

# Fieldwork Practicum as Perceived by Social Work Students with Special Reference to Madurai

S. Joyce Jeyarani\*

Ph.d., Scholar, PG & Research Department of Social Work, Bishop Heber College, Trichy

Dr A. Umesh Samuel Jebaseelan

Associate Professor, PG & Research Department of Social Work, Bishop Heber College, Trichy

## Abstract

In the scholarly world Social Work is viewed as a practice-oriented discipline. Social work education comprises of a theoretical component taught in the classroom and field- based education involving integration of the academic aspect and practice. Fieldwork practicum is the hallmark of Social Work. Fieldwork, which is also known as field instruction, field placement, field education, practicum or internship is therefore an integral component of social work education. The perception of students about Field Work program was studied by adopting a qualitative technique called Focused Group Discussion (FGD) with three groups of final year Social Work Postgraduate students at a particular college in Madurai, to find meaningful insights. An Explanatory Research Design was adopted for the study. Student's perception on three broad areas such as (i) Training at Fieldwork agency, (ii) Faculty guidance and (iii) Practical application of theories were studied. Students perceived certain fieldwork agencies with wider scope to practice the methods of Social Work but there were also fieldwork agencies, where the scope for social work practices was low due to lack of Social work professionals. It was found that Fieldwork enables students to come in contact with needy people, their problems, their reactions to the problems and their attitude towards social workers and thus the students discovered their ability to help. Students perceived fieldwork as a supervised social work practice that provides opportunities for them to match theory and practice. Thus Fieldwork enabled Social work student trainees to develop their knowledge, skills through practical application.

**Keywords:** Field Work, practical application, student perception, Social Work

## 1. Introduction

Social work is an international profession and similarly social work education internationally has always embraced both academic and practical components. Social work education comprises of a theoretical component taught in the classroom and field- based education involving integration of the academic aspect and practice. Fieldwork, which is also known as field instruction, field placement, field education, practicum or internship is therefore an integral component of social work education. A widely used definition of fieldwork is one by Hamilton and Else (1983) who view it as, "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." As the social work curriculum is based on both theory and practice, the provision of sound theory is critical as is fieldwork experience. As Shardlow and Doel (1996:6) observe, "...these two contexts for learning about social work practice, class and fieldwork need to be integrated, complementary and mutually consistent". They further point out that the challenge for the student and agency supervisor, is to make this a reality". Fieldwork is an opportunity for aligning theoretical knowledge and learning, with the needs of society and the market place. The present study is focused on the perception of Social Work students towards Field Work Practicum on three broad aspects. Such as perception towards (i) Training at Fieldwork agency, (ii) Faculty guidance and (iii) application of theory into practice. The study highlights the pros and cons of fieldwork practicum as perceived by students through Focused Group Discussion. A focus group discussion (FGD) is a good way to gather together people from similar backgrounds or experiences to discuss a specific topic of interest. The moderator helps the group to participate in a lively and natural discussion amongst them.

## 2. Research Methodology

In bridging research and policy, Focused Group Discussions are useful in providing an insight into different opinions among different parties involved in the change process, thus enabling the process to be managed more smoothly. (Stewart, D.W., Shamdasani, P.N, Rook D.W, 2007). Focus groups come in numerous shapes and sizes. The methodology adopted for the study was based on (Krueger and Casey, 2000) which stated that a minimum of 10 to 12 participants to be included in a single group. The method also mandated that the nature of the group should be based on its homogeneity because composing a group with highly different characteristics will decrease the quality of the data.

According to, Ivanoff and Hultberg (2006), the researcher can play the role of a moderator and may lead the

group discussion, encourage interaction and guide the conversation of the group. The researcher is also compelled to document the same whereby obtaining good and accurate information presented by the participants in the focus group. According to Krueger and Casey (2000), the focused group comprised of the following elements:-

Elements / Factors	Focused Group
Format	Group 1, 2 & 3– Both boys and girls
Age	22 years
Size	10 respondents in each group – 1, 2 &3
Length of each session	45 minutes to 1 hour
Number of sessions	1 session
Participants	Social Work students from 3 departments
Nature of Setting	Circular group with casual discussion setting
Forms of data	Conversation including non- verbal gestures
Data Collection	Direct observation and Documentation
Moderator	Flexible, Focused and used focused group scripts
Documentation pattern	Keen observation, selected statements and verbatim recording

### 2.1 Objectives

1. To describe the educational status of the respondents
2. To study the perception of Students towards Training at Fieldwork Agency
3. To study the perception of Students towards Faculty Guidance through Individual Conferences
4. To study the perception of students towards application of Theory into practice
5. To suggest intervention for enhancing the quality of Fieldwork practicum

### 2.3 Research Design

Descriptive research design was adopted by the researcher, since the researcher was interested in finding fact regarding the perception of Social Work students towards Field Work practicum. Using the Conative model in a Focused Group Discussion, proposed by Mary Goodyear (2013) Conative approach to Focused Group Discussion in qualitative research that in interpretative and based on a humanistic approach. In Conative approach, data is collected through structured or unstructured qualitative interviews or group discussions and is treated as requiring analysis and interpretation. The present study was carried out in this model as follows.

