Research Paper Social Science

Field Practicum- The Venue For Competence Development In Social Work

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ABSTRACT

Field work is the signature pedagogy of social work education which is primarily instrumental for the development of competence in social work students. Competence implies knowledge, skill, ethics and values that a social worker should posses to be a professional. It is the integration of theory and practice that occurs at the practicum that shapes and reshapes the professionals in social work. Field practicum therefore becomes the sole venue where professional social workers are carved out.

Keywords : Social work, Field practicum, Competence, , Signature pedagogy, Integration,

Practicum- The Venue for Competence Development in Social Work

Profession of social work relies on social work educational programs to produce competent and ethical professional practitioners. This implies that social work education is expected to equip the social work professional with adequate training and expertise in a wide range of areas to handle effectively the problems faced by individuals, groups, families, organisations and community. Class room training alone is insufficient to achieve this, pointing to the significance of practice training. Field practicum in social work education is the primary venue in which social work students are socialized to be professionals (CSWE, 2008). National Assessment and Accreditation Council (2005) describes it as a closely supervised educational internship in a social work setting that provides planned opportunities to apply theory taught in classrooms to field situations, which, in turn, enhances classroom learning. It has been described as integral, crucial, pivotal, key, central, significant and essential part of the social work education. Council on Social Work Education considers it as the 'Signature Pedagogy' of social work education as it represents the central form of instruction and learning in which a profession socializes its students to perform the role of practitioner.(CSWE 2008) Thus, social workers are not only expected to be informed about relevant theories but must apply them to practice so that unfavourable conditions in the society can be ameliorated. It is this practice informed by theory that distinguishes professional social work from informal forms of helping (Berder 2000)

Competency in Social Work

Competency in social work is defined as having the knowledge, skill and attitude to accomplish an objective, task or professional assignment. It means that social workers be equipped with knowledge level efficiency to deal with social issues, skills to tackle social problems and attitude towards societal needs.

Knowledge base of Social work differs from the knowledge structure of any other disciplines like medicine, law, engineering etc., due to its generic nature. It is a contested activity due to its practice in diversified settings enabling different interpretations and value stances. Workers therefore need knowledge of how people function, their support networks and how society can influence and impact on everyday lives. Social work has three distinct areas of knowledge: Knowledge that informs about client's experience and context; Knowledge that helps to plan appropriate intervention and Knowledge that clarifies the understanding of legal, policy, procedural and organizational context in which the practice takes place. (Compton & Galloway, 1)989

The knowledge base as described by various authors converge to three major aspects i.e., the person, the situation and the interaction. It encompasses understanding of various theories related to human behavior and various methods; Knowledge of problem solving process and of social work assessment and intervention. While the discipline may borrow and integrate practice concepts from other professions, the responsibility for developing, testing and transmitting knowledge about social work practice-both process and models of intervention- must remain a central responsibility of social work.

Knowledge base of social work is never static rather it continues to expand. It is constantly developing and evolving to meet the changing needs of the practice context, providing a pool on which to draw and guide both understanding and actions. Over time, workers develop a knowledge base which reflects their understanding of the realities of social work and social work practice. Through experiences in practice; reflection on how they and others carry out their work; reading the experiences of others and studying research findings, workers develop their understanding of theories for practice. This builds into a knowledge base which can be drawn upon 'so that we are not reinventing the wheel every time we act' (Thompson 2000, p. 51)

Skill development is a debated and much discussed subject in social work. Unlike in other professions, it remains difficult to identify the kind of practice for which a student is to be prepared in social work because of the breadth of the professional practice. The vast canvass of the Social work horizon makes it difficult to provide adequate knowledge and skill base required for effective practice in a given area. Even the term skill itself is considered to be confusing as it means differently to different people. Social workers are expected to develop the following competencies during the course of their training: communicating and engaging. promoting and enabling, assessing and planning, interviewing and providing

services and working in organizations. To develop these competencies, a social worker needs to develop a) cognitive skills –as analytic skills, capacity to evaluate/reflect, using research findings effectively, applying knowledge and understanding to practice b) administrative skills - skills to organize and prioritise individual workload skills to find resource availability and other work priorities c)record keeping and record writing d) interpersonal skills- skills to communicate verbally and non-verbally, understanding of self awareness. (CCETSW)

