



RECIPROCITY OF COMMUNITY FIELD WORK PRACTICUM: THE CASE OF OPEN COMMUNITY PLACEMENT IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

Abdul Azeez E.P¹

Abstract: *Field work is considered to be the most vital part of social work education across the globe. The element of field work is visible in almost all curriculum frameworks, even though there are variations in the credit and methods allotted for it. Generally field work practicum in India consists of observation visits, concurrent field work, summer placement and block placement. Open Community Placement (OCP) is an Indian model of concurrent field work which is widely practiced in the country apart from the institutional placement. Rural villages are preferred to be the potential locations for the student's placement for concurrent field work as it facilitates the trainee to understand the magnitude of rural problems, possible intervention strategies and working models. There is higher demand of trained manpower for working with the rural issues in India. This necessitates social work profession to engage their young trainees proactively with the rural issues. The trainees placed in open communities are closely works with the local institutions, stakeholders and clients under the guidance of a faculty supervisor. Different methods of social work are being practiced during the span of placement. Present paper is based on the experience of placing students in rural community for fieldwork. This paper tries to highlight the reciprocal advantages which students, faculties and community had through these placements. Information were collected from student trainees (those who are undergoing training and completed), alumnus, social work educators (who guide the students for Open Community Placement) and from the community. Two school of social work which practicing Open Community Placement (OCP) was selected for the analysis. The analysis shows higher implications of Open Community Placement (OCP) in Social Work education and practice.*

Keywords: *Reciprocity, Community, Field Work Practicum, Open Community Placement.*

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, School of Social Sciences, Central University of Rajasthan, Ajmer, India. E-mail: instinct000@gmail.com

Introduction

Field work practicum is the heart and soul of social work education. It is not merely the application of theory into practice as conventionally told and heard. It is a conscious effort to experience, explore and analyze the social work practice in the real life settings. It is an inevitable ingredient that molds a professional with the skills, competence and insights on the socio-economic and political happenings around them. Field work facilitates the inculcation of humanistic values and development of professional attitudes. In addition, it adds to knowledge, and imparts a perspective to deal with human problems which relate to the self, between the self and others, and between human being and their environment (R.R. Singh, 1997). Field work provides an opportunity for testing and validating theoretical underpinnings and practice modules in a pragmatic manner with different sections of the population and with diverse issues. The contribution of fieldwork placement is praised for its role in growing student skills, knowledge, and competencies as they learn to marry classroom learning with the realities of agency practice (Hanlen, 2011).

There are wide varieties of field work models being practiced in social work around the world. India too has different models of field work practice as the country still doesn't have a unified model of fieldwork and social work education. Generally field work practicum in India consists of observation visits, concurrent visits, and block placements. Concurrent fieldwork is the compulsory component of social work education in India, in which students are sent to an agency or placed in a community. Schools¹ may select the type of agency or site for the field work, based on the nature of course (generic or specialization based), location and other institutional mandates. Most of the Universities and schools follow two day field work procedure in a week as the module for concurrent fieldwork. Open community placement is an Indian model of concurrent field work which is widely practiced by many schools in the country apart from the institutional placement. Open community means a village (in the case of rural areas) or an urban area (preferably backward areas) selected for the purpose of fieldwork. This selection of the open community will be done on the basis of certain criteria and it is different for school to schools, and region to region. Factors such as distance, scope of work, magnitude of social problems, availability of institutions and non-existence of significant threat may be considered. Rural villages are preferred to be the potential locations for student's placement for the concurrent field work as it facilitates the trainee to understand the magnitude of social context, rural problems, possible intervention strategies and working models. Usually a faculty member is allotted with 3-5 students for the supervision. Fieldwork supervisor and students plan and engage positively with the field work activities. The activity and intervention planning is done during the Individual and Group Conferences². Open community

¹ School refers to a Social Work Department/Unit offers courses like MA/MSW or BSW (Bachelors or Master's degree in Social Work). Usually such schools in India function as the Department or unit of Colleges or University.

² Individual Conference and Group Conference (IC & GC) - Individual Conferences are conscious, planned and focused situations for sharing and learning between the supervisor and

placement provides a wide spectrum of avenues for the students to practice with multiple stakeholders and clientele in the real life setting. Twice in a week students engages with the community at least for 16 hours with a pre-planned set of actions.

