

‘Know Your Neighbourhood’: An Innovative Programme in the Fieldwork Practicum of Social Work Education

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Abstract

Social Work Practicum enables the learner to develop professional skills through the process of action-reflection in a real life situation. As an essential component of fieldwork, Rajagiri School of Social Work has introduced an innovative practice titled as ‘Know Your Neighbourhood Programme’ where the students who are admitted to Master of Social Work (MSW) Programme are expected to undergo ten days of self-learning through observation, interviews, discussions about their own locality and its diverse resources, problems and prospects. The objective of the assignment is that students are motivated to acquire adequate information regarding various institutions and developmental programmes, in their own home village / town. They should also acquire sufficient information about various socio economic problems of the people of their neighbourhood. This process is envisaged as an opportunity to acquire better insights into the socio cultural realities of one’s own locality. This kind of self-learning at the beginning of MSW Programme will sensitize the students and facilitate them to better learning at subsequent levels of studies. The students may visit various governmental / non-governmental / private institutions and meet the concerned officials to understand the functioning as well as various services offered by these institutions. They also have to make a transect walk to understand the geographical features and natural resources of the place and to meet a few senior citizens to understand the history and traditions of the locality. Based on this study, a report of about 20 pages is to be submitted to their respective faculty facilitator and they have to share their experiences in the introductory sessions. An evaluation of the programme is carried out to understand its’ effectiveness. The programme has been found to be successful in facilitating self-learning as well as enhancing the social awareness of the MSW students.

Keywords

neighbourhood, social work practicum, self-learning, curriculum

Introduction

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The profession of social work is primarily devoted to addressing the diverse needs and problems of individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities by helping them to restore or enhance their social functioning. As a practice-oriented profession, social work deals with a wide spectrum of social issues and concerns that range from struggles against unjust societal structures to attending to people's psychological problems. The definition of social work according to International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) is "The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance their well-being. Employing theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at those points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work" (IFSW, 2012).

The mission of social work is to enable all people to develop their full potential, enrich their lives, and prevent dysfunction. Professional social work is focused on problem solving and change. As such, social workers are change agents in society and in the lives of the individuals, families and communities they serve. Social work is an interrelated system of values, theory and practice. The framework of social work is based on humanitarian and democratic ideals, and its dominant values are respect for equality, worth, and dignity of all people. The social work profession draws on theories of human development and behaviour and social systems to analyze complex situations and to facilitate individual, organizational, social and cultural changes. The evidence based knowledge derived from practice evaluation and action research contributes to enrich the methodologies in social work. Social workers respond to problem situation by utilizing a variety of skills, techniques and activities which are based on the methods of social work. These interventions include counselling, clinical social work, family management and mobilizing resources for community organization and development (IFSW, 2012).

The discipline of social work is characterized by its constant innovation in field practice by addressing the expanding and deepening problems of the society. It has a 100 plus years of history in social work education, with the first social work class being offered in the summer of 1898 at Columbia University (NASW, 2014), it vouches that the social workers all over the world have made many innovative services in this field to address the societal needs and problems (NASW, 2014). Social work education was started in India in the year 1936 by the Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work (presently, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai), as an adaptation of an educational programme of the United States of America, where social welfare services were meant "to assist the people in their adjustment to an industrial, urban and metropolis dominated social milieu" (UGC, 1978, cited in Lawani, 2002). The objectives of social work education aimed at providing sound professional education and creating opportunities for advanced studies and to enable the trainees to be efficient and good administrators in various social welfare organizations and to carry out independent social work research and social investigations for promoting social change and development (Lawani, 2002).

