[01-11]



# Journal of Development and Social Sciences www.jdss.org.pk



## **RESEARCH PAPER**

# Social Work Field Practicum: From Signature Pedagogy to the Field Workers Challenges

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Social Work Field Practicum is an essential to Social Work education. Literature shows the there are certain challenges and problems in Social Work Field Practicum. The intention of the study was to investigate experiences and challenges faced by graduate students during traini of Field Work. To explain the issue, the following study used phenomenological resear approach. In the present research, multi-stage sampling was used and firstly two universiti of Punjab namely, University of the Punjab Lahore and University of Sargodha, Sargodha we selected; secondly department of Social Work of the above said universities were selected following purposive sampling and thirdly the participants of the study were contacted through the department. Criteria for the selection of participants were the students who had completed field work during graduate program. The data was analyzed by following the over process guided by Creswell (2013) and later analysis was presented through the major them.

Academic Supervisor, Field Supervisor, Fieldwork Practicum, Phenomenological **KEYWORDS** Analysis, Signature Pedagogy, Social Work

#### Introduction

Social Work Field Practicum is the important component of Social Work Education, students get opportunity to practice Field Work at social welfare agencies, they go through various experiences, meet new people and learn practical skills of problem solving, dealing with clients and working in complex situations. Students learn theoretical knowledge in educational institutions and they have to practically implement that theoretical knowledge into practice at social welfare agencies during training. For proper implementation of theoretical knowledge into practice, Social Work students need to be capable of working in complex situations with clients of multiple categories by utilizing their analytical skills, practical skills, confidence, professional qualities, proper methods and techniques so that only then they will be able to select theory or practice model that is most relevant and appropriate for their practical work. But it is observed that students often face challenges at social welfare agencies, which keeps them far behind from achieving their full potentials and they often feel that they are not fully equipped with skills to deal with complex situations (Ahmed, Butt & Sajid, 2021)

The Council on Social Work Education acknowledged field education as the signature pedagogy of social work, in 2008. This way the importance of field practicum is highlighted as the important component of social work education. It's now understood that both social work curriculum and field practicum are significant, valuable and equally important. Along with coursework, students must also complete their field practicum within time, to achieve degree of social work. As field practicum is important, its quality is also important. Students are assigned placements in social welfare organization for field practicum by their respective universities. Field practicum means that students have to deal with various people, they meet clients from diversified backgrounds. They need time to build rapport. To keep check and balance, to maintain quality and to guide students, two supervisors, one external supervisor and one internal supervisor, are assigned to students. Students are expected to learn the implementation of theoretical knowledge into practice

by their own experiences. Field practicum is the training given to students so that they become able to enter into the professional world of social work (Agnimitra, 2015).

Field Assignments and reports are considered an important component of field practicum. Students are given assignments which they have to complete within assigned time and submit completion reports to their respective supervisors. Supervisors keep check and balance of students' performance and guide them when needed. Field practicum is an integral component of social work education, without its good quality the purpose of field training can't be achieved.

Since the beginning of Social Work Education in Pakistan, Field Work is considered as an integral part of graduate program. As an essential part of the BS and MA degree, it is carried out in collaboration with social welfare agencies (government and non-government) in order to solve the problems of the indigenous communities, where the students apply their learnt course work knowledge, ethics, Values, skills and generic principles in order to have a successful assessment and intervention of the clients under study.

#### **Literature Review**

In Social Work Education, course work and field practicum, both are equally important. The Field practicum plays a pivotal role in Social Work Education. Field practicum is also known as field work and it is an internal part of social work education around globe. Field practicum which is also known as field education around globe, includes skill building, upholding standards of ethics and practice excellence, and developing competent practice. The overall objective of field practicum is to produce a professionally reflective, self-evaluating, knowledgeable and developing social workers. Field practicum is viewed as a unique partnership between the department of social work and social welfare agencies with the purpose of designing, implementing, and monitoring a sound educational program for students. Through ongoing communication, the social welfare agency's and department's personals work towards the development of a shared educational philosophy and standards regarding field assignments, field education, and students' performance. This partnership is dynamic in its orientation, responsive to changes in social welfare agency's environment, in department's curriculum, and in the students, it seeks to educate.