As a social work educator and field instructor author has experienced and observed significant indications of positive changes in the three levels of group involved in OCP, i.e. students, social work educators and the community. Though many of these changes are qualitative in nature, the attitudinal and perspective changes which happened to educators and students need to be analyzed for wider dissemination and discussion. The preliminary assumption indicates that the communities in which the schools considered for the sites for OCP witnessed considerable alteration in the structure and dynamics; which is even visible in the quantitative aspects. Therefore the paper seeks to answer the following questions. The first question, whether the notion of engagement as a field work trainee in community brings positive outcomes in the enhancement of knowledge and practice base of a student, is true or not? The second question, are the communities really benefiting from the OCP? Third, whether faculties and social work educators develop wisdom or not? Finally how the fieldwork in an open community is different from other modalities of field work, especially the institutional placement. Information was collected from the students, educators, and the open communities of the two schools¹. The selection was done on the basis of preliminary analysis of the interventions undertaken by these schools. It is understood that these schools are involved at field level in a greater magnitude through the activities of open community placement.

Open Community Placement: The Idea, Practice and the Context of India

Open community placement is a widely practiced model of field work in Central and Northern parts of India. Communities are considered as the social laboratory where the students have opportunity to experiment methods and techniques of social work with a diverse population, under the supervision of a social work educator. As the word OCP indicates, students are placed directly in the community with or without any

supervisee. The conferences provide occasions to discuss issues and concerns arising during the course of field work. Group Conferences enable students to undergo a wide range of experiences in a structured and controlled setting. These experiences range from responsibilities involved in presenting, chairing and recording sessions to exposure to a wide range of field work settings where they are not placed for field work (Field Work Manual, DSSW, 2010). Individual conferences occur twice in a week and Group conferences occur monthly once.

¹ Central University of Rajasthan, Ajmer, India and Guru Ghasidas Central University, Bilaspur, India. Central University of Rajasthan located in a village named Bandarsindri which comes under Rajasthan State; the Department of Social Work of this University places their students in 7 different rural communities for concurrent field work. Guru Ghasidas Central University is located in Bilaspur city of Chhattisgarh State. The school of social work of this University too places their students in seven nearby rural and semi-urban communities.

institutional support (most of the time they work independently under the direct supervision of the faculty). This module is different from the agency/institutional placement where an agency supervisor guides the students to undertake the activities which are specific to the interest of the organization or on the basis of curriculum. Open community placement has a wide variety of objectives that extends from the sensitization of students on social issues to strengthening their capability to practice social work with heterogeneous populations and complex situations independently. The placement in open communities enlighten the students with the comprehensive understanding on the context of social work practice; diversity, disadvantages, marginalization, vulnerability, power relations, the lack of access to resources, discriminations, importance of status and roles, strategies for mobilization and utilization of resources. Recognition of these factors is the core of social work practice in a country like India. Most of these factors are generalizable to a greater extent in the entire context of the country and the universe, even though variations in magnitude can be observable from region to region, State to State and country to country. As an academically structured and guided activity, fieldwork in community offers the students to develop the wisdom to analyze these structural and functional issues. Such empirically grounded understanding of the students and their supervisors initiate the application of social work methods and techniques in real life setting, not only for solving the problems but to have an insight on the applicability of the theoretical underpinnings. Open community placement helps the students to understand the social welfare programs and policies on operation and its implementation. It widens the opportunity to work with the basic unit of society, family to the institutions at local, state and national level. The proactive field involvement makes them fit for community organization practice. This has been rightly pointed out by Janki Andharia (2011) as ‘students are not mere ‘observers’ performing mechanical tasks but are simultaneously engaged in analysis and critical reflection. The nature of work envisaged for the student, the tasks performed and the depth of involvement determines the creation of this identity as a community organization practitioner. Field supervisor/faculty members play a vital role in making them understand the process of working with communities and other clientele groups.

