field work, schools of social work have designed concurrent field work, visit to welfare agencies, block field work programme, rural camp and research project depending upon the kind of field opportunity and adequate number of teaching faculty available with the department. Some departments have not been able to introduce all the above kind of opportunities to the students. By and large schools of social work have their own field work manual which is used by the students and teaching faculty supervising students field work.

According to the field work manual prepared by JamiaMillia and Jain Vishwa Bharti Institute, the major field work objectives, keeping in mind the availability of field work opportunities with schools and learning needs of students include:

- (i) To prepare students to learn how to understand socio-economic and cultural profile of locality / area where they are working so as to generate baseline information.
- (ii) To learn the psycho-social characteristics of his personality and role of environment in his functioning.
- (iii) To develop capacity to make use of knowledge from different disciplines useful to understand people and their resources and environment.
- (iv) To develop capacity in students to make use of problem solving methods, theory, principles and techniques individually or in groups with client or community systems.

During field work students of social work are generally given opportunity to work in rural, tribal, urban-slums, welfare agencies, schools, village panchayats, youth clubs, *Mahila Mandals* for helping in organizational matters and role performance; providing awareness about government and non-government agencies for senior citizens, children, disabled, unemployed youth, widow, poor, scheduled castes, scheduled tribe, education and environment, population problem, prevention of anti-social issues such as dowry, discrimination against women, alcoholism and drug addiction, child marriage, untouchability etc.; organization of camp on health education, family planning, social service, cultural /recreational sports and such other programmes and promotion of peoples' participation in programme implementation organization. Similarly, in specialised agencies students learn monitoring, role function of concerned officials and opportunity to practice social work methods. These students working under the supervision of subject teacher and agency staff, are guided in a way to help them to learn professional values and art of their practice.

### **Issues and Challenges in Field Work**

The admission criterion developed by the University, such as the percentage of marks secured in graduation or in the entrance test, do not help us to have right kind of students having proper communication skills and basic attitudes in social upliftment. After having a brief work orientation and visiting a few welfare agencies, students generally do not develop adequate knowledge / understanding on the system of working in the field work agency. Due to lack of effective coordination between classroom teaching and field-work, students working in the field fail to make use of the theoretical knowledge in their functioning. Therefore, efforts made in the field work remain a matter of just doing things without knowledge.

Some schools of social work do not have trained supervisors in the field-work agencies, because of which students working in the field work do not get proper guidance and learning opportunity, which in turn leads to several kinds of frustration in the students working in that field-work agency. Some thoughtful recommendations made in Field-work workshop (1981) specially the phases of field-work such as orientation, placement, induction, exploration, identification, planning, implementation and evaluation are quite good but in absence of having deserving students suitable to our profession, teachers orientation to field-work, proper fields for training, proper students-teachers ratio and support of agency staff, these recommendations do not allow us to promote and maintain our field-work system in a better and desirable manner.

People in villages, urban slums and tribal areas expect direct benefits by the students doing field-work there. Keeping their expectations and old perception of social work in mind, students working in the field like to make false promises mainly because of the reason that it helps them to get an early acceptance by the same and gain work satisfaction / better image in the field. In some cases, students in the field without going into details of the problem / issue taken by them start suggesting the means they feel better in the given situation. It does not only hinder students learning but also

block the opportunity of consulting books and having discussion with the teacher for gaining further in depth knowledge.

Students placed, especially in the first year, in welfare agencies for field-work to develop adequate knowledge in the field of their placement do not find proper chance to practice method with beneficiaries in true perspective. Therefore, during evaluation, they do not prove their better understanding. In some cases, while supervising the students we social work educators forget our role as supervisor, therefore, some of us just inspect the students in the field-work agencies. Besides, there are several other challenges before our field-work programme which we social work educators are to respond for promoting it.

### **Conclusion**

In light of the above discussion it can be concluded that our field-work programme has not been able to live up to the expectations of the emerging issues around us. Therefore, in order to prepare field-work programme useful to practice the social work profession, we need regular discussions on field-work for sketching a new kind of method and pattern of field-programme useful to the changing issues in emerging scenario, production of adequate literature on the field-work instruction, identification of emerging fields of social work agency having trained person in social work or through associateship in social work as earlier suggested by Association of Schools of Social Work in India (ASSWI), teachers' orientation on latest kind of field knowledge, skills development / field-work opportunities to the students in the emerging fields such as in social development, social movements, advocacy, project formulation and evaluation etc. necessary modifications in the system of field-work supervision are needed so as to make the students committed to their social responsibilities and a strong will for building of professional image in society.

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