

# Fieldwork in Social Work Education: Challenges, Issues and Best Practices

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## **Abstract**

Fieldwork has always been part of social work and an integral component of social work education. Fieldwork is based on the philosophy of 'learning by doing' and its purpose is fundamental to a sound education in social work. Fieldwork opportunities take the students to a vast variety of ground realities around the world. It is critically important for social work students to acquire, in a classroom environment, practice principles, values and ethics and the scientific basis for practice. Equally important is the need to apply the theoretical content covered in the classroom, to real life situations as part of a student's preparation to become a professional social worker. In this perspective began the evolution of field action projects (presently referred to as social labs or live labs) by the leading social work institutions in the country. These initiatives provide both meeting the needs of the target population and a platform for the students to practice. This paper looks into the major challenges faced by the students, teachers and the agencies/live labs in providing the training for the students. It also draws light on the different issues in the entire process of fieldwork in Kerala. Finally it also highlights the best practices that can be replicated for the benefit of the students and professionals.

## **Keywords**

fieldwork, live labs, best practices, social work

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## **Introduction**

The social work curriculum consists of classroom education and learning from the actual fields of practice. Classroom education provides the information basis, theoretical knowledge and understanding in all the foundational areas. Social work practicum is based on the philosophy of 'learning by doing' and its purpose is fundamental for a sound training in social work. Social work practicum, usually referred to as fieldwork plays an essential role and provides the experiential basis for the students' academic programme. Many of the leading researchers in social work explicitly assert the importance of both fieldwork and classroom instruction in social work training (Adsule, 2005; Alphonse, 1999; Dhembha, 2012; D'Souza, 2012; Johnson et.al., 2012; Mallick, 2007) As Hepworth et.al. (2002) observes, fieldwork engages the student in supervised social work practice and provides opportunities to integrate theory and practice. The fieldwork opportunities take the students to a vast variety of ground realities of the world around. Therefore it is critically important for social work students to acquire, in a classroom environment, practice principles, values and ethics and the scientific basis for practice. Equally important is the need to apply the theoretical content covered in the classroom, to real life situations as part of a students'

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preparation to become a professional social worker. It takes more than academic fitness, but also evidence-based knowledge, field- tested skills and a wealth of hands-on-experience to become a true professional social worker.

### **Professional Social Work Education**

Social work education shapes the profession's future through the education of competent professionals, the generation of knowledge, and the exercise of leadership within the professional community (Johnson et.al., 2012.) Education provides knowledge, skills and practice models to enable people to cope with and maintain a balance with the environment. It emphasizes the initial preparation of the qualified social work personnel as well as the provision of continuing education for social work practice, administration, education, training and research, within the value framework of the profession. The objective of social work education is to impart integration of social work knowledge, attitudes and skills, relevant to the contemporary social realities, in the historical context, and local social realities, in the national and international context (Sewpaul and Jones, 2004). It also focuses on the development of a critical consciousness in students, through a process of critical pedagogy, so that they become aware of the social ills of society and are motivated to alleviate them (Johnson et.al., 2012). The approach used is student-centered dialogical classroom teaching-learning, self-study, supervised fieldwork and practice-based research.

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, inculcation and assimilation of social work ethics, principles and values. Thus, social work students on fieldwork are exposed to social work at both the micro and macro levels. Additionally, the concurrent exposure to class room theory and fieldwork ensures that students obtain thorough professional development to the social work practice with individuals, families, groups and communities. The class room teaching and fieldwork is equally important in social work education. However, in reality fieldwork is marginalized when compared to its academic counterpart in many training institutions. (Dhemba, 2012; D'Souza, 2012; Mallick, 2007). In social work education, integration is given prime importance though the concept of integration remains ambiguous (Mallick, 2007). To make the integration of theory into a reality is actually a challenge at times for the students, agency supervisors and even for the educators. In addition, the scarcity of indigenous literature on fieldwork has intensified the training situation in social work.