Open community placement has the potentiality, if it has taken a serious supervised activity, to mold students with a set of skills and attitude that are an ingredient to work with diverse population on their different needs¹. There is a higher demand for trained manpower for working with the rural issues in India. This necessitates social work profession to engage their young trainees proactively with the rural issues. The trainees placed in open communities closely work with the local institutions, stakeholders and clients. This facilitates them to understand the socio-political structure and systems of the areas/sites of operation. These set of skills and critical understanding is necessary

¹ But here we need to understand that the field work in social work is entirely different from the internship programs in other courses of study, where the objective is to inculcate the skills for performing a particular job. In social work as discussed field work is a conscious activity which aimed to the inculcation of human values along with the practice base for working with diverse section of society.

for social work practice. But many of the developmental organization (NGOs) which hires and employs social workers often complain that they are not in a position to get a resourceful or capable person to meet the career requirement. No doubt, this assumption is not generalizable and depends to a great extent on the individual capability. But social workers who are employed in developmental organization opine that candidates, who hail from Schools where rigorous field work is offered, perform far better from their counterparts in the field.

Overview of Methodology of Practice

As a supervised activity open community placement revolves around number of phases. The initial stage is devoted for understanding the community. Preliminary information will be collected from available sources including primary data, directly from the people. Faculty supervisors guide the student to possibly follow the processes of community organization (CO) in a systematic manner. In the second stage, students try to explore, and prioritize the problems, community faces. At the later stage faculty supervisor guides the students to thoroughly analyze root causes of the problems and develop intervention strategies; it is through the purposeful application of social work methods, techniques and collaborating them with available community and other resources. The application of methods and techniques are employed at different phases of the field work. On the basis of the discussion arises in the IC & GC faculty supervisor assign specific tasks to the students. There are unique activities often assigned for individual student and common tasks for the groups of students placed in a particular community. For example, a student may be asked to work with the school and other might be working with primary health care centre as individual task. As a common task students might be instructed to organize a sensitization campaign on a social problem.

Community placement often brings valuable non-academic outcomes too even though field work is purely an educational activity. The outcome may be materialistic or non-materialistic that reflects on the three stakeholders i.e. community, supervisor and students. This may perplex student and community whether the field work is target oriented or process oriented. There is no doubt that field work activities are process oriented and aims to achieve the broader goals of fieldwork and social work. The targets are set for the conscious and purposeful utilization of available techniques and methods during the process.

Open Community Placement: Reflections on Reciprocity

As discussed, fieldwork in social work education is continues engagement which can be significantly beneficial to the people involved in it.

1. Areas of Practice

The schools analyzed in this study have engaged in a wide spectrum of practices and experiments in the field, which extends from working with mezzo client to macro clients. The very decision of area of practice is purely based on the magnitude of social

problem of the community and the requirement of the curriculum. It is evident from the open community placement of the schools that, the initial phase of the field work is devoted for working with individuals and families. According to John (name changed), a faculty supervisor *'initially we emphasize the students to establish a positive working rapport with the people and understand the dynamics of the community'* he added that this enables the student to understand the basics of community profiling and social analysis.

The open community fieldwork has different dimensions of practice. The first approach focuses on the practice of method where the primary and secondary methods of social work are practiced. Each student is encouraged to undertake a specific assignment on each of the methods such as conducting case work and group work, community organization, social action and social work research. Students are asked to work closely with government institutions and non-governmental organizations in order to create awareness of the practice of social welfare administration. Another approach is to focus on the demographic dividends of the population where students are supposed to work with children, youth, men, women, aged and people with special needs. The schools have active working structure with youth, adolescence, schools, local self-institutions and health delivery systems. Specific issues such as sanitation, water, health, school dropout, gender discrimination, alcoholism have given significant place in the practice module. These problems are almost similarly ubiquitous in the breadth and width of the country and even in other developing world. Students in open community placement are professionally trained to work with varied issues and diverse groups in a given time. Their engagement with the community is proactive and non-political in nature.

2. Field Engagement: New Insights

Continues engagement with the people and community brought insight into faculties and students on the areas and modes of practice. The open community was academically used as a potential social laboratory for the practice and application. The practice has widened the attitudes and brought new insight for students and faculties in the areas of research and practice. Many of the unexplored areas of research are taken into consideration and have started empirical investigations.