Social work education is based on the system of values, theory and practice (Zastrow, 2016).. The goal of the Social Work Field Practicum is to provide students the space and opportunities to integrate theory, learn practice skills, and experience the expression of values in social realities. The curriculum of Social Work Education, in the various schools and departments of social work is commonly comprised of various components spread over two years of a Master's course and 4 years Bachelors program. For better understanding of Social Work Education there is a way to review the content and expectations evident in the curricula of accredited social work programs.

Fieldwork is accepted as integral in the teaching of professional social work, which is both an academic discipline and practice-based profession (IFSW, 2014). Social Work Education is incomplete without its Field Work practice. Field practicum is a complete process where social work students' work at social welfare agencies within assigned duration under supervision of internal and external supervisors. Field Work is mandatory to complete Social Work Education.

Field practicum is an important component of the Social Work Education, which needs to be effectively coordinated for creating workforce which is skilled, capable and ready to serve for the adjustment of groups and individuals in the society. Field practicum supervisors are considered instructors in the field, who guide students. The way supervisors guide student's matters because if supervisors guide properly according to the learning requirements of students then it becomes visible in students' performance, but if students aren't guided well or supervised in a good manner then it can be problematic for students, so the quality of supervision should be maintained as per standards of social work education (Marc, Makai-Dimeny, & Osvat, 2014)...

Since the beginning of Pakistan as an independent country, Social Work has always been significant. Starting from trainings and short diplomas, it became an independent academic discipline initially awarding students with degree of MA Social Work. With the flow of time Social Work has evolved, both academically and professionally. Now in many colleges and universities of Pakistan, BS, MA, MPhil and PhD Social Work are being taught and later students achieve many professional positions in this field to serve their country. According to Rehmatullah, the objectives of social work's founding mothers and fathers 'has never been done' (2002). Indeed, 'very little social work literature has been produced, and social work methodology of "group work" and "case work' is still being taught in the same manner as in 1954' (Rehmatullah, 2002).

If we talk about Social Work in Educational context, in Pakistan, course work and field practicum both hold equal importance. Colleges and Universities teach students all the theoretical subjects, and assign them placements at different social welfare agencies for practical learning. After reviewing the relevant literature it's understandable that; Field Work has been described as the 'signature pedagogy' of the profession (Wayne, Riskin, & Bogo, 2010). In Pakistan, educational institutes have a very good systematic curriculum for coursework and field practicum, they take responsibility to send students to proper placements e.g. fields, at right time by their own choice, students are given option to select their place for field work practice from available options.

In Pakistan, Social Work Education is being taught since country's very existence. With time Social Work profession has evolved in all the better ways, but somehow there are still some grey areas about Social Work Education and Profession not only in Pakistan but also in other countries too. Literature shows that Field Work Education is helpful for students but it also has some challenges and problems, in Social Work Field Practicum, students often face multiple problems and challenges.

Problems which are faced by students at field practicum, can only be understood when they are studied in depth, for gaining in depth knowledge of field work challenges and problems, the direct source of information can only be students themselves. So my research aims at targeting students of social work, to gain knowledge about field practicum problems and challenges by learning their real experiences, which are faced by them.

#### **Material and Methods**

The intention of this study was to investigate experiences and challenges faced by graduate students during training of Field Work in Social Work Education in Punjab. To explain and explore the said issue, the following study was based on qualitative social research methodology and used phenomenological research approach. Phenomenology is a specific type of qualitative research design. Donalek (2004) defines phenomenology as the examination of 'lived experiences' of individuals. This examination is carried out with the help of descriptions provided by those people who are involved in the given phenomenon. In this type of research, the respondents are asked to describe their experiences according to their own perspective. So, it requires the researcher to keep aside his own biases about that phenomenon, which is known as 'bracketing'. This is necessary in order to unveil the real meaning of lived experiences of individuals as understood by them. Focus group discussions were used to collect data from the participants. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) are a type of group interview with a defined focus, provide rich and in-depth perspective on a well-defined topic and can surface new ideas as a result of their unplanned responses

(Rubin, D, 2016). For this purpose, a loosely structured interview protocol was designed to conduct some FGDs to collect data from the participants till the saturated data was acquired. A small and manageable group of participants were invited as Krueger & Casey (2000) suggest between six and eight participants group for each FGD.