In July 2001, both the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) reached an agreement on adopting the global standards for the education and training in the profession of social work. Following guidelines are assigned for the field education:

- Field education should be sufficient in duration in complexity of tasks and learning opportunities to ensure that students are prepared for professional practice.
- Planned co-ordination and links between the school and the agency/field placement setting.
- Provision of orientation for fieldwork supervisors or instructors.
- Appointment of field supervisors or instructors who are qualified and experienced, as determined by the development status of the social work profession in any given country, and provision of orientation for fieldwork supervisors or instructors.
- Provision for the inclusion and participation of field instructors in curriculum development.
- A partnership between the educational institution and the agency (where applicable) and service users in decision-making regarding field education and the evaluation of students' fieldwork performance.

- Making available, to fieldwork instructors or supervisors, a field instruction manual that details its fieldwork standards, procedures, assessment standards/criteria and expectations.
- Ensuring that adequate and appropriate resources, to meet the needs of the fieldwork component of the programme, are made available.
- Clear plans for the organisation, implementation and evaluation of the theory and field education components of the programme (Sewpaul and Jones, 2004).

In this perspective began the evolution of field action projects (presently referred to as social labs or live labs) by the leading social work institutions in the country. These initiatives actually provided both meeting the needs of the target population and a platform for the students to practice. Later on the different social work and related agencies are included as the place for fieldwork for the student in and around the state, country and even outside the country. This calls for a highly professionalized approach in social work practicum. This paper looks into the major challenges faced by the students, teachers and the agencies/live labs in providing the training for the students. It also throws light on the different issues in the entire process of fieldwork in Kerala. Finally, it highlights the best practices that can be replicated for the benefit of the students.

### **Fieldwork in Social Work Education: Issues and Challenges**

Students undergoing fieldwork may be placed in settings in which they are engaged in direct practice or indirect service provision. All student social workers are expected to develop certain competencies that are considered essential. These include the application of the ethics of social work practice, the use of critical thinking to guide decision-making, the acceptance and understanding of diversity in practice, the advancement of social justice, the participation in the development of policies that impact social service provision and the engagement, assessment and intervention with individuals, families, groups and communities (Johnson et.al., 2012).

**General structure of fieldwork:** Social work training institutions generally use these forms of fieldwork in Kerala, namely exposure visits, concurrent, block, a combination of all three and 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 of 25-30 days. Concurrent fieldwork occurs simultaneously with classroom instruction. Typically, students spend two days in a week at the field agency and the remaining four days in the classroom. The beauty of the 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 concerns with the faculty supervisor and this can contribute to effective integration of theory and practice. A major limitation of this arrangement is that students have to be attached to agencies within the proximity of the college. Students are denied the opportunity to work in preferred areas of social work intervention. Another disadvantage is the possibility that the fieldwork experience becomes more fragmented and students are unable to do justice to either classroom or fieldwork because of the overlapping expectations of the agency and the college. Many of the agencies of late do not prefer concurrent fieldwork thus it becomes difficult to arrange agencies for the fieldwork. While the block placement allows students to immerse themselves 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 lack of consultation with the faculty supervisor. At times the agency may not give the students enough exposure to the social work intervention but only do the administrative work. Over the years there is an escalation in the number of institutions offering social work training. This development has placed a strain on the ability of social service agencies to provide fieldwork experiences for students and consequently has led to increasing challenges in securing placements for students. At times the fieldwork for the students becomes an

expensive affair to manage.

**Fieldwork syllabus:** A fieldwork syllabus can shape the content of what is learned by students through a practice curriculum and students are empowered through the existence of an explicit written syllabus. They can also have an understanding of required learning at the start of the placement itself. With a given curriculum it is possible to know what a student has learnt 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. According to the view of the agencies and students some of the colleges in Kerala are yet to prepare a syllabus on fieldwork.