#### 1. Introduction – 10 minutes

In this stage the researcher welcomed the participants and introduced herself. She then explained the general purpose of the discussion and the reason for choosing the participants to join in the Focused Group Discussion. The outline of general ground rules and discussion guidelines such as importance of everyone speaking, talking one at a time, and being prepared for the moderator to interrupt to assure that the topic is not bifurcated were addressed in the session. The importance of confidentiality during the discussion was also guaranteed by the moderator.

#### 2. Group Discussion – 35 minutes

The members of the group were encouraged to discuss and state their claims and interests pertaining to the questions addressed in the focused group script.

#### 3. Closing Summary – 15 minutes

The key points discussed are readdressed to ensure its validity while not ascertaining to the bias of the researcher – the moderator. Closing remarks are finally made and the respondents were thanked for their involvement and participation.

#### 4. Reporting

The researcher had made every attempt to adopt the above presented model whereby incorporating an appropriate report pattern while adhering to the methodology in conducting Focused Group Discussions.

### 2.4 Selection of Study area

The study was carried out in one of the colleges at Madurai. In the present research study with reference to perception of students towards Field work practicum, the researcher selected 30 respondents, 10 respondents from each specialization who were selected randomly. The consent of the participants and their willingness to participate in the research process were systematically done while adhering to the ethics and norms of the research.

### 2.5 Sample design

For the purpose of the study, simple random sampling technique was used. 10 students were selected from each

specialization namely Human Resource Management, Community Development and Medical and Psychiatric Social Work. Thus, 30 respondents were considered for 3 Focused Group Discussion.

## 2.6 Tool for Data collection

Focused Group Script was prepared by the researcher, after conducting the pilot study and in consultation with subject experts in Field Work practicum. The theme adopted in Focused Group Script is based on the perception of Social Work students towards Field Work Practicum.

### 2.6.1 Questions posed to the students – respondents:

- i. What was your field work experience during I MSW?
- ii. What is your specialization experience during II MSW?
- iii. How do you perceive the quality of the training received at Fieldwork agency?
- iv. How is the recognition at Fieldwork agency for a social work trainee?
- v. What are the challenges faced by you in field work agency? Especially when you don't have professional social workers in the field work agency.
- vi. How do you perceive the concurrent field work program?
- vii. How do you perceive the guidance given by faculty supervisors through Fieldwork individual conference?
- viii. How do you find the application of theory into practices? Is it possible, and applicable?
- ix. How is the scope of learning as perceived by you in the field work agency?
- x. How far are you able to improve your skill competencies through Fieldwork practicum?

## 2.7 Group Discussion Results

As an outcome of focused Group Discussion,

### 2.7.1 Student's perception towards Training in the Fieldwork Agency

The Focused Group Discussion with regard to training at Field Work agency, it was revealed that during first year, the learning was generic to them, where they got exposed to all sorts of Fieldwork agencies. They knew only the agency profile, activities and functions of the organization. *"I am a CD student. But when I was put up in a hospital, I learnt 'O' Bombay blood group"*. So, the learning during first year on other fields of Social Work was useful to them. Only during the second year, they were placed according their specialization. They were able to intensify their learning by identifying Social problems, knowing employees welfare, knowing corporate culture and studying cases. In every visit they had something to learn new. The agencies conduct training programs and make the trainees to take part in it. The practice teacher never allows them to sit idle. They also said, the approach of the staff at Field work agencies was helpful for learning. *"I was given an opportunity to file a petition to Human Rights commission for a victim"*. In some fieldwork agencies, professional social workers were there and professional learning took place. They perceived their agency as a place to learn more practically. The field work agency had given understanding of social work. They said, *"We learnt to identify the cause of the problem, intervention strategies and techniques"*.

On the other side, there were agencies without professional social workers. So, the trainees couldn't get professional training from Social Workers and their learning was less. *"We are getting training from nurses at palliative care and at hospices. If Social Workers are there, we would get professional training"*. *"Government officials are not professionals"*. They expressed their inconveniences, when they are involved in fund raising by the field work agencies. There were also some fieldwork agencies that survive namesake, without any funds and activities. There was no learning in such agencies for students.

### 2.7.2 Student's perception towards Faculty guidance obtained through Individual Conferences

The discussion with regard to perception of Social work students towards guidance obtained from faculty members at college through individual conference, it was revealed that students had different perception. For some students said, *"Our Field work Individual conference helps us to take right direction in learning at fieldwork agency. The guidance provided to us is helpful in applying the methods of social work in reality"*. Also, the students expressed that they perceive to have sufficient guidance from Faculty members through the feedback given in the fieldwork record. Some students said *"The feedback given in our record notebook by our faculty supervisor helps us a lot in correcting ourselves and to learn more"*. Faculty visiting the agency supervisor and encouraging the students by their visits to the field had helped students to have intensive learning in the field.