In the present research study, multi-stage sampling was used and amongst the types of multistage sampling (multistage cluster sampling and multistage random sampling), sample was drawn by following multistage random sampling. The concept of multistage random sampling technique is similar to multistage cluster sampling. But in this case, the researcher chooses the samples randomly at each stage. Here, the researcher does not create clusters, but narrows down the sample by applying random sampling. By adopting this firstly two universities of Punjab namely, University of the Punjab Lahore and University of Sargodha, Sargodha were selected; secondly department of Social Work of the above said universities were selected by following purposive sampling and thirdly the participants of the study were contacted through the department. Criteria for the selection of participants were the students who have completed their field work during graduate program. Focus groups of these participants were based on volunteer sampling. The data was analyzed by following the overall process guided by Creswell (2013) and later analysis was presented through the major themes.

#### **Results and Discussion**

# Theme: I- Students' Experiences during Social Work Field Practicum

Field practicum is a new phase for students in which they enter into practical learning from theoretical learning. They explore field practicum for the first time where they have the opportunity to recognize their personal capabilities, strengths and weaknesses so they can improve themselves through this learning experience of field practicum. As all individuals are different from one another in the same way students experiences during field work can vary from student to student.

Some respondents told that as it was their first experience to do field work so they had no idea about how they were supposed to perform there. During field practicum students realized that actual field work is far different than what was told by supervisors. The theoretical knowledge didn't help them enough to work at field practicum and they had to learn new skills to work there.

During field work, all experiences were totally new for me, I had no idea about how it's carried out, after going for field work I realized that what was told by internal supervisor is different than actual field work. I was told by external supervisor about my tasks and responsibilities, and also by my own experience I realized that field work is very different than what we were expecting. The already leant theoretical knowledge didn't help me enough at field work and to cope with new situations at field work I had to learn new skills.

Some respondent told that being male when they were assigned female oriented social welfare agencies then the nature of their tasks was only related to office work, they had to work within boundaries of office at the social welfare agencies, so they could not directly deal with clients.

Some respondents told that being male it was their first experience to deal clients who are children so during field work it was difficult for them to take case histories from children because they were not cooperative. Students also told that their practical experiences of field practicum are proved to be different than what they expected.

During field work I faced problem in working with children as they were school going children so it was really hard to deal with them. It was my first experience with children so it

was hard for me to deal children, it was hard for me to communicate with them, to handle them. It was also difficult to take case histories from children as they were not cooperative. At field work I realized that what we were guided by supervisors is different than our actual field practice.

Some participants told that before field practicum they didn't know about orphan homes for children. During field work they intentionally maintained space with children as a strategy to not make them dependent. They taught them to be independent by not forming emotional attachments with their clients who were children.

During field work I explored that there are orphan homes which are working really well for orphan children. During field work I took care of maintaining space with children in a professional manner so that they may not depend on me in future. I didn't form emotional bonding with children, I didn't make them emotionally attached to me so that they can learn to be independent.

Some respondents were not happy with their field practicum. They said that the environment at social welfare agency was very unprofessional and they were not assigned tasks which they were supposed to rather they were given office work tasks only. These respondents said their experiences were not good.

During field work my experiences were very much different than theory of social work. The environment was very unprofessional. We weren't given enough opportunities to interact with clients. We were assigned irrelevant tasks at social welfare agency like assisting them in office work rather than dealing with clients. My experiences weren't good and I was not happy about it.

Some respondents told that orientations given to them by external and internal supervisor were contradictory in nature as both supervisors guided according to agendas of their institutions, internal supervisor guided as per requirements of social work education but external supervisors guided as per agendas of social welfare agencies which was different than expected field practicum environment. Students had no choice but to adjust themselves as per agendas of social welfare agencies. Although the environment at field practicum was challenging for students but they realized their responsibilities and they themselves tried to create space to apply their learnt knowledge during field practicum.