**Supervision:** Learning through social work practicum takes place through regular and continuous facilitation. Usually the term employed is supervision. It is an integral and essential part and aims at developing core skills such as observation, listening and communication, intervention, relationship building, skills in fact finding, recording, analysis, administrative procedures, planning, organisation, and implementation in students. At the social work schools generally every student is placed with a faculty member such as a faculty supervisor and an agency supervisor, who is generally a trained social worker. The facilitation takes place through periodic individual and group conferences, scrutiny of the weekly reports; faculty visits to the agency and discussion with the agency supervisor/personnel. Guidance and support are inevitable in the process of the supervision. It affords students the opportunity to practise reflection, and to build skills related to professional use-of- self. Under supervision, students can learn to communicate issues or concerns in ways that are direct, open, and honest.

**Group conference and individual conference:** These are important components in supervision. Individual conference with the faculty supervisor provides the student to explore his / her goals, learning styles, aspirations, fears, worries, intelligence and energy. Whereas group conference is a platform in which they learn from one another. In the group conference students of each group are encouraged to present their achievements, learning gains and concerns with the entire work and the team. It is an energizing exercise. Faculty supervisor encourages the students to prepare a resource file of their respective client system.

**Recording:** It is basically a learning tool for the student. It is meant to develop in the student the skills of presenting information in an organized manner. It serves as a tool both for the student and the concerned faculty to assess the growth of the student as a professional. It becomes a database for the agency and worker for further follow up and research on it. Students are required to submit weekly recordings to their concerned faculty supervisor before the individual conferences. In the block pattern, the students are encouraged to do daily recording of the activities, and send them to the faculty supervisor once a week. The recording should have the utilization of time, the details about activities and a section of analysis based on the theoretical inputs. It should also have a critical reflection on the activities, the problems, the gaps, the government policy, and the possibility for improvement.

**Fieldwork evaluation:** In training the process of evaluation is a continuous one. It helps the trainee to grow in self-awareness which is necessary for the development of a professional social worker. During the teaching-learning process of fieldwork, the student and the faculty supervisor are expected to share the initiative in evaluating the student's performance in the fieldwork. While for each semester, attainment of the distinct and definite learning goals are to be assessed as part of the evaluation; certain common areas form the part of evaluation during the entire programme, namely, areas of learning, achievements, areas of strength/improvement, areas on future learning and growth of 'self' as a professional social worker. The evaluation is done on the development of the student in three areas, knowledge, attitude and skills with respect to the semester field practicum objectives. They are cumulative in nature, i.e., while new ones are added as required in the new semester, the old ones are essentially retained, and the new ones are built on them. Evaluation is not limited to the written and formal end of placement evaluation, but is

implicit through weekly individual conferences. Though the responsibility of grading the field performance of the student lies primarily with the respective faculty supervisor, in order to ensure some standardization, the final grades are awarded after a discussion of the student performance in the department faculty council.

**Fieldwork presentation:** At the end of the each semester the students have to present their fieldwork experiences generally before the panel of teachers and agency supervisors. Students are expected to make presentations creatively using the different media.

Field supervisors play the major 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 dialogue between the training institution, the agency supervisor and the agency. It is probably in recognition of this fact that the IASSW and IFSW spell out the need for training institutions to provide fieldwork manuals and orientation to agency supervisors. This enables them to appreciate the expectations of their role and also ensures that students are given optimum opportunity to develop professional knowledge and skill. Though the use of qualified and experienced supervisors is quite critical in any professional training the supervision of students by non-social workers remains a common practice in Kerala. Some of the field supervisors even do not know the purpose of fieldwork. Many institutions have not taken enough steps to organize training for field supervisors. Students complain that the agencies do not have any clear ideas about fieldwork. They engage the students with clerical work. Defining student roles is an important step, so the student can benefit fully from the educational opportunity, while providing appropriate service to both clients and agencies.

### **Challenges in the Management of Fieldwork**

The fieldwork in social work education is an ongoing process of moving between one's teaching, outlook, field action and research, administration and consultation, and evaluative reflection and back again to building critical perspectives. Fieldwork placement opportunities should provide an environment within which students can be exposed to the professional realities of practice in social work. Against this background a study was conducted. The purpose of this study is basically to expose the challenges in the management of fieldwork faced by the educators, agencies and students in Kerala. The study is based on the view that while theory and fieldwork are of equal importance in social work education yet the latter is marginalized and it is not given the importance that it deserves. These views were collected from the respondents through telephonic interviews.

