

Issues and challenges of social work practicum in Trinidad and Tobago and India

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Education is one of the dominant sectors of the economy in terms of enrolment of students in Trinidad and Tobago and India. The practicum is an integral part of many professional courses in higher education, and is manifest in several different forms depending on the area, such as field experience, case work, group work, community organisation, block placement and clinical practicum. This article provides an overview of different ways in which the practicum has been conceptualised, implemented and evaluated in higher education. It focuses attention on the purpose and value of the practicum; the relationship between the practicum and the learning outcomes of a course as a whole; and the structure and placement of the practicum within a course in Trinidad and Tobago and India. This article discusses the standards of social work practicum and the present condition and challenges of the social work profession in Trinidad and Tobago and India as well as the need to seriously look into the practice methods, in order to improve the quality of practice and also to face the new upcoming challenges in better way. This article intends to contribute to the scholarship on social work education, with specific emphasis on the social work practicum, by comparing the structure, issues and challenges facing the social work practicum in India and Trinidad and Tobago. The article will focus on the social work practicum at Bharathiar University in India and the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine on the island of Trinidad. The fact that these countries are both developing countries is of interest in the comparative analysis.

Key words: Higher education, Social Work Practicum, Field Education, Structure, Challenges

Introduction

The social work practicum is a fundamental aspect of social work education that provides students with the opportunity to apply the theoretical foundations of the profession to the practice arena (BSc. Social Work Course Outline, The University of the West Indies, 2011). It is considered to be a central aspect of social work education (Maidment, 2000) and has even been described as the “signature pedagogy” of the profession (Council of Social Work Education, 2008, p. 8). Practicum or evidence-based practice was first introduced into social work in the 1990s, although earlier models for integrating research and practice did exist (e.g., the empirical practice movement and scientific practitioner model) (Gambrill, 1999; Gibbs, 2003; Reid, 2002). Evidence-based social work practice (EBSWP) is,

however, qualitatively different from these earlier efforts and has been seen as a paradigm shift (Gambrill, 2003).

A search on academic databases revealed that there is a wide range of research available on the issue of the social work practicum. Topics included models and methodologies used in practicum (Lee, 2007; Ivry, Damron-Rodriguez & Lawrence, 2005; Adler, 2006); the experiences of students on practicum (Larson & Robertson, 2007; Didham, Dromgole, Csiernik, Karley, & Dermot, 2011), and relationship issues between students and their field instructors, (Giddens, Vodde & Cleveland, 2003; Clark, Rompf & Walker, 2001; Pehrson, Panos, Larson, & Cox, 2009). The search for literature also revealed that research had been produced in diverse parts of the world, such as New Zealand (Maidment, Chilvers, Crichton-Hill, & Meadows-Taurua, 2011), India (Bodhi, 2011), Canada (Larson and Robertson, 2007), Taiwan (Feng, 2008) and the United States of America (Koenig, Lee, Fields & Macmillan, 2011). However, there appeared to be a dearth of comparative literature that addressed practicum issues in diverse countries (Pawar, Hanna and Sheridan, 2004).

Professional social work education

The existing pattern of social work education in Trinidad and Tobago and India has been adopted from an American model of 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" (Council on Social Work Education, 2008, p.1). The education provides knowledge, skills and practice models to enable people to cope with and make a balance with the environment. Social work education emphasises the initial preparation of 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 the 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. Social work education 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. The approach used is student-centred dialogical classroom teaching-learning, self-study, supervised field work practicum and practice-based research.

In addition to the direct preparation of students, social work education aims at developing and disseminating knowledge for evidence-based social work practice, administration, education, training and research. The methodology used in the development of social work knowledge integrates knowledge and action, based on a critical inquiry into multidisciplinary and applied social science knowledge, practice wisdom, practice-based and participatory research, documentation of best practices and policy analysis. In keeping with the goal of

social work to enhance the wellbeing of human beings (International Federation of Social Workers, 2012), social work education provides consultation on social work, welfare and development policies and programs; provides training and research to voluntary, government, international and other academic organisations, and strengthens professional associations in social work.