During field work I realized that social welfare agencies have their own agendas while the main agendas of social work education for field work are different. So I had to work and adjust according to agenda of social welfare agency which was challenging for me. What we are guided by internal supervisors is different than what we are told by external supervisors as internal supervisors guide us according to agenda of social work education while external supervisors guide us according to their agencies environment. So students like us, get confused but with passage of time we understand what we are actually supposed to do and how we have to create space for applying our knowledge as it is our own responsibility. I created my own opportunities and space to implement my knowledge of social work practically.

During social work field practicum students get exposure about the practice of social work through their lived experiences. Many students reported that their practice experiences are different than their theoretical experiences. Students seemed dissatisfied with the amount of information they were given by supervisors before joining field practicum, as during field practicum they realized that field practicum is different than what was told about it, and they had to learn new skills to cope with the new and unfamiliar environment at social welfare agencies. Some male students faced gender discrimination as they were assigned female oriented social welfare agencies where they were not allowed to work with female clients so they had no other opportunity to do office work and outdoor tasks only.

# Theme: II- Students' Post-Social Work Field Practicum Experiences

Post-Social Work field practicum experiences are those experiences which students have after completion of field practicum. Field practicum is practical training of social work students where they are supposed to learn practical application of theoretical knowledge, so it's generally expected by students that their learning will be maximized after being through field practicum.

Some participants told that through field practicum they overcame their short comings and gained confidence to apply their learn knowledge practically.

After field practicum, my learning is increased. I explored how to apply my learnt knowledge into practice. I figured out that my knowledge is enhanced by practical work. Now I know how to apply theoretical knowledge practically. After field work now I'm able to work with clients confidently. I overcame my hesitation, reluctance and shortcomings through this field work.

One participant told that he is not satisfied regarding his field practicum. He said that allocation of social welfare agency was not appropriate for him being male, as he was the only male in his whole group who was sent to a female oriented social welfare agency so he was not allowed to work with female clients. His disappointment was too much, he said he could not experience field practicum as other students experienced it as he was denied major opportunities for his learning. He said his experiences could be better if he was assigned a suitable social welfare agency where he could work with clients rather than only working in office domain. He said that he requested to change his social welfare agency but his request was not accepted.

Well, my experiences are that I'm not satisfied with my field work, I wasn't given enough opportunities to work in domain of social work to apply my theoretical knowledge practically. I wasn't given clients to deal. I was only given tasks in domain of office management. It was so heart breaking for me because I was denied my right to have proper opportunities like other students. Even I raised my concerns to change my social welfare agency but it was of no use. So I think I could not experience field work as other students get the opportunity to experience it. I feel like much of time got wasted only because I was assigned an agency which was females oriented and males were not allowed to work there with clients. I feel like I could be assigned a better social welfare agency.

Some students told that their experiences are good, they have gained awareness about how to practically deal with clients, and their learning is increased through field practicum so now they are confident to be working as future social workers.

My post social work field practicum experiences are good. My learning is enhanced. My knowledge is increased. I realized that after field wield work now I know how to solve clients problems, how to deal with them, how to gain their trust and how to make mutually cooperative environment with clients because only then it can be possible to deal them when they are willing to cooperate too. Now I'm confident to work as a professional social worker in future.

One participant who worked at orphan home told that now he has gained confidence to deal with clients regardless of their age. He is now capable to manage activities on his own. He has got the insight to be careful for orphan children in the society, so now he know how to help such children and how to work as a professional social worker.

I'm now confident about dealing clients even if they are children now I can deal them easily. Now I know how to practically remain professional while dealing with clients by not forming emotional attachment with them. I dealt clients in a way that made them independent

and not dependent on me. Now I know if I see children with no home or place to live then I can refer them to orphan homes. Through my field practicum experiences now I'm ready to manage activities on my own. Now I'm confident to work professionally as a social worker.

One student told that after field practicum now her perspective has changed to look at the subject of social work in a positive way. She has got skills to practically help people and now she can generate awareness in society as well to help vulnerable people. She thinks her field practicum experience has groomed her to work as a future social worker.