**Teachers:** Care has been taken to include the views of both senior as well as the junior educators in Kerala. Social work profession calls for multiple tasking. Often fieldwork gets side tracked with other pressing concerns of professional growth, institutional needs and personal works. Shortage of teachers is also a challenge. There are institutions where only two or three teachers handle the entire programme. The teachers, both senior and the juniors, feel devoting the exact stipulated time for each student is a distant dream. Supervision comes down to a level of just correcting the recordings. Lack of practice experience of the teachers is also a challenge. Fresher's find it difficult to guide their students effectively. Time constraints prevent them from getting experiential knowledge through action oriented research. Some of the teachers feel there is a problem in getting fieldwork placements in reputed agencies. Many such agencies prefer the structure of block placement rather than concurrent placement. At times the distance to such organizations also put a financial burden on the students. "Ironically such fieldwork actually gives a chance to take block leave," a faculty added.

**Agencies:** Students have enthusiasm and passion for social work, new ideas and an inquisitive mind. Agencies have found most of the students do not hesitate to ask questions and are eager to learn. Students working alongside experienced social workers quickly immerse

themselves in social work practice. It is great to witness students gaining in confidence as they progress through their placement. They bring vibrancy to the agency which they value. Fieldwork placements are a positive two-way experience for agencies. In return the agencies provide a constructive and enjoyable learning experience for students in a supportive, team environment. In their views the following are the challenges in the management of fieldwork placement.

- To balance students' supervision and completion of their work become at times a burden. When staff has to work on a target and time bound projects, constraints of time is a real challenge.
- The agencies get students from different colleges, managing and providing them with exposure and experience is a concern for many of the agencies.
- Students' lack self motivation, initiatives and creativity.
- Managing students who do not have the relevant aptitude and right attitude for the profession is a concern in recent years. The staff has to check on the adherence to attendance, required clock hours, and performance of duties.
- Some of the agencies feel that concurrent placement is not beneficial for the agency and the students may not get possible exposures. In contrast providing students with one whole month of work is also a dilemma for some.
- All the agencies look forward to the faculty supervision and their involvement in the students' work. Often they have to be satisfied with only the visitation or telephonic enquiry. Some colleges do not even do this bare minimum requirement.

Students: Fieldwork is perhaps the most eagerly and anxiously anticipated part of the social work education. Students can experience a range of conflicting emotions prior to placement ranging from excitement to self-doubt. Once fieldwork begins it can be exhilarating, exhausting, affirming, and challenging. It is through practice that knowledge begins to be tested and skills are applied and further developed takes place with an attitudinal change. The following views have been collected through the experiences sharing result awaiting MSW (Master of Social Work) students from different colleges in Kerala.

- Many students felt there was lack of supervision by their faculty supervisors especially during block placement. Since the students are placed in far of places it is not possible to have direct consultation with the faculty. The students get even the corrected recordings only when they are back in the college. Some students also mentioned they get their clarifications and guidance through telephone or electronic mail.
- Lack of professional social workers in some agencies is another challenge faced by some of the students.
- Some of the students also felt that the colleges had defined objectives for fieldwork for each semester. Many of the agencies got their specific jobs done by the students. Thus the students faced tough challenges in fulfilling the requirements of both. Some of the leading colleges had in their learning contract the semester requirements, agency needs and the students initiatives clearly incorporated.
- The use of student as substitute employees was another problem experienced by some.
- Some agencies do not have any scope for the students' initiatives and creativity. They were made to do only administrative work. It also lacked a challenging exposure. In some of the residential institutions even the clients were aware of the case work and group work. Students shared they felt embarrassed to do the same case again and again which was already done by different students.
- Writing a report linking theory in particular was a challenge for some of the students.
- For a few, some of the field placements at times were a financial constraint.

### **Fieldwork in Social Work Education: Best Practices**

The 'best practice' is a technique or methodology that has evolved through experience and research. Here some of the best practices adopted by the School of Social Work of Rajagiri College of Social Sciences are discussed.