Fieldwork in Social Work Education

The social work education comprises of classroom training and learning from the actual fields of practice. While the classroom education provides theoretical knowledge and understanding of social work methods to the learners, fieldwork ensures the learning of social work training by the doing aspect. Dewey's idea of learning through doing has had a primary influence in the concept of fieldwork (Lawani, 2002). Fieldwork in social work education means any kind of

practical experiences in a social organization or agency, this experience has been deliberately arranged for the education of the students, who are undertaking these courses designed for social workers. It is an interactive process between a student and a social life situation. Fieldwork in social work is carried out in and through social welfare agencies and communities, where the student learns skills, test out knowledge according to an educational plan (Subhedar, 2001). Field practice is a process of learning the techniques, skills, strategies and use of methods of social work in fieldwork (Bhanti, 1996).

The distinguishing feature of social work education is the social work practicum which makes social work training a unique programme among various social science disciplines. The topmost priority is given to fieldwork in all prestigious universities which offer programmes in Social Work. Many western Schools of Social Work have metaphorically used the coinage that Field is the heart of social work education to highlight the importance of fieldwork training in social work education. "Field is the heart of social work education. These internships created the opportunity to experience social work practice in all of its various forms, and to apply the theoretical learning of the classroom to real agency situations with clients, programs, colleagues, and communities" (SFSU, 2014). Social work practicum forms the core of Social Work Training which plays a pivotal role and provides the experiential basis for the student's academic progress. According to the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) guidelines for the assessment of Schools of Social Work for accreditation, Social Work Practicum, ideally, should form 50 per cent of the total academic training (TISS, 2003). An acceptable standard is one-third of the total training, i.e., a minimum of 30 days per semester (90 days) is to be stipulated for Fieldwork Practice. Social Work Practicum enables the learner to develop professional skills through the process of action-reflection in the real life situation.

Three Stages of Field Practicum

The field practicum could be envisaged as a process consisting of 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 inserted 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 inserted with necessary competence (RCSS, 2009). Observational visits to social work agencies, social sensitization camp, concurrent social work practicum, block placement, summer placement, study tour, organization of annual conference / seminar, field survey and action research projects are the usual means employed to guide the students through the aforesaid stages of exposure, insertion and immersion of Fieldwork training (RCSS, 2009).

'Know Your Neighbourhood' Programme of Rajagiri School of Social Work

This is a pre-academic exposure programme, where the students are guided to learn from their own neighbourhood. As an essential component of field work, Rajagiri School of Social Work has introduced an innovative practice titled as 'Know Your Neighbourhood Programme' where the students who are admitted to the MSW programme are expected to undergo ten days of self-learning through observation, interviews, discussions about their own locality and its diverse resources, problems and prospects. The objective of the assignment is that students are motivated to acquire adequate information regarding various local institutions, development

programmes, local self government (LSG) in their own home village / town. They should also acquire sufficient information about various socio economic problems of the people of their neighbourhood (RCSS, 2009). This process is envisaged as an opportunity to acquire better insights into the socio-cultural realities of one's own locality. Such a self-learning at the beginning of MSW programme will sensitize the students and facilitate better learning at subsequent levels of studies (Sunirose, 2013).

Methodology of the Programme

The MSW students are expected to visit the various governmental / non-governmental / private institutions in their respective Panchayat / Municipality and meet the concerned officials to understand both the functioning of the institutions and various services offered by those institutions to people. The following instructions are given to the students to facilitate the learning process:

- Acquire a copy of the developmental report of the Panchayat / Municipality / Corporation.
- Visit a few self-help groups, local clubs, like youth clubs, or a farmers' association to understand their functioning.
- Do a transect walk to understand the geographical features and natural resources.
- Meet a few senior citizens to understand the local history and traditions of the village.
- Interview a few women, young people, children and a few elderly to understand the problems of the locality.
- Based on the work, prepare a report of about 20 pages and submit it to the irrespective faculty facilitator for evaluation.
- A formal presentation and sharing of personal experience in the class (RCSS, 2009).

A checklist for identifying the resources in the community is given to the students along with the guidelines for the assignments. The students are recommended to visit the maximum number of institutions / organizations within the stipulated time period. The following is a model checklist for the students.