Proactive engagement in the field enables many students to accumulate and inculcate the humanistic values into their personality. Being a person from dominated caste, Mr. Ram (name changed) had prejudiced attitude towards other castes, but his engagement with the community has significantly changed his attitude and started social intercourse with the lower caste people in the community. Mr. Ram was categorically worked with the people in the lower strata of the society and his interventions brought significant results in the empowerment of this community. In a caste oriented rural society working with lower strata is still considered as a stigma. These realities of rural life brought into the life of students and faculties, such sensitizations are necessary for the social work practice in a country like India. One faculty from a school said that....

'The field work supervision and interactions with rural communities during supervision in the field changed my understanding on the rural realities which I

had perceived with different orientation'. He further emphasized that 'in open community placement a faculty supervisor have to perform an additional duty of an agency supervisor, this enables the educator to have practice base, this is important because many of the social work educators are in their current employment without having any base on field based practice'.

This is very true in the case of many young educators and the open community placement is a venue where the educator have much freedom on designing and implementing interventions while comparing to the agency placement.

3. Development of Practice Base

A number of interviews were conducted among the alumnus of the two schools who have undergone open community placement and are in social work practice. Majority of the alumnus of both schools are in direct social work practice. They were asked to respond how their practice base is grounded with the open community placement they underwent. Interviewees had different observations and diverse perceptions on open community placement. The common ground in their perception was many component of the OCP is ingredient in their current practice of Social Work. Trainees working knowledge established during the field work is significantly utilizable in their current employment requirement where social work is practiced.

Ms. Neena (name changed) is working with Women Self Help Groups (SHGs) in a Non-Governmental Organization opined that:

'The interventions that I have engaged now is almost similar to the field work I have done during my masters, at that point of time we (me and my co-workers) were mobilized women (even it was difficult to mobilize women in such a community) and formed an SHG. I am privileged to indicate that still that SHG is functional'.

Social Workers currently engaged in practice and who have undergone open community placement is enough confident and capable to work with the complex rural community set ups which usually creates significant challenges in the practice.

Open community placement provides prospects for social work trainees to develop potential skills in rapport building and establishing working relationship with clients and stakeholders. Working in a rural community or urban slum without an agency support is a difficult task, as people hesitate to cooperate and doubtful to give information. Students who are placed in open community usually overcome this challenge by continuous efforts and by conveying their purpose to people i.e. learning. People usually incorporate when they come to know they are not going to benefit materially for their time and cooperation. But trainees overcome these issues and mobilize the community in due course of time.

Mr. Sudhir (name changed) an alumnus of Central University of Rajasthan working in a University project involving in the mobilization of community people on water issues said that:

I am hailing from a rural community of the same region and I was very familiar with the culture and social structure but through open community placement I developed the skill of having focused observation to the social phenomena by connecting with the theoretical base’.

Understanding the caste and local dynamics is a necessity for working with the communities because these are the factors that could act as significant determinants for outcomes of any interventions.

Reena (name changed), an alumni from Guru Ghasidas Central University, said that:

I am working with vulnerable children and my current practices are somewhat similar to those of the interventions we have done with the children through child clubs during open community placement’.

Many of the interviewed practitioners reiterated the same. One practitioner who is working with a tribal community said that:

My capacity of working with communities has developed during the open community placement; I could not be in this practice and help these people if I would have sent only for agency placement’. Further he opined ‘I think agency placement often ends in contradiction and confusion, as the agency supervisor is most of the time a non-professional, their guidance rarely suits with the framework of theoretical underpinnings and in most of the cases they just entertain the social work trainees for the sake of doing it’.

A social work trainee currently pursuing Masters and recently finished open community placement pointed that:

Community placement is a very noteworthy component which can create a series of advantages to the trainees and I personally experienced that one of my coworker, she was so shy and introvert became such a wonderful community organizer by the end of her community placement. I strongly believe that community placement has the potential to bring leadership qualities to upcoming social work trainees’.

Fresh Graduates have positive opinion on open community placement under the given criteria of the proactive engagement and guidance from the supervisor.

