

## Educating through the 'Field' in North East Region

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### Research Article

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#### ABSTRACT

Social Work Education is incomplete without field work. In a complex reality of life and liberty in North East Region, professional social work interventions are rare and minimal. The understanding of field work education is a contemporary reality for many social work agencies in this region. In this paper, I have captured my experiences of working as a student, as a practitioner and then as an educator who have engaged in the fieldwork program both from an agency as well as from the faculty side. I intend to bring in self-reflective learning and engage in a dialogue with the approaches, practices and perspectives while dealing with student's concerns during their field work learning experience. Any unintended shortcomings are regretted and expect the readers to be patient with the de-constructionist approach.

### INTRODUCTION

Field Work is that part of social work which is integral to professional learning. In fact when most of the theories are unimaginable, field work makes it possible to relate to such theories. Some people follow the theories to the last word and some just create new theories while discarding the existing ones even before testing these theories in the field. Field Work is understood in diverse ways by both students and teachers. Students look for field work as a getaway from the daily rigor of academic work and teachers assume fieldwork as the testing ground for their theoretical lessons in class. Social Work practice considers field work to be part of the practical understanding of people, problems and possible solutions for those problems. But for academic disciplines in other social sciences field work is a space to witness the events as an objective observer and then develop strategies to analyze the situations. But in social work practice, fieldwork is a process of engagement of the student social work with the real problems of people and thereby understands the context of the work which is supplemented by theoretical perspectives. Definition of fieldwork given by Srinivas is that field work is an educationally planned and professionally guided program of interaction of a student with the real situation experienced through welfare, institutional, multi-organizational and people based system in order to help her/him perceive, understand, appreciate existing human conditions and work to bring about desired improvement and change in them.

### LOCATING INDIVIDUAL PRACTICE WITH THE NORTH EAST CONTEXT

My engagement with fieldwork in social work has been to be able to change situations instantly in whatever way I can when I was a student. I would call a rather impatient way of dealing with field work realities. For me if I am doing something in the field then it has to have an impact on the client system, I am engaged with. In case there is not much impact then there is something wrong. As a field work supervisor for students, I have worked with NGOs to help social work students to gain knowledge, experience and skills in the field of their study. During that period, NGOs do not value field work for social work students as a process of learning. They consider students as a liability because of the short time frame. They cannot correlate the process of incubation of students to contribute to the social work practice and also generate voluntary support for the organizations. Most organizations fear that immature students misinterpret the agency interventions in a way that does not reflect the agencies well in the light of the donors. Some organizations also find the students very effective in testing ground for new projects they would like to initiate in their field areas and also at the same time some students are involved in assessing the impact of the interventions which were made in the past. Students are hardly given the scope, space and freedom to reflect and practice some of the social

work skills in the field areas. For a social work practitioner in North East, some of the inherent challenges are related to not being part of the standpoint socio-political contexts of the region which defines the very nature of the work in this region <sup>[4]</sup>. Field work in the current context has become a reality. It has become a process of assessing skills, learning and perspectives of a student. Field work is related to exploring newer locations and this search for novelty has helped in innovations and also hampered in a way that today field workers are not practice interventionists but rather they are agency allies or surveyors who cannot make an impact in the community. Field Work process in block has become more of an orientation process for the students of social work. While concurrent field work practice in the North East is still a new concept. Since too many students come for concurrent field work in the limited organizations available for students to go for fieldwork, client system is exhausted with the queries of the students. There is a greater need for more agencies and also incorporate social work practice in unconventional sectors within the current economic model.

## **CURRENT POSITIONS OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN NORTH EAST**

The essence of field work is drawn from the historical context of social work intervention during times of crisis and difficulties. Some categories of social work intervention are associated with health care, cure and prevention, livelihood support services, livelihood skill enhancement and also livelihood security measures. Field interventions also have issue based initiatives which are related to child rights, animal rights, women's rights, disability rights, human rights, LGBTQI rights, environmental rights, cultural rights of ethnic communities, tribal rights, minority rights, land rights, educational rights, food entitlement rights and many other rights based categories which are not enlisted here but which exists within different paradigms. Within North East region social work has been classified into government interventions through flagship programs of Sarba Siksha Abhijan, National Rural Livelihood Mission, National Rural Health Mission and Integrated Child Development Scheme and other such welfare schemes. Welfare model is most applicable to North East where professional social workers are engaged in field interventions. Another area of intervention is social welfare administration, where many social workers are engaged in administrative and office management work within semi-government and Non-Government organizations. In these agencies, social workers are in managerial positions and mostly responsible for project formulation, implementation and evaluation. They are also involved in trainings and resource mobilization. They have multiple roles and build their careers through different skill building processes and development initiatives. These tasks are relevant to organizations which are working with the support of multiple donors and also have a lot of resources to sustain the MSW professionals. Most of the professional social workers in North East region also operate independently as a consultant and as heads of organizations and enterprises which they have developed. These workers are more into policy advocacy work and project management work. They have hardly any time to have field based reflections unless it is mandatory to analyze their engagement with their field. Most of the development work is also donor driven and they work along the lines of the resources available for such work. Many initiatives which need support are sidelined due to lack of resources and staff.