The goals of social work education are accomplished through the promotion of an egalitarian, participatory and democratic educational system and the concurrent denouncing of a hierarchical, authoritarian and alienating educational system. A commitment is made to laboratory praxis that is an on-going process of moving between critical perspectives, one's teaching, field action, research, administration and consultation, and evaluative reflection and back again to critical perspectives. Fieldwork placement opportunities provide the context within which students can be exposed to the role of social work professionals and to innovative social work practice, administration, training and practice-based research.

Professional social workers recognize that social work should not confine itself to ameliorative work, but should aim towards social action designed to remedy the roots of social malaise and to change the social order (Dasgupta, 1967). Thus, social work students on practicum are exposed to social work at both the micro and macro levels. Additionally, the simultaneous exposure to theory and practice ensures that students obtain thorough professional development given that "social work practice with individuals, families, and groups is rooted in a vast base of borrowed and indigenous knowledge consisting of concepts, theories, models, practice wisdom, and research findings" (Reid, 2002, p. 6).

Competencies required for social work practicum

Students undergoing practicum may be placed in settings in which they are engaged in direct practice or indirect service provision. All social workers, whether engaged in direct or indirect practice, are expected to display identified competencies. The Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards of the Council on Social Work Education (2008) outlines central competencies that are considered as essential for the development of the social work student. 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.

General goals of social work practicum

The general goals of social work practicum in Trinidad and Tobago and India reflect a Liberal Arts perspective of preparing generalist social workers who possess the knowledge, skill and value base for effecting change at the local, national and global levels. A major emphasis is the development of the ability in students to apply

critical thinking skills in social work practice and to help them to encourage citizen participation in addressing issues of social and economic justice, particularly among disadvantaged populations. A further goal is the preparation of students for pursuing graduate level education in social work. The onus is on faculty to provide continuing educational opportunities to enable social workers to improve the quality of their professional practice. Additionally, faculty also develop effective cooperative and collaborative partnerships with government, non-government organizations and community groups whose interests are consistent with the mission of the practicum programme.

Structure of social work practicum

Trinidad and Tobago

The instructional objectives of the social work practicum for undergraduate students at The University of the West Indies in Trinidad focus on the acquisition of cognitive, affective and psycho-motor skills. Students are expected to develop in their ability to relate the theoretical frameworks of social work to their practice and to understand social work practice; recognise and manage their feelings in the context of social work intervention and practice and implement activities through various methods such as writing, facilitating groups and conducting meetings or presentations (BSc. Social Work Course Outline, The University of the West Indies, 2011).

In Trinidad and Tobago, first year social work students participate in 168 contact hours of in-house practicum. The in-house practicum was developed in 2005 in response to the growing demand for social work education and the concurrent reduction in available practicum placements. The in-house practicum is comprised of structured laboratory experiences, which are designed to aid first year students in gaining a clearer understanding of the helping process of social work and in developing the central attitudes and skills possessed by social workers. The in-house practicum therefore prepares the students for the practicum experience in the second and third years. Preparation is considered to be essential to the optimal benefit of the practicum (Maxwell, 1999).

The practicum experience of second and third year students takes place on two days per week for the duration of the academic year. Students are required to complete 336 contact hours of practicum each year. Students are placed in settings that provide experience in both direct and indirect social work practice. Although some students experience their practice in non-governmental organisations, the majority of students are placed in government agencies. The majority of placements are direct and involve services to individuals and groups.

For the third-year undergraduate students, the practicum experience is interspersed with fieldwork seminars that are designed to support their practical experience and reinforce the application of theoretical foundations of social work to the experience.

At the post graduate level, students commence the practical component of their experience in the second semester during which they go for a 16 week block placement, according to their area of interest. Students who are interested in regional or international placements may be facilitated.

The practice teacher is responsible for completing an evaluation of each student's practice during the practicum. This evaluation will be taken into consideration for 60% of the final grade. Additionally, the student is required to submit an analytical report and a self-reflective essay to the Practicum Coordinator. The grading of these documents comprises 40% of the final grade (The University of the West Indies BSc. Social Work Course Outline, 2011).