- 1) Panchayat Office, 2) Village Office, 3) Krishibhavan, 4) Anganawadi of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Project, 5) P. H. C / Hospitals, 6) Police Station, 7) Veterinary Hospital, 8) Co-operative societies (credit, producers co-operatives like dairy / fisheries), 9) Community Development Society (CDS) of Kudumbashree and Micro Enterprises units, 10) Children's associations, youth clubs and Senior citizen forums / MahilaSamajams, 11) Factories / Industries, Public and Private Firms / Small Scale industries), 12) public libraries / Continuing Education Centres, 13) Trade Unions, 14) Banking Institutions, 15) Special Schools / Schools / Colleges 16) NGOs / Orphanages, 17) Farmer's Forums and their farms, 18) Amusement Parks / Theaters, 19) Religious centres (Churches / Temples / Mosques), 20) Common Facilities (Beach, Railway Station, Bus Stands), and 21) Natural Resources—Springs, Rivers, Forest, etc.

Evaluation of the Programme

A study was conducted among the first year MSW students of the School of Social Work of Rajagri College of Social Sciences (RCSS) who have completed the assignment of 'Know your

Neighbourhood Programme ‘in the year 2012. The major objective of the study was to understand the various benefits obtained by the students and their evaluation about the effectiveness of the programme.

A structured questionnaire was used to collect the required data from the 30 first year MSW students deputed for this study. The analysis of the data and subsequent interpretations based on the objective of the study is presented in the following section. The socio economic profile of the students is analyzed in terms of variables such as age, gender, caste / communities, economic status, education, locality and major occupation of the head of the household (HOH).

The majority of the MSW students (66.7%) were females. The economic status of the family is determined by the official deceleration of the family as Above Poverty Line (APL) or Below Poverty Line (BPL) by the Government. Majority of the students (90%) belonged to the APL section and a most of them (73.3%) were from the rural background. Eighty per cent of the students had obtained their undergraduate degree in arts and social sciences subjects. The occupation of the HOH was found to be from five different sections (agriculture-20%, business-13%, private sector-23%, government sector-20% and the rest were Non Residential Indians (NRIs)). About 24 per cent of the heads of families were (NRI) and this indicates the migratory pattern of the people of Kerala who go in search of employment outside the country. All the students were from the state of Kerala and most of the students were from the central region of the State where their college was situated.

Participation of students in National Service Scheme (NSS) and in the activities of different students clubs in the college may often motivated them to opt for social work as their future profession. The following Table provides the data in this regard.

Table 1: Membership / Participation of Students in Associations at Degree Level

<i>Item</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
Membership in the NSS unit of the College	30	11	36.7
Membership in Clubs of the College	30	18	60.0
Membership in Local clubs	30	11	36.7
Participation in Rural camps	30	9	30.0

Only 36.7 per cent of the students were members in NSS during their undergraduate level but a good number of the students had worked in the nature clubs, tourism clubs and other similar associations during their degree level but only very few had participated in the rural camps organized by the NSS units of the respective colleges. Memberships in the local level clubs are also found to be very low among the students.

The students’ interaction with various institutions and resource systems of the community are presented in Table 2 to understand the effectiveness of the ‘Know Your Neighbourhood Programme’.

Table 2: Students Interaction with Agencies in the Locality

<i>No.</i>	<i>Agency</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>V-E*</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>V-KYNP#</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%change</i>
1	Village Office	30	24	80	28	93.3	13.3
2	Panchayat Office	30	21	70	28	93.3	23.3
3	Public Health Centre (PHC)	30	17	56.7	21	70.0	13.3

4	Police Station	30	6	20	17	56.7	36.7
5	KrishiBhavan	30	10	33.3	21	70.0	36.7
6	Anganawadi (ICDS centre)	30	15	50	22	70.3	20.3
7	Cooperatives (PACS / DCS)	30	6	20	9	30.0	10.0
8	NHG of Kudumbashree / others	30	9	30	11	36.7	6.7
9	Local clubs (children, youth)	30	13	43.3	16	53.3	10.0
10	Local Trade Unions	30	1	3.3	3	10.0	6.7
11	Orphanages / Special school / NGO's	30	17	56.7	21	70.0	13.3

Legend: *V-E: Visited Earlier #V-KYNP: Visited as part of the Know Your Neighbourhood Programme (KYNP).