## **Field Work Training for Social Work Students**

In the current position of being a field work coordinator and faculty supervisor for students of MSW at TISS Guwahati, I have experienced very interesting insights into the work done by agencies and also the praxis followed by students. While designing a field work plan for students in social work, student's learning has been the primary focus of the field work plan. So we tried to design the plan for field work in such a way where students could relate to their theory inputs in classrooms with the field interventions. In the first semester, students are placed in organizations and agencies which work through institutional settings. So far students have worked in child development agencies, women's empowerment agencies, old age homes, health work interventions, counseling centers for substance abuse and also in education specific organizations. In these settings students gets an experience of understanding working with individuals, groups and agencies intensively. In the second semester students are encouraged to work in open community settings or in agencies which have rural or urban community engagement. Students have also taken part in movement based alliances like NAPM, NBA, Shramik Adivasi Mukti Sang than to experience the learning from social action method. So here the students learn to experience the skills in community organization, mobilization, advocacy and social action by getting engaged in cause specific work. In the third semester, students are exposed to agencies working on research based work, trade unions, social planning and policy advocacy groups and also in resource support groups and donor agencies. Our students have worked in Oxfam, IGSSS, RGVN, Action Aid, Prayas, People's Science Institute and many such agencies which work on issues of resource mobilization. By this semester students are exposed to all the methods and skills of social work practice and they learn to conduct research activities and also contextualize participatory research through community interventions and advocate for policy change and policy implementation. In the final semester MSW students are exposed to undertaking choice based placements. Here students are given the freedom to choose their own setting to be able to develop their specific skills of practice better. Here students try to pursue those organizations where they would like to work with in future and also those organizations which will give them a flexible learning space. Most of our students have tried to explore organizations which work on areas like mental health, livelihoods, cultural rights, nomadic and de-notified tribes, disability issues and human rights issues. By now students are expected to understand the context of doing their field work and define the settings well to suit the needs and aspirations of the agencies and the client system at large. This holistic approach towards field work intervention has led students to understand the academic and analytical approaches of field work within the social work practice. Most students have tried to work within this framework. But some of them have also devised their own placements as

per convenience and personal choices. Some students have emerged to be loners while working in different settings. Individually they work very well but as a group they develop difficult dynamics which comes in the way of learning fresh perspectives. Some students have built very strong understanding of the issues of the organizations and have tried to contribute through their skills and expertise in software, technical knowhow or social skills on a particular issue. Few students have tried to resolve some of the core concerns shared in the agencies and carried forward the linkage with the client systems<sup>[2]</sup>. The students have also contributed in streamlining various interventions of the field agencies. Their work remains integrated into the larger scheme of things when it comes to planning, interventions and mobilization as far as the agency is concerned. Some students developed tangible results like contributing to annual reports, developing proposals, creating websites and also building groups in the communities, while many students struggled hard to find some space for themselves within very structured organizations.

## **PERCEPTIONS AND STRUGGLES OF STUDENTS**

Social Work interventions through student's field work can also make an impact if there is a good understanding with the field organizations. Most organizations in the North East Region believe that social work students will be good in preparing reports, power point presentations and documenting minutes of activities done by the organizations. In case some students engage themselves in critical questioning, such students are not entertained and abused verbally also. Most of our students have been able to address the critical concerns of the NGO interventions and also connected the real views of the client groups to the respective organizations. Some students have really made very interesting observations and got tremendous support from the agencies to carry forward with the specific work plans. Our students have lived in bare minimum conditions and have been able to adjust to very subsistence food,<sup>[3]</sup> hygiene and staying facilities. Many women students have adjusted to their menstrual cycles during the field work period and tried to continue with their work without requesting for withdrawal from field work during adverse health conditions. Some students have taken minimal leaves during their field work process to be able to finish their work on time in spite of severe dental and tonsillitis problems. Some of our students have also worked as house maids in the field guide's homes where they are placed in lieu of having a free staying facility in a city like Delhi.