India

During the first and second years of university training, undergraduate social work students in India attend practicum on two days per week practising their skills while being exposed to the theoretical aspects of the programme (concurrent fieldwork). First year students go for observational visits at social service agencies during the first semester in which they are exposed to a range of services. In the second semester, they are placed in social welfare agencies under the direct supervision of a qualified field work supervisor. In the second year, students are placed in different agencies and are required to participate in community camps in which students get an opportunity to stay in a village for ten days and conduct programmes for the benefit of the rural community. During the third year (the final year of university training), practicum continues in social welfare agencies according to the student's choice of course. In the third year of training, students attend a block placement of 30 working days.

At the graduate level students are subjected to concurrent fieldwork training. Summer internship and block placement training is extended to students to enhance their social skills and leadership qualities and to help acquire hands on experience and knowledge about the field where they are going to serve in the near future. Students initially go for observation visits, visiting various governmental and non-governmental organisations in order to gain knowledge on the functioning of different agencies. In the second semester the students undergo advanced practicum training. They are placed in an organisation for their concurrent field work practicum training. In the second year they continue their training by conducting an individual research project under the supervision of a qualified faculty member and go for educational trips. At the end of the final year they are placed on a continuous block placement for thirty days according to the student's interest and the choice of the course (specialisation). In the field work practicum, the students are placed directly with a qualified social worker under the supervision of the field supervisors and the social work faculty (Abell, 2010).

The evaluation of the fieldwork practicum is done by conducting a *viva voce* examination on the practicum experience involving one external examiner and one internal examiner. This comprises 40% of the final grade. Students also

prepare a report at the end of their practicum, which is worth 20% of their grade. Additionally, students are assessed on their regularity at field work; at supervisory conferences, and in submitting the weekly reports (20%). They are also assessed on their initiative and resourcefulness and utilisation of the supervision for professional growth (20%).

Present and upcoming challenges in social work practicum

Over the past decade, social work practice has expanded in Trinidad and Tobago, opening additional opportunities for the placement of students on practicum. However, the expansion of social work practice was paralleled by the escalation in the number of institutions offering social work programmes. This development has placed a strain on the ability of social service agencies to provide practicum experiences for students and consequently has led to increasing challenges in securing placements for students. The challenges in securing community placements and placements that provide experiences in social action have restricted the practical experiences that are available to students on placement in Trinidad and Tobago. The lack of opportunities for placements in social action limits students' ability to fully understand the role of social worker as advocate or activist. In addition, the majority of the students prefer to go for their field work practicum in the medical or psychiatric social work settings, which is a challenge, as Trinidad and Tobago has limited medical and psychiatric social work agencies.

In India, there is limited literature that is of Indian origin available to the students and professionals. Even though most of the knowledge of social work in India is borrowed from the West, it is difficult to directly apply the theory that is based on a different culture to India. Some of the history of social work in the West is comparable to that of the beginnings of social work in India, as social work in India had its beginnings in voluntary helping of the underprivileged. However, there are major differences when one considers the family structure, religious beliefs, legal emphasis, status of women and prevailing value system. There is a dire need to develop indigenous social work literature.

Discussion

The basic course structure of the field work practicum remains the same when comparing Trinidad and Tobago and India. In both countries, the social work practicum occurs concurrently with the student's exposure to theories and two days are assigned each week for the practical experience.

The central differences in the organisation and management of the social work practicum in the two countries reflect the different contexts within which social work education and practice occur. Social work students, in both countries, are introduced to social work practice in their first year; however, different strategies are employed. The use of the in-house practicum in Trinidad and Tobago, as opposed to direct exposure to social work settings as in India, reflects an adaptation of the educational programme to the limitations in the numbers of available social

service agencies. While this does not provide the direct exposure that is beneficial for early introduction to social work, it is a useful alternative to the introduction to fieldwork experience. Maidment (2003) notes that there is an “unhealthy reliance on the field to provide all practicum learning” (p. 5) and indicates the need to explore alternative models for ensuring quality experiences for social work students. The development of the in-house practicum model in Trinidad and Tobago reflects a move to use alternative approaches to ensure quality experiences in a context of declining placement options.

