

Promoting *Practice-Teaching-Research* Nexus: a goal to develop the social work profession globally

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Abstract

The scope of professional social work in the 21st century is ever widening. Started as a helping profession on an individual basis, it now reaches to a wide range of target groups and communities, justifying its cause, contributing to the integrated development of the individual, family, group and societal levels. Professional Social Work Education provides the budding aspirants a platform to practice their theoretical knowledge and skills in different social work settings. One of the major goals of professional social work education is to mould these trainees into unique individuals, so that they contribute the best out of them for the growth and development of the society. Social work education has recognised the need for research informed practice and as such evidence based practice has been accepted as a paradigm in the professional fields of social work, thus making the research-practice nexus embedded in the values of the profession. In this regard, it is worth mentioning the core mandate of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) to enhance social work education and training at a global level that focuses broadly on the practice-teaching-research nexus. To promote and accomplish this goal, the students of social work were given an opportunity for experiential learning by making a study of the novel initiatives of professionally run NGOs.

Key words: Social Work Education, Practice-Teaching-Research

Introduction

Professional social work has embraced evidence based practice with a focus to develop need based programmes and proficiencies of the practitioners. International Associations have stated the need and importance of evidence based practice and the idea has been imbibed by the social workers globally. Social work as a practiced-based profession (IFSW/IASSW, 2014) requires a combination of theoretical and practical learning. In order to achieve that goal, all the universities follow practice integrated curriculum, where the students get opportunities for experiential learning.

The IASSW (2004) Global Standards for the Education and Training of the Social Work Profession encourages all social work educators to include knowledge of research and research skills. Social work research as an area needs more attention in social work education in order to develop a sound theoretical base for the profession. The research needs to be strengthened with adequate infrastructure and teaching facility, which would help professional practitioners develop

grounded theory building in the profession in the development of the discipline (Baikadi et.al, 2014). Singh et al. (2011) argue that students' learning should be 'embedded in local traditions'.

IASSW has promulgated this cause in its core mandate of promoting and enhancing social work education and training on a global level by recognising the need for practice-teaching-research nexus. It is important that practice is informed by research. It is equally important that lessons from practice are incorporated into the research and teaching endeavour. It states the necessity to overcome the splits between education, research and practice and draws together teaching, research, community engagement and field practice education in meaningful ways to develop a research informed professional culture. This is possible only through the recognition and application of *practice-teaching-research* nexus.

- *Are we integrating the field evidences into the curriculum?*
- *Is our curriculum modified regularly according to the demands of the field?*
- *Do we give exposure platforms for the students to think out of the box?*
- *Do we give enough opportunities for the students to develop their creative thinking capacities and competencies?*

Thus, there is the need for enhancing reflective and critical thinking capacities among the student trainees by giving them opportunities inside and outside the classroom, and the outcome of this reflective analysis should be used to modify the curriculum.

The Rationale

The process of learning is of vital importance for students to help them acquire, practice, and improve the knowledge, attitude, values and skills, needed for the profession. This is facilitated through both classroom and field learning opportunities which enable students to become competent, ethical, and professional social workers. It seems to be a progressive and developmental process that starts from the entry of the students into their educational programmes and continues throughout their experiential learning venues within the curriculum. This view has been supported by other studies (Dewey, 1997, Mezirow, 2000 and Hager, 2005) that learning impacts the whole educational process and is therefore considered as a long-term developmental and critical process, the purpose of which should be not only to inform, but also to change and transform.

We, as social work educators, focus more on students' learning and knowledge output than taking time to step back and reflect on the ways in which students learn and develop their competencies in classroom and field settings. In the experiential learning venues, educators and practitioners tend to focus more on the operational and task-oriented nature of learning than on the process of learning itself, while they also underestimate the value of critical reflection in student learning during the field experience. What is of paramount importance is how social work students reflect on what they have learnt from the classroom and the field settings and how they develop and formulate their professional identity and competencies in the practice of social work.

Internationally, the focus of social work educators has tended to be on the role of research in social work education (Orme & Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2012). Academics have sought to connect what is taught in social work programmes with a sound research base, thus reinforcing the connection between research and practice and the role of research beyond the academic sphere. Social work practitioners have tried to integrate research and practice, but it is equally imperative that these evidences from the field are incorporated into the curriculum.