After completing my field work practice and submitting my final reports my dimensions are changed by which I used to look at this subject. There are a lot of people who are unaware of these social welfare agencies which we are assigned for field practicum, which are to help those people who are in vulnerable condition, so my most relieving experience is to aware vulnerable people of society about these social welfare agencies to get help. After field work now I'm confident to deal with clients and help them. I overcame my shortcomings through this practice experience. I feel like my field work experience has groomed me to work professionally as social worker in future.

When students were talking about there post social work field practicum experiences, many of them were dissatisfied about their experiences at field practicum as they were not happy with their assigned social welfare agencies and the environment and treatment they got by agency representatives. Some students told they were deprived of their right to have proper opportunities like other students at field practicum. Only few students seemed happy and satisfied about experiencing field practicum. However majority claims they have felt the increase in their learning after being through field practicum.

# Theme: III- Challenges faced by Students during Social Work Field Practicum

Regarding challenges, participants told that their biggest challenge was the allocation of unsuitable social welfare agency to them. They were sent to those social welfare agencies which were female oriented hence they were not allowed to deal with female clients. They were assigned office management tasks and it was challenging for them to communicate with clients who had a different mother language.

During field work I faced the challenge that I was sent to dar-ul-aman which is a female oriented agency, males were not allowed to deal clients, so I think my placement was not suitable. I was assigned office management tasks which was not my domain as a student of social work, also the people visiting that office were coming from various backgrounds so it was also challenging to communicate them in a language which they understand like Punjabi.

Some participants told that there challenge was lack of proper guidance by supervisors and lack of cooperation by team members. The environment at social welfare agency was inappropriate to work in domain of social work. They also faced challenges regarding time management from supervisors as they didn't assign time relevant with students comfort as they were hostel students so they needed cooperation by supervisors.

Some participants told they faced challenge of working with children as it was their first experience to deal with children and children were stubborn and non-cooperative. They overcame these challenges with time.

The main challenge for me was that my client's population was children. There were many children who were non-cooperative who were not ready to take our help. It was hard for me to develop a bond with them so that they can trust me. Somehow I managed to make them feel comfortable and helped them. Another challenge was that children were very stubborn so it took a long time to teach them appropriate manners and engage them in healthy activities. But I overcome these challenges with time.

Some participants told that they faced challenge of irrelevancy of theory with practice, the tasks assigned to them didn't gave them opportunity to apply learnt knowledge practically, also social welfare agency representatives took them non-seriously and didn't assign proper opportunities.

The challenge I faced was that our practice at social welfare agency was not according to the theory taught to us in our curriculum. Another challenge was that we were taken nonseriously at social welfare and hence we were engaged in irrelevant tasks. We weren't given opportunities to work in domain of social work also; I faced was that there was a gap in our work days. We were supposed to work only two days in a week. Then after one week when we used to go there then our clients used to get distracted in this time period and then I have to start working them from start and teach them same things again and again. It was very challenging. I had to do more hard work in this regard than usual.

Some participants told that they faced challenge of differences in agenda of social welfare agencies with the domain of social work practice. They had no choice but to adjust themselves according to the agenda and environment of social welfare agencies which was not in alignment with standards of social work field practicum. They faced challenges regarding gender biasness. They faced challenges regarding application of theoretical knowledge. However they tried to overcome these challenges with time.

I faced many challenges. At my field work I had to work according to agenda of social welfare agency because we are under them when we are at our placements. There was transportation issue as I had to manage it by myself. And as there were females in the group it was more pressure on me how I'll help them survive in community work as obviously there is gender biasness in our society. Also the application of knowledge practically was tough for me as I had no idea how I'll be doing it. But I figured out with time that I was applying my knowledge practically but I understood it late. Like if I'm communicating well with people it means I'm using communication skills and so on. Initially there were many problems and challenges but with time they got minimized as I got familiar with the work environment and procedure.

Some participants told they faced challenge of public dealing as clients were non-cooperative. It was challenging for them to generate awareness for clients regarding roles of social workers so that they may start cooperating with them.