**Development through Live-Labs:** Many of the social work training institutions have initiated live labs of their own. The School of Social Work of Rajagiri College has the unique feature of an array of practice cells, which have been named live-labs. They serve as the practice wing of the School of Social Work, providing models and avenues for the Social Work trainees. Each student is allocated to a minimum of two exposures to live-labs, with the twin intention of gaining professional experience, and encouraging voluntarism and a spirit of service, which form part of the professional social work. Their involvement with the live-labs is assessed, and a weightage is given in the fieldwork evaluation for the same. Besides the voluntary assignment, at times, the students are also assigned to the live-labs for their regular concurrent / block field practicum as well. Following are the live labs in which students generally do their fieldwork, namely, Rajagiri Out Reach, Family Counselling Centre, Adoption Coordinating Agency, Middle Level Training Centre, Research Institute, and Child Line. In these live labs they have trained professional social workers. Out Reach alone has more than 50 professional social workers in it. Rajagiri live labs cater to all the student social workers from in and outside the country with regard to different specialization.

**Public-Private collaboration:** Another healthy practice is that of building tie-ups with the initiatives of the state and various autonomous bodies. It includes student involvement as Voluntary Executives of Kutumbasree (VEK), as community volunteers for the World Bank assisted by the Jananidhi Project, research collaboration with Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA), and for the CSR of the leading corporate sector, Social audit in collaboration with the local self governments, work with National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), National AIDS Control Organization etc.

**'Know Your Neighborhood' programme:** An innovation training begins from where students are, which is termed as 'Know Your Neighborhood Programme' through which the student learner is sent out to learn about one's own community from a development and welfare perspective. This is a 10 days of self-learning programme through observation, reading, interviews, discussions about their own locality and its diverse resources, problems and prospects. The programme intends to acquire adequate qualitative and quantitative data regarding various institutions, organizations, developmental programmes, projects and services in their own home village / town which are considered as public resources. They should also acquire sufficient information about various socio-economic problems, developmental issues and concerns of the people of their neighborhood. This self-learning at the beginning of their social work education will sensitize the students and facilitate better learning at subsequent levels of studies.

**Organizational observational visits:** After the Know Your Neighborhood Programme the students are better disposed towards the observational visits. The field orientations in the form of observational visits introduces them to various settings of social work practice. This is organized in order to give the students an exposure and orientation to the ongoing services by different groups and individuals for addressing people's needs. Organizational / Agency visits are held all through the BSW, PGDAHS and MSW programmes. With reference to MSWs in the first semester, the visits begin with the major objective of exposing students to various settings and modes of social work practice. They are meant to give the student an idea of the possibilities ahead, to understand the element of professionalism, the issues and the problems involved. In the second semester, visits conducted in connection with the theory papers such as Counseling and Gandhian Studies. In the third and fourth semesters, visits to specialization fields are

conducted, for specialization in their topics, or as part of further exploration. The college also organizes orientation programmes for the students prior to their field placements. This gives the students an opportunity to interact with their respective agency supervisors. The students are able to clarify their doubts and through discussion can prepare a learning contract during the orientation programme.

**Social sensitization camp:** Social sensitization camp has evolved as one of the most important activities of Rajagiri College of Social Sciences (RCSS). It focuses on generating social sensitivity. It is an integral part of the curriculum during the first semester. The camp experience is gained in three phases like pre-camp orientation, planning and preparation in groups, the actual camp experience and post camp evaluation. It provides occasions for experiential learning about rural people, rural life and rural areas, it also gives them a taste of physical / manual labour and hard realities of life to the students. This leads them into a firsthand experience in participatory planning, coordination, and management of a programme. It also brings out the creative expression of the potentialities and opportunities for developing creativity. This camp of 10 days is often organized as a National Service Scheme programme, under the special camp category.

**Study tour:** This forms an essential component of the third semester field practicum. It intends to present the students with a view of the social work scenario beyond the boundaries of the state. It also serves as a tool of learning from the field of practice through a detailed process of identifying issues in social work and the development sector, setting specific goals for learning from the field, and familiarizing with the art of programme planning and implementation by actually undergoing such a process. Generally it is a 10-14 days programme with 10-12 field visits. This enables the students to interact with practitioners and other partners/stakeholders in a development project/service delivery system. Through this students can establish contacts with development / social work agencies working in their specialized areas. The students also prepare a documentary based on their trip to various agencies and presents it before the junior batch and the faculty council.