4. University Community Engagement

Open community placement plays significant role in creating reciprocal relationship between University and community. University Community engagement is a multidimensional umbrella term that describes collaboration between the University and a community for the mutual beneficial exchange of resources and knowledge (Escrigas et al., 2014). As seen in the earlier part of this paper, students and practitioners empower themselves in the practice base; the case of communities are also not different as the sites of open community placement (villages in these cases) has significantly benefited from placement of students. The advantages which the community had can be categorized as material and non-material. As a supervisor for the open community placement the author had experienced certain constructive changes in the community and which was reiterated by people in the community. It is noteworthy that open community placement could bring such changes in the areas of practice even though it is a non-political and sponsored programme which doesn't have any mode of financial support. The activities undertaken during the field work include mezzo to macro level activities. Most of the villages wherein the schools placed their

students are interior areas, in which most of the features of typical rurality are prevalent. The intervention of government or non- governmental sector is minimal in the locality and the existences of social problems are devastating. This has provided greater scope for practice and at the same time, it created considerable challenges for practice.

A set of interventions were undertaken in the field work villages by the students with the participation of villagers. Social Work students placed in each village prepared comprehensive community profile and did need identification. Based on the identified needs, each student trainee prepared their plan of intervention that comes in the purview of social work. Existence of social problems was almost similar in the villages where schools placed their students. But each community has peculiar needs and dissimilar magnitudes problems.

One of the crucial issues identified and intervention made was on sanitation. Rural Rajasthan accounts voluminous practices of open defecation and mismanagement of waste water. A series of sensitization programs were conducted to promote the construction and usage of toilet. A number of households came forward for constructing toilet with and without the support of government schemes. Another initiative was soak pit construction. Soak Pit is a simple indigenous technology which has a countless benefits on water and sanitation. Rural areas of India have very poor system of household waste water management. This waste water usually runs through streets, and forms puddles here and there. Soak pits that work on the simple principle of filtration. It consists of a circular pit of about one diameter width and one meter depth. It is filled with filter materials which are easily available pebbles, sand and brickbats. The wastewater from the kitchen and bathroom is directed into these soak pits through a pipeline. This pit enables and ensures the surrounding is cleaned, which reduces the risks for epidemic and recharges the ground water. The intervention yielded significant results in the cleanliness of the villages. Apart from the material benefit, a large number of villagers were motivated for healthy sanitation practices. Around 80 soak pits were constructed and most of them are successfully functioning. The construction was facilitated by the students with the active support of villagers.

Another area of intervention was establishment of community Libraries. Educational backwardness is a felt problem in these communities. The status of adult learning is also poor. The habit of reading and spirit of inquisitiveness are lacking, these leads to the intergenerational transfer of social problems. Libraries are expected to serve as the centre of learning and debates. Four community libraries are established and that are playing significant role in inculcating the habit of reading and spirit of enquiry among rural students.

Mr. Nandalal (Name changed), one of the community member said that:

'Students from the University regularly come here, they always find time to interact with the villagers and due to their effort a library was established in our village. Children are showing interest in reading the books and spent time in library; this is very new experience for our village'.

Social work trainees practice with different groups yielded significant impacts in the communities. Trainees are established youth clubs in all the sites (villages) of open community placement. These youth clubs are engaged in the voluntary activities with

the aim of village development. The dedication and engagement of the youth was being utilized at different village level activities. Trainees are trying to link the youth with different government schemes and make them accessible to career opportunities by providing career guidance. Another demographic segment social work trainees closely work with is children. All the villages have a children club where promotional and recreational activities are regularly organized. Adolescence girls group is another initiative. This group serves as a forum for sharing the concerns and problems of girls. They are being motivated to study further and empowered to stand for their own rights. The activities of girls group is relevant for a country like India where girls/women are being discriminated at every stages and aspects of their day to day life. As a result few girls were motivated and joined the University courses from those open community villages.

Both the Social Work Schools have continuously organizing sensitization campaigns at the village level. Rallies, street plays and other forms of public sensitization campaigns are organized throughout the year with the objective of prevention and promotion. Such campaigns resulted better in the university community engagement.