On the other hand, some students were unable to record their opinions, for they didn't have even a single individual conference. They said, *"We are unable to get faulty guidance due to time constraint"*. Student trainees found it difficult in having the concurrent field work practicum. She said, *"We are unable to study and follow theory classes as we get into fieldwork on alternative days"*.

### 2.7.3 Student's perception towards application of Theory into practice.

The discussion with regard to perception of Social work students towards application of theory into practices, it

was found that they were able to apply Social Case Work in hospitals, Social Group Work in Rehabilitation setting. For eg: Psycho Education to the family. Instead of studying about empathy, she said that by being in the fieldwork agency, *“I had empathetic feelings for burnt cases when I saw them in their wards”*.

On the other hand, some students were finding it difficult to cope with concurrent field work and classes. One trainee said *“I lack balance between classes and fieldwork”*. Some student expressed that there was lack of applicability of theory. Due to lack of Social work professionals in the agency, professional practice of theory into practice was not there.

## 2.8 Salient Findings

The findings from Focused Group discussion were divergent. It is highlighted as follows on three broad areas.

1. With regard to the perception of Students towards Training at Fieldwork Agency, it was perceived to have poor professional learning as there were no social workers employed in the fieldwork agency. Other teaching professionals were only giving training to the Social Work students. In some government sectors, Social work professionals were not there to help students in professional learning. There is a shortage of qualified supervisors and students are supervised by non social workers. In some agencies, the professionals give training to the trainees to identify cause for the problem and to give intervention. In every visit they had something to learn at the agency.
2. With regard to the perception of Students towards Faculty Guidance through Individual Conferences, some students were getting guidance from their faculty supervisors through individual conferences and also through the feedback in the field work record notebook. Some students were able to guidance only through feedbacks in their record notebook. Few students were finding it difficult to have fieldwork individual conference with their faculty supervisors.
3. With regard to the perception of students towards application of Theory into practice, some students were able to apply the methods of Social Work, theories and techniques into practice. Some students were unable to practice their theory in the field, as there was no professionalism and no professional social workers in certain fieldwork agencies. There was a shortage of suitable agencies for field work.

## 2.9 Suggestion

The study findings has created disturbance in the mind of the researcher. Hence the researcher suggests the following measures for enhancing the quality of Fieldwork practicum

- i. For Fieldwork Agency: For Field work, it would be better to identify and send students for training to the agencies where only professional social workers are there and where the scope of learning is more.
- ii. For Faculty guidance: Periodical review meeting by the fieldwork committee to ensure the guidance provided to students by faculty members may help the students to get more guidance from the faculty. Periodical visitation of faculty supervisors will stimulate the agency supervisors and students to get guidance and assess their progress.
- iii. For applying theory into practice: By placing social work students in social work agencies where professional social workers are employed, the students will have an opportunity to apply theory into practice. Introduction of fieldwork manuals will help students to apply theory into practice.

## 2.10 Conclusion

Divergent findings were drawn from the Focused Group Discussion. Some students had outstanding training and performance at field work agency, while some students were not getting proper training due to non social workers in the agency. Some students had sufficient guidance from the faculty and some were not getting it. There was lack of supervision of faculty members. Some students were able to apply theory into practice, where some students were unable to do so due to shortage of suitable field work agency.

## References

- Goodyear, M. (2013). *Conative Model*. Retrieved from The Association for Qualitative Research: <http://www.aqr.org.uk/glossary/conative-model>
- Hepworth, D.H, Rooney, R. and Larsen, J.A. (2002) *Direct Social Work Practice: Theory and Skills*. U.S.A., Brooks/Cole
- Jotham Dhemba, (2012) *Fieldwork in Social Work Education and Training: Issues and Challenges in the Case of Eastern and Southern Africa*, Social Work and Society International online journal, Vol 10 (1) , pp
- Kaseke, E. (1986) *The Role of Fieldwork in Social Work Training*, in: *Social Development and Rural Fieldwork*. Proceedings of a workshop held in Harare. Harare, Journal of Social Development in Africa, pp. 52-62
- Kaseke, E. (1990) *Foreword*, in: Hall, N. *Social Work Training in Africa: A Fieldwork Manual*. Harare, Journal of Social Development in Africa
- Raphael, F. B. and Rosenblum, A. F. (1987) *“An Operational Guide to the Faculty Field Liaison Role”*, in:

Social Casework: The Journal of Contemporary Social Work, March, pp.156-163

Richard Krueger, M. A. (2000). *Qualitative Research*. Retrieved from Focus Groups. A Practical Guide for Applied Research: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/791/1718>

Safari, J. (1986) The Role of Fieldwork in the Training of Social Workers for Rural Development in: Social Development and Rural Fieldwork, Proceedings of a Workshop held 10-14 June, Harare. Zimbabwe. Journal of Social Development in Africa, pp 74-80