Much discussion has been held on the relative benefits of the block, concurrent and combined models of field instruction (Ramsey, 1989). The experience of undergraduate students in Trinidad and Tobago is limited to the concurrent model while those in India experience the combined model (in the final year of their education). For Ramsey (1989), the combined model is the ideal approach, as students are able to benefit from both the agency/practice orientation of the block model and the classroom/theoretical orientation of the concurrent model.

Well-structured field work seminars, which are absent in India, are an added advantage for students in Trinidad and Tobago. Field seminars provide opportunities for the integration of social work knowledge, skills and values (Bohanan, 2007), as students interact with each other. The experience of students in India in community work is more extensive than that of students in Trinidad and Tobago, as they are involved in community placements in their second and third years of the undergraduate programme, as well as the first year of the graduate programme. Such experiences have the potential to broaden the skill base of students in India.

In India, the practice teacher is not involved in the grading of the students. The grading of the students is done by the academically qualified lecturers, working in the university. In Trinidad and Tobago, however, the practice teacher plays a central role in the grading of the students, as his/her assessment of the student's practice is taken into consideration. The involvement of academics in the evaluation of students' grades can help ensure a consistency and high standards.

Conclusions and implications for field practicum

Allen (1976) provided guidelines and techniques that can be applied flexibly and appropriately by universities in diverse contexts in designing field work placements and supporting practice teachers. In nurturing a supportive atmosphere for learning, students are allowed to develop self-confidence and feel encouraged to experiment and creatively reflect and employ different related theories in their own pieces of work and study. This is important because the current emphasis on producing particular technical field work skills is one of the most important functions of social work education and is critical to encouraging innovative and constructive knowledge leading to intellectual self-sufficiency to face the challenges of contemporary complex knowledge-driven economy. Respecting the student's

personal experience is crucial to the development of professional practice and helps him/her to recognize and adopt an individualised theory or concept. Lifelong learning requires not only social work skills, but also knowledge and application of theories in different case work contexts with individuals, groups, families and communities.

It is very important to learn about the social practices and values of the community within which field practical take place. Supervisors can be important guides to understanding the network of social services available in a particular region, and can help orient the student to the agency context in which they will work. Clearly defining student learner roles is an important step, so the student can benefit fully from the educational opportunity, while still providing appropriate service to both clients and agencies. Faculty liaisons can help ensure that everyone's needs are addressed and that opportunities to integrate classroom training with "real world" experiences are maximized. A fruitful social work practicum would be the final shaping of the student in becoming a professional social worker.

Given the reality of resource limitations (personnel, time and money) in the context of developing countries, universities may consider the use of online communication between field supervisors and individual practice teachers as well as group supervision, in which practice teachers can support and challenge each other (Ghipiu and Maghiar, 2011).

A review of the social work practicum in the contexts of Trinidad and Tobago and India creates questions of the usefulness of hybridisation in these contexts. The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (2012) highlights the role of social workers in "[strengthening] the capacity of communities to interact with their governments to extend social and economic development" (p. 2). The limited community placements in Trinidad and Tobago contradicts this goal and leads to the question of whether it is expedient to consider the implementation of community camps that are similar to those used in the practicum in India.

The Global Standards for the Education and Training of the Social Work Profession (2004) notes that schools of social work should aspire for the "recognition and development of indigenous or locally specific social work education and practice from the traditions and cultures of different ethnic groups and societies" (p.5). Although the social work practicum in the contexts of Trinidad and Tobago and India may not fully reflect indigenous practice, the unique aspects that were highlighted reflect a useful adaptation of this aspect of social work education to meet the requirements of each country. There is a need for research into the role and involvement of other systems, such as the professional associations of social work in the provision of social work education during the practicum. Professional associations of social work have the potential to advocate for change and contribute to the development of budding social workers (Wehrmann, 2010). Future research could explore the extent to which the professional associations in Trinidad and Tobago and India might directly assist the schools of social work by influencing

members to assume the role of supervisor of social work students on practicum and indirectly by providing the vision and opportunities for macro level intervention (such as social action and advocacy) that is as much a part of social work as micro practice.

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