Working with school is a major agenda for the social work trainees. As indicated earlier, educational backwardness is a serious problem in the rural villages, the same was contributed by many factors starting from the school infrastructure, lack of human resources, lowered student attendance ratio, school dropout and low learning outcomes. Interventions of trainees have focus on these issues. Every field work day students visit the school and interacts with the teachers and students. They teach value education to children and engage them in voluntary social service activities such as tree plantation and cleanliness drives. Recreational components are also planned and implemented to make learning more enjoyable. Activities like these are important for schools where such initiatives are not implemented. Mr. Kishore (name changed), an elementary school teacher where trainees involved in school social work stated that:

'Students from the University mobilized youth of the village and initiated the renovation of the school playground which was not in use for many years, now the students are playing in the ground and after the school hours same is used by the youth'.

Another teacher said that:

'Students of the University always conduct group activities with our students and they enjoy those activities, one of the notable things they have conducted is the sensitization on hygienic practices, it has resulted positively. Students are being motivated to come regularly to school and their involvement in voluntary activities like tree plantation and cleanliness drive is promising'

Ms. Jyoti (name changed), alumni of Guru Ghasidas Central University considered that:

'During our field work we actively worked with schools, we found lot of issues and one of the devastating was school dropout. A number of children drop out even before completing their elementary education and there was no initiatives from schools authorities to get them readmitted, we are reported the same to our supervisor. He suggested why don't you go and meet the parents of students? Then we have collected the details of dropped out students from school and approached one by one. The reasons for school dropouts were not that complex and we found that most of them are

in a position to continue their studies. Main reason was the apathy of parents; they just were allowing them to stay back if their children do not show interest to go school. We have counseled the children and parents through many home visits. At the end of episode we could brought back 6 children to school and still 5 among them are in school'.

Students were guided for the purposeful utilization of community resources and mapping the indigenous techniques to solve the problems that exists in the communities. The scientific and skill based approach resulted positively in tangible and measurable outcomes in the community.

Conclusions

Open community placement and subsequent interventions have definitely created a momentum of change in the community and created practice base for students. This is quite evident from the current analysis as involved agents of the field work practicum i.e. students, faculty and community had vital insight. Open community placement has significant implications for social work profession and education. It has a potential for initiating and enhancing university community engagement, such engagement is imperative role in ensuring sustainable development.

Some senior academicians criticize the open community placement by saying that it is not just the result of pure intention of training students in community setting. They argue that some social work schools are being compelled to send students as they are unable to find an agency having trained social worker or a professional who could guide the students in the perspective of social work education and practice. Especially Social Work Schools located in rural areas face this problem as it is difficult for them to find appropriate agencies. It is evident from the current analysis that the quality of open community training is largely depended upon the input they get from the school and particularly from the faculty supervisor. Unfortunately many of the time such quality concerns are missing from the scene. It is understood from the analysis that sending students to an agency without having a skilled professional social worker as a supervisor is worthless and such experience is far behind than those from the OCP.

The conclusions from the study are not generalizable as the reciprocity of open community placement is always subject to the kind of training, quality of human resources involved and the areas of practice. The proactive involvement of faculty supervisors, nature and cooperation of community is also significant determinant that affect the reciprocity.

Reference

- Escrigas, C., Sanchez, J. G., Hall, B. L. and Tandon, R. (2014). Editor's introduction. GUNi (Ed.), *Knowledge, engagement and higher education: Contributing to social change* (pp. 31-34). Hampshire (UK)/New York (USA): Palgrave Macmillan
- Janki Andharia (2011). Fieldwork in CO: Privileging the process of a Political Engagement. *Community Development Journal*. 46 (1), 96-116. Oxford University Press.

- Patricia Hanlen (2011). Community engagement: manager's viewpoints. In Carolyn Noble and Mark Henrickson (Eds), *Social work field education and supervision across Asia Pacific*. Sydney: University Press.
- R.R. Singh (1997). Relevance and Scope of Field Experience in Social Work Education. George Joseph & P.O. George (Eds), *Social Work Education: Emerging Concerns*. Rajagiri School of Social Sciences, Cochin.
- Delhi School of Social Work (2010). *Field Work Manual*. Department of Social Work. University of Delhi.