## **CHALLENGING EXPERIENCES OF SUPERVISION**

In the recent times, students are so confident about the practice in the field that they do not look for external field staff support or even for supervision from the agency and also from the faculty supervisor. In my recent experiences of supervising students in rural practicum and during block field work process, some students with previous social work experience ideally dominate the groups with whom they work. They try to ensure that activities are done in some way or the other to be able to present in the field work seminar or to represent in the reports. They are not sensitive to the support provided by the field contacts and resource persons on the ground. In fact once when one field work agency staff offered to help with local contacts for a survey work in a village in Gujarat, our students said that they can find their way through the village through the internet and GPS device. I was almost taken aback with the extent of technological invasion into the learning process of social work practice. For me the community contact and goodwill of the agency will definitely weigh much more than a GPS direction. So, then we do not need to do transect walk, we can conduct PRA exercises through GPS only as all the villages are found in the GPS. I kept wondering if professionalization of social work practice has led to insensitivities or India's technological innovation has opened up newer possibilities of mobile interventions in rural set-ups. The approach towards social work supervision has been enabling, supportive and suggestive so far but in one of the practices, I could not practice the principle of controlled emotional involvement and reprimanded my students. The students misrepresented some of the agency commitments to the community and then the agency was rounded up by the community members<sup>[4]</sup>. In such a scenario, I had to react as a faculty supervisor. I shared my discontent with my students and they gathered what I meant but they never accepted what they missed out in contextualizing the issues. I still regret my approach and look forward to dealing with such situations more sensitively. Another situation which made me reflect on my approach for a very long time when one of my students, whom I had supervised share her views that she was hesitant to approaching me during her field work because I did not speak to her in her mother tongue. I was surprised with this revelation since I thought I was being fair by not indulging in relating to a student in his or her mother tongue but somehow that was misread by the student. Confidentiality is another issue which we grapple with as social work practitioners and faculty supervisors when it comes to students giving us S.O.S call for tough conditions. As a field work coordinator I was approached by some of my colleagues in very delicate circumstances. There were situations when agency supervisors misbehaved and demanded money from students to give the evaluation reports for their work. In some cases, students could not deal with their co-workers and developed difficult dynamics which had to be resolved with great sensitivity. The principles of choice and maturity were applied to the students to resolve such trying situations. Some instances made me develop very harsh stands on students to maintain an equal and just position. But this fairness, zeal for justice and equality might stand in the way of student's learning and perspective building. At times probably it is important for field work supervisors to retrospect their positions. "In essence, the attempt to ignore the backgrounds, while well meaning, is unrealistic because people are not only shaped by their identity and individual biographies but have pre-existing narratives that contribute to the ways people see themselves and to the ways in which they relate to other people and to the world around them."<sup>[5]</sup> I still feel the need to have enough space within the social work practitioners and educators to share our practice as supervisors with our peers, seniors and even students without being judgmental or without competing with our approach.

## EVALUATION OF FIELD WORK STUDENTS

Field work evaluation process has been a very intensive process so far. Student's self-evaluation tools are used in most of the instances but this process does not imply that students will be conscientious and apply their unbiased judgment. In one of the instance where one student was caught for plagiarism from his co-worker, we encouraged the student to rework on her/his assignments. The field work evaluation for some students who do not believe in social work principles, ethics and codes has been the most testing for me so far. While evaluating their work, layers of lenses tend to influence and it is a very difficult standpoint to take up which is unbiased and full proof. I constantly go through the dilemma where I try to understand the student's context for fulfillment or non-fulfillment of social work goals. It is very difficult to remove all forms of presumptions about the student's practice. I am indeed trying to build an individualized approach rather than a color-blind approach to the student's learning process in this context.

### Learning, Unlearning and Relearning in Field Work

One of the biggest challenges in field work practice is when we tend to learn some facts, ensure the facts are drawn from theory and experience and do not unlearn our learning within the given context of field work. During my field work supervisory experience, I had to supervise some student who headed an organization. As a field work student of social work, my supervisory brief to this student was to unlearn his learning from previous field intervention experience. He also engaged in the process of unlearning and tried to relearn the specific context of the agency and managed his field work very well. Students of Social Work take field work as their learning ground. In recent times <sup>[6]</sup>, students are more interested to visit field locations as per their convenience and also as per the tourist interest area attached to that field work location. Some students who complete their Bachelor's in Social Work come with prior experience and engage in work which they have done in the past. This approach hampers the learning process of the students as they tend to stop unlearning the context and current realities of the field locations. Some social work students do explore new concepts through their field work and try to apply theory into their practice only through their reports but in practice they do not apply the realities.

### Way Ahead for Field Work in Social Work in North East India

Field Work Practice of Social Work Education needs to be oriented to field organizations from diverse settings. Social Work students can be encouraged to publish their field work experiences in in-house journals and newsletters of agencies where they work without the fear of grades and marks. Students need to be encouraged to explore diverse field intervention initiatives as per their choice. Field Work Practice can be a constantly transformed as per the emerging concerns, needs and priorities of the North East context. This understanding can be also established through the agencies with whom we have been working with. There can be a field work support resource pool which could be created for social work education in every state, agency and non-state civil society intervention which will enable more and more students to carry forward their learning experience. Unless we support and patent the practice model of student practitioners we shall never be able to create grounded theories and improvise on our professional social work practice. Field Work is often integrated with internships, data collection visits for dissertation work and also for incubation ground for specific courses. The focus of field work has to be towards strengthening the social work practice within whichever context we are considering. Within the context of North East Region, field work cannot be limited to assessments, explorations and observations; they have to be client-driven in the community, group or individual contexts. North East Region is not just for providing the research subjects and exhibits but also for practitioners and field work interventionists to innovate collective practices which supports and creates enabling situations for the struggles of this region.

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