**Annual conference/seminar (Dyuti):** The departmental annual conference, Dyuti, is a mega event organized by the collective effort of the entire department, with the students playing a pivotal role in planning, mobilizing resources, organizing, coordinating and documenting the function. It is envisaged as a platform for discussion on relevant issues in the context of social work as a profession by bringing in people of high standing in the concerned field from all over India and abroad. The year-long planning and the hosting of Dyuti have always brought a festive spirit in all Rajagirians.

**International placement opportunity:** The students are encouraged to take up international placement during their final year block placement. The college also has a tie-up with various universities outside India. Some of them are as follows:

**Rajagiri Student Overseas Internship Programme:** Katho University College, Department of Social Sciences, Kortrijk, Belgium: The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) of bilateral understanding was signed in 2004, between Katho University, Belgium, and RCSS. As per the agreement every year, the living expenses of three students and a faculty member is borne by Katho International at Katho. BSW students are selected every year through a screening process held within the campus.

University of Applied Sciences, Western Switzerland: Since 2011 three MSW students are selected for the Summer University at University of Applied Sciences, Western Switzerland. The total expenses for three weeks placement are borne by the Summer University.

BSW Students on Field Practicum Internship Nepal and Sri Lanka: The students from final year BSW often do their one-month internship in Nepal and Sri Lanka. They generally go to developmental and welfare agencies of these countries.



RCSS also has signed MOU with the following University for the Twinning programme  
University of Maryland, School of Social Work, Baltimore, USA from 1998  
Graduate School of Counselling Psychology, Assumption University, Thailand from 2004  
School of Social Work, University of Applied Sciences, western Switzerland from 2012.

RCSS has an international academic tie-up for professors in social work, social work students and practicing social workers. From 1997 onwards the following universities send their students regularly for internship to Rajagiri:

Salem State College, Massachusetts; Rutgers

The State University of New Jersey and West Michigan University, USA

Laval University, Quebec and Moncton University, Canada

Göteborgs Universitet; Lund University; Mid Sweden University and Malmö University, Sweden

University of Co-operative Education at Stuttgart, and Berufsakademie in Stuttgart, Germany

University of Ghent, Belgium, Zurich University, Switzerland.

From 2005 onwards:

University of Maryland, School of Social Work, Baltimore, USA

Katholieke Universiteit, Kortrijk, Belgium

Université Catholique de Lille, France

University of Washington, USA

Juniata College, USA

Ryerson University, Canada

Dominican University, Graduate School of Social Work, USA

University of Amsterdam, Holland

University of Bayreuth, Germany

The international academic tie-up gives the opportunity for Rajagirians to interact with them on the campus. They organize classes, seminars workshops and even conduct research jointly. It also enables them to work together in social sensitization camp, study tour and field placement.

Fieldwork manual: Some of the training institutions in Kerala have developed a fieldwork manual. Rajagiri has a comprehensive fieldwork manual with all the semester wise details like fieldwork objectives, components, requirements, evaluation criteria, guidelines for supervision, and model recordings. It is given to all the students, agencies, and teachers. This serves as a reference book.

### Conclusion

The fieldwork is envisaged in three stages: Exposure, Insertion and Immersion. The initial phase is that of exposing various settings and situations to the students; in field practicum proper, the student is introduced into the profession of social work, basically through an open community learning opportunity, with linkages with one or many of the existing systems or resources. Immersion phase is an expected stage of growth in the student's life, when the student absorbs the professional values and is able to take one's stand and get immersed in the field in which one is introduced. 'Practice makes human perfect' is the adage often used. It would indeed set the individuals on the track to perfection. As the Sanskrit saying goes, 'abhyasat siddhim apnoti'—skill comes through practice (Rajagiri College of Social Sciences, 2009).

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