Public dealing was one of the most difficult challenge I faced, the patients were very suspicious about social workers and were not ready to give any kind of info. To aware people about social welfare agencies and their working was one of the most difficult challenge for me. People had no awareness about social workers so it was really challenging to aware them, to make them feel comfortable and to gain their trust and cooperation.

Some participants who worked at Shadab Training Institute for mentally challenged, told that, they faced multiple challenges as they didn't know how to deal with mentally challenged clients. Learning sign language was a challenge for them. Doing marketing for funds collection of the respective social welfare agency was another challenge they faced.

I faced difficulties during social work field practicum. To deal with mentally ill clients was difficult. Using gesture language was also difficult to make clients understand anything. Teaching process was also difficult, marketing experience for institute was also very difficult and the awareness program about institute was also a challenge for me. These were the multiple challenges during my Field work practicum.

Some participants told they faced challenge of mismanagement at the hands of social welfare agency representatives. They were not assigned clients rather they were only

assigned office work tasks and computer work. There was lack of cooperation among group members and transportation issue was another challenge for them.

During field work the first challenge I faced was mismanagement from agency representatives, they didn't gave us enough time and opportunity to work according to social work domain, they rather engaged us in computer work and file management work and other activities. Another challenge was that group members were not serious about time management. There was no cooperation from group members. There was a transportation issue for females as the social welfare agency was far away from university. Absence of clients was another big challenge.

Some participants told they faced challenge of gaining complete awareness about their field practicum as the orientations given to them didn't contain full information. The external supervisor was not dealing with them professionally rather she had a moody attitude towards students. In such environment clients were also non-cooperative. Students tried to overcome such challenges by their own efforts.

During social work field practicum the first challenge was to gain full awareness of the assigned agency as the orientation given to us didn't contain complete info so we had to explore many things on our own. Second big challenge was coordination with the external supervisor as she had many mood swings so we had to manage according to her wish. Another challenge was to diagnose clients' condition as they were non-cooperative in start, but with passage of time we overcame few of these challenges.

Some male students who were assigned female oriented social welfare agencies told that one big challenge was no allocation of clients to them and another challenge was to do marketing campaigns for funds collection as there were communication barriers.

During field work I faced the challenge that I was sent to Kashana Welfare Home which is a female oriented agency, males were not allowed to deal clients, so I think my placement was not suitable. I was assigned other tasks like fund raising and managing resources. Also the people in community were from various backgrounds so it was challenging to communicate them in a language which they understand, people didn't know about Kashana so it was also difficult to generate awareness in society and to collect funds.

From participants responses it's obvious that all participants faced multiple challenges of different nature. In this regard the unprofessional environment at social welfare agency, lack of proper orientation containing full fledge information of field practicum, non-serious behavior by external supervisors and allocation of irrelevant tasks, lack of proper opportunities played a big role for students to face challenges at multiple levels of field practicum. Only few students faced challenges due to their personal incompetency.

#### Conclusion

The present study concluded that majority of students found contradictions in given orientations regarding field practicum than actually exploring it by field visits. Students seemed unsatisfied by their external supervisors, as all of them did not belong to Social Work profession. External supervisors weren't enough cooperative with students and treated them like ordinary volunteers rather than specifying students' tasks and responsibilities in domain of social work. They were given administrative tasks rather than field assignments. Many students were incompetent to manage unwanted and unfamiliar complex situations at field practicum. Some students faced gender discrimination as male students weren't allowed to work with female clients at few social welfare agencies. There were multiple challenges for students to complete their field practicum smoothly, from their own incompetency to less-cooperation by group members and lack of proper guidance by external supervisors and lack of appropriate opportunities at social welfare agencies. Students' realizations at field practicum were, that international level knowledge and norms are hard to implement practically at local placements so they had to adjust according to local requirements and norms. Many students were of the point of view, that they had to adjust according to the agendas of social welfare agencies which were contradictory to the standards of social work education. By being through such multiple difficulties and challenges, majority of students faced contradiction in theory of social work and practice of social work. Students found huge gaps in theory and practice. By students experiences it's found that there was no or less alignment in theory and practice of social work. But students were unsatisfied with practical application of theoretical knowledge at field practicum due to not having enough opportunities and having challenging circumstances.

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