Skill in social work hence, denotes the degree of knowledge, expertise, judgement and experience that is brought to play within a given situation, course of action/ intervention. It can involve several factors such as arriving at a sound judgement, how best to work within a particular environment:, the level of intensity that the work requires; formulating a judgement about the level of skill that the work requires and what the practice emphasis should be, particularly at the beginning, middle or end of a piece of work or course of action etc. (Trivethick)

The mission of the social work profession is rooted in a set of core values that lays the foundation of social work's unique purpose and perspective. Values can be thought of as beliefs that a profession hold about people and about appropriate ways of dealing with people. Knowledge differs from values. Value statements refer to **what is preferred** and knowledge statements to **what is confirmed.** (Gordon 1965)

Social work profession exists in the society and hence it identifies and operationalise the value premises already existing in the society and not exclusively held by the profession. The values that social workers hold includes: service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity and competence. (NASW) The principles that flow from them must be balanced within the context and complexity of the human experience.

These values, ethical principles and standards are articulated in a professional code of ethics which is relevant to all social workers and social work students, regardless of their professional functions, the settings where they work, or the populations they serve. It refers to the obligations of a professional person to other persons, including clients, other professionals and the general public. Moreover, it should clarify, test and learn fundamental principles such as equality, justice, liberty, dignity, harmony, self determination, acceptance, non-judgmentality, etc to help students arrive at their own understanding about the same

Development of competence through Integration

Competence is achieved through the application and integration of classroom learning of knowledge, skills and attitude in the practice situations. This connection between academia and the real world experience referred as the "the nexus of influence" (Schneck, 1995, p. 6). is one of the key goals of field education. Through this process students understand how their experiences are connected to social work programme; helped to understand the social work skills necessary during professional interaction; knowledge that informed the actions, values that influenced the interaction, evaluate the effectiveness of interventions; contend with the realities of social, political and economic injustice; strive for cultural sensitivity and competence; deliberate on the choices posed by ethical dilemmas; develop a sense of self in practice; and build a connection to and identity with the profession. They learn the 'why' and 'what' of their actions. They develop practice skills; apply theory to actual situations and otherwise "test their ability to be professional social workers" (Fortune, McCarthy, & Abramson, 2001). The Social work educators on the other expect the transfer of learning from classroom to practice to occur in the field practicum, with field instructors providing the primary, on-site supervision of that transfer (Knight, 2001). The experience in field is thus expected to promote a synthesis between academic forces and practical work via investigation and performance of interventions in a guided process with the aim of ensuring proper and controlled development of the student into a competent professional.

However, the challenge of how to ensure the student's ability to link or integrate theory with practice has been a consistent theme throughout the social work education literature (Rogers & Thomlison, 1998). Inadequately equipped field instructor, use of expediated methods, increasing workloads of the agency field instructors and lack of training of field instructors have been cited as the challenges to the effective integration/ competence development. Two of the most prevalent questions related to this were: where to locate the primary responsibility of integration and how to discern which strategies are most effective in enhancing students' abilities to integrate theory and practice.

Efforts have been undertaken to plug these gaps in integration. Interactional design developed by Bloksberg, and Walberg (1971) is pioneer in this regard. It included components such as systematic sharing of information, team teaching, and peer consultation. Bogo and Vayda (1998) have developed the Integration of Theory and Practice (ITP) Loop. Using the stages of David Kolb's (1984) learning cycle, the Loop prescribes a four-step process a)retrieving information related to practice situation (concrete experience), b)reflecting on personal associations related to the encounter (reflective observation), c)linking knowledge and theory with practice encounter (abstract conceptualization), and d) selecting a professional response derived from previous steps (active experimentation) for analyzing client encounters.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges and limitations experienced at field practicum, it continues to remain the sole site for developing competence social workers through appropriate integration of theory and practice. Too often, educators become focused on producing an end product in their classrooms instead of viewing classroom experience as a development level in a learning process that continues in their field and eventually into their work environment. Constructive and continuous interaction between the TRIAD- the student, field instructor and faculty liaison regarding the field experiences is required for effective integration. Pushing out. softening, and reshaping the boundaries of social work knowledge and practice with designing individual plans for competence development and integration at practicum therefore becomes central to social work education.

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