

SOCIAL WORK ACADEMICIANS – FIELD EDUCATORS INTERFACE:–A BEST PRACTICE IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Field work is an integral component of social work education. Field education provides students opportunities to integrate theory into practice. Human service organizations provide excellent opportunities for students to experience social realities and practice social work methods. Field educators play crucial role in student's learning process and significantly contribute to their professional development. It is imperative to have an open dialogue between social work academicians and social work practitioners on effective implementation of field practicum. . What should students and supervisors expect each other? What are mutual concerns? This article is based on a workshop conducted to discuss about concerns, strengths and hopes of field educators and academicians.

Key words: Social Work, Field education, Field practicum, Supervision

INTRODUCTION

Field education is the core component of social work education. During field practicum, the students get direct experience of field realities and make sense of what they learned in their class room. Usually the field practicum consists of residential camps in rural/urban/ tribal communities, concurrent field work in human service organizations and block field work. The schools of social work prepare students to engage with diverse and complex services. After the initial orientation and introductory lectures on social work, the students are placed in various non- governmental and government agencies for their field practicum. The students work as part of the organization for a specified period of time. During the placement the students are expected to record their experiences and learning and submit their reports to their agency and faculty supervisors. Formal presentations are also done in agencies as well and schools of social work in order to enhance the students' capacity to reflect and articulate their experience and learning. The field education standards, rules and regulations are established by the respective school of social work taking into consideration of the code of ethics for social work practice.

The success of any field education depends on the learning opportunities available in the agencies, guided engagement in those activities and the possibilities of initiating programmes in the agency. In the current field education scenario we have only few trained social workers as field educators, others are not trained in social work but interested in social work teaching-

learning programmes and act as task supervisors for the students. One of the important tasks of field educators is demonstrate to students how they conceptualise their own practice. This will support the development of critical thinking and analytical skills in students. They are the role models for students as prospective social workers. The field educator is also responsible for ongoing supervision to the students and also for the evaluation of the students' performance. The field educator should make sure that the students have well formulated learning agreement with specific learning goals and objectives. It is their responsibility to ensure professional and ethical behavior throughout the placement. In order to equip the field educators to effectively carry out the responsibilities, a workshop of field educators and academicians were organized. This articles gives the process and outcomes of one such workshop held in the author's school of social work.

OBJECTIVES

- Create a platform for field educators and academicians to discuss about the current practices in social work – field education
- Formulate strategies for improving field education practices in order to enhance student competencies
- Ensure quality practice learning in social work education

METHOD AND TOOL

The data was collected in a meeting of the field educators and academicians from two schools of social work in Thrissur District of Kerala State, India was organized. The objectives of the meeting were :

- understand the strengths and limitations of field practicum of students with special reference to two schools of social work.
- prepare practitioners to supervise social work students during their field education placements
- create a collaborative partnership between the student, organization, field educator or supervisor and school of social work.
- develop a constructive supervisory relationship between the practitioner and student
- formulate strategies to strengthen field practicum

After the introductory session the participants were allowed to interact in small groups to do an evaluation. The tool used for the assessment is 'Three houses' which has been very effectively used in child protection and a variety of other contexts. The points of discussion were the practitioners' and academicians' concerns about field practicum, strengths or good things and their hopes and dreams. There are separate groups of practitioners and academicians and each group presented their report.

Results of the group discussion are given below:

The concerns expressed by the field educators are:

- Difficulties in delivering quality supervision to students
- School's expectation Vs actual delivery of Supervision
- Lack of commitment of students
- Lack of proper feedback mechanism
- Time constraints of the agency supervisor
- Lack of proper orientation about field practicum to students
- Students' lack of commitment in completing assignments/tasks
- Lack of clarity about what work to be given
- Lack of willingness of students to stretch time
- Lack of language and communication skills of students
- Students hesitant to work independently
- Problems in timely submission of reports
- No matching between students' learning needs and agency's activities

The strengths or good things about field practicum expressed by the field educators are:

- The importance of field education in social work curriculum
- It creates professional growth in field educators
- Excellent opportunity for the students to understand field realities
- Students get more 'life experience'
- Students give fresh ideas and feedback to the agency
- Students share workload of agency staff
- Students actively engage in fund raising
- Agency gain more public relations through students' work
- Students' interest in community work
- New 'staff' in the agency
- Students provide psychosocial support to clients
- Students provide a great deal of support to agency staff

The hopes/dreams of the field educators are:

- A tool to assess professional growth of students
- Pre-placement interviews by field work agencies in order to select students for field practicum
- Students will be given opportunities to prepare their CVs and attend interviews
- Orient students to work as part of the organisation

- Provide continuous mentoring of the students
- Students demonstrates punctuality and regularity
- Regularity in reporting
- Match students' skills with organizational needs
- Proper learning plan
- Continued interaction between schools of social work and field educators
- Absorption of students as staff of organisation
- Students undertake research activities for the organization

DISCUSSION

The workshop was planned to have an open dialogue between the practitioners and social work educators in relation to their experience in supervising students for field practicum. The formal and informal interaction with the practitioners revealed many of their apprehensions and expectations about field practicum and its effectiveness in developing social work competencies among students. The workshop was an opportunity to establish a net work of agencies in the field of social work education and also was an opportunity for the organisations to get to know each other. This has enhanced better collaborations and referrals to enhance their service delivery system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the decisions evolved from the workshop inorder to improve the quality of field practicum of students.

The decisions are to be implemented at three levels- schools of social work, agency and student

SCHOOLS OF SOCIAL WORK

- Ongoing meetings or workshops of field educators and academicians to be organized on a regular basis eg. for each semester at the beginning and conclusion of each placement
- Faculty members to visit the organization during the initial period of placement so that they can contribute well towards formulating learning plan
- Special training programmes for field educators on field work supervision taking into consideration of the three functions of supervision-educative, administrative and supportive (Kadushin, 1985)
- The students should be given proper pre- placement orientation on field practicum
- Special attention to be given by the schools of social work to provide considerable amount of theoretical knowledge before starting field practicum of each semester

Agency

- Provide a welcoming atmosphere in the agency especially at the beginning of the placement
- Ensure sufficient orientation about the organization and its activities to the student
- Provide basic facilities (seating, computer etc) to students on placement
- Ensure occupational health and safety for the students
- Allocate a supervisor, trained social worker if possible, to the student
- Ensure proper learning plan with practical ideas and tasks to be completed by the end of placement
- Provide students opportunities for formal presentation of their experience in organizational team meetings
- Proper evaluation of student performance
- Suggestions to be given to students as well as schools of social work for improving field practicum

Students

- Sufficiently acquaint with the prospective field work agency by conducting prior visits and meetings with supervisors
- Attend pre-placement interview with the agency in order to gain experience of a job interview
- Conduct review of literature about the psycho social problems of service users of the agency and social work interventions (evidence-based)
- Attend regular supervision with agency supervisor and faculty supervisor
- Follow reflective learning throughout field practicum
- Timely submission of periodical reports

CONCLUSION

Field Education is a critical element in the learning experience of social work students. Effective education entails open dialogue between field educators and academicians. This workshop was an effective way of eliciting feedback and suggestions from field educators. Combined efforts of students, academic and field education staff and organizations are crucial in shaping competent professionals in social work. The results of the above workshop providesignificant ideas towards achieving quality practice learning and a sense of professional identity for social work students.

REFERENCE

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