To understand the level of interaction of the students with various societal institutions and facilities, the students were asked about their visits to these areas. They were asked whether they had visited the centre earlier for any reason or had they visited these areas as part of the given field related assignment. The findings are:

- Majority of the students had contacted the village office and Panchayat office for their personal purposes earlier but the assignment had specifically helped more students to visit and understand the functioning of these offices (13.3% to 23.3% increase).
- Only 56.7 per cent of students had visited PHC earlier but as part of the assignment 70 per cent of the students had visited and interacted with the staff of the Public Health Centre (PHC).
- A few students (20%) had visited the Police station earlier, KYNP has helped about 36.7 per cent students to visit the police station and interact with the police officials.
- Majority (70%) of the students had visited KrishiBhavan, Anganawadi of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and orphanages as part of the assignment.
- Students' interaction with cooperative institutions, neighbourhood groups and trade unions are found to be very low even in the context of the assignment.

Table 3 provides the details of the ranking given by the students regarding the major benefits of the pre-training assignment.

Table 3: Perception of students regarding the merits of the Programme (N=30)

<i>Statements about the Programme</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S. D</i>	<i>Rank</i>
The visits have helped to improve the self confidence to interact with people	1.93	1.40	1
The visits have motivated self-learning	2.93	1.64	2
The visits have helped them to understand the working of the agencies	3.43	2.13	3
The visits have helped to understand the community resources	3.50	1.89	4
The visits have helped to follow the MSW classes effectively	4.27	2.21	5
The visits were useful in understanding social problems	4.63	1.77	6

The most important merit of the programme perceived by the students was that the programme has helped them to improve their self confidence to interact with the people. The methodology of the assignment was such that the students have to go independently and interact with the officials and collect the necessary information for their study. No letter of authorization was given from the college to the students so that students had to use their personal skills and competence to meet the concerned officials to collect the necessary information for the study. The second important merit reported by the students was that the visits have motivated self-learning. A major objective of the assignment was facilitating self-learning which was noticed to have been realized through the process of these assignments. The understanding of the functioning of the agencies, community resources were given subsequent priority by the students.

The feedbacks of the students regarding the given assignment are collected through open ended questions. Students' personal gains as well as their insights from the programme are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4: Students' feedback regarding the Programme
(N=30)

<i>Statements</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
Improved the self-confidence of the student to interact with people	17	56.67
Programme has helped the student in self-learning	16	53.33
Obtained knowledge of local self government (LSG) and the Programme of Government for Development and Welfare	15	50.00
A positive perception regarding the government officials that they are approachable and helpful	10	33.33
The improvement in the communication skills of the students	9	30.00
Understand the community resources as well as problems of the village	8	26.67
The programme was a new learning experience and exposure	8	26.67

About 50 per cent of the students are of the opinion that the programme has helped to improve their self confidence and promoted self-learning and they could obtain knowledge about the working of the LSG institutions and the programmes of various government departments. A major insight for some students was their change in perception about government officials. Contrary to their assumptions the officials with whom they have interacted were found to be friendly and very helpful in providing the necessary information for the study. Improvement in communication skills was another merit observed by a few students. The learning method was a new experience for some of the students.

Conclusion

The initial phase of the fieldwork practicum of exposing the students to various settings and situations of the society in which they live and interact was introduced to them as a pre-academic exercise of 'Know Your Neighbourhood Programme.' It was a critical and conscious exposure of the students to the primary realities of their neighborhood and the local village. The students are now motivated to acquire adequate primary information regarding various societal institutions and programmes, through the process of self-learning. The evaluation of the programme reveals that it has helped the students in many ways like promoting their self-confidence, enhancing communication / interaction skills and facilitating self-learning.

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