Given the importance of this issue and to promote and accomplish this practice-teaching-research nexus, the students of social work at Masters' level were given an opportunity for experiential learning by studying about the research based and programme based novel initiatives adopted by a professionally run NGO.

The Program Objectives

The objectives of this experiential learning initiative were:

1. To have a comprehensive understanding about the innovative initiatives – research based and programme based - of a reputed and professionally run NGO.
2. To understand the competencies required by the practitioners to meet the demands of the field with specific reference to the field setting of the selected NGO.
3. To have exposure to the domains where these innovations have been applied.
4. To make a reflective analysis of the exposure, consolidate the learnings and make recommendations to develop the curriculum.

With these objectives in mind, we have identified Community Based Rehabilitation Forum – a project of Caritas India. It is a non-governmental organisation which facilitates the community based rehabilitation approach of Persons with Disabilities. Incepted in 1996, it works through 72 partners all over India, reaching out to 40, 000 PwDs in the country.

Methodology

The methodology adopted was a 10 day study exposure in the NGO and its intervention areas. The learning happened through lectures, workshops, field visits, interaction with the field staff as well as the target group, review of the documents, reflections and evaluations. The experiential learning opportunity enabled the students to learn the novel initiatives implemented by this NGO in furthering the CBR approach. The students got exposure to the initiatives that were introduced at 3 levels – (1) at the **field level** directly involving the target group, (2) at the **programme level** and (3) at the **management level**.

Learning outcome

This exposure visit gave an impressive learning at three different levels.

The initiative at the field level is the *DLIs – District Level Initiatives*. District Level Initiative is a community based model for inclusive development of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs). DLIs are federations where 5-8 NGO partners come together to promote the rights of PwDs and to bring about systemic change through a bottom up approach. DLIs promote self-representing

structures called Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) at Village, Block, District and State level who use lobbying and advocacy strategies to bring systemic changes promoting inclusive development.

At the programme level, the students learnt a new concept called "**Lifting Barriers**". It is a tool developed by the organisation to identify the barriers that impede the inclusive development of the Persons with Disabilities. Introducing this tool has been a paradigm shift in intervening with Persons with Disabilities (PwDs), by looking at the competencies these people have, rather than the disability. It provides baseline data to plan tailor-made interventions for these PwDs and, by addressing these barriers it becomes a programme in itself.

At the management level, the students got an exposure to learn the **Result Based Management (RBM) Approach** in the implementation of the project. RBM is a management tool used by corporate/business enterprises for the cost-efficient running of their projects. The students learned how to measure the impact of interventions through systematic and scientific methods.

The NGO where the students had this exposure, is an NGO which works at the mezzo level and macro level. Generally, students who seek field work training during their course of MSW programme, get exposure to NGOs who have direct interventions with their target areas and target groups. This was an opportunity to get an understanding of an NGO who works through partners, the major focus being Training, Capacity building, Monitoring and Evaluation.

The exposure gave an understanding to the student trainees about the competencies required for professional social work practice in different settings. The identified competencies were:

- Demonstrating ethical and professional behaviour
- Engage diversity and difference in practice
- Advancement of Human Rights and social justice
- Engage with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities
- Assessment of individuals, groups and families
- Engage in practice-informed research and research-informed practice.

The identified competencies served the students with an insight to be more focused in their interested areas. To quote Nikhil (name changed), "Internationally reputed NGOs look for professionals with specific competencies in specific intervention settings. My understanding about competencies gave me mileage in my internship; I was absorbed by the same organisation."

The learnings about the novel initiatives have developed a reflective thinking in the budding professionals about the scope and role of professional social workers, tailor-made approaches and effective management strategies adopted by the NGO. The students got an opportunity to be part of a research initiative using the newly developed tool –'lifting barriers'. This has initiated research interest in students which further helped them to select the research problem in their final dissertation project. To quote Lakshmi (name changed), "it was an opportunity to relate to a different target group, other than what I have been experienced in the last two field work placements. 'Lifting barriers' helped me to identify variables for my study." It is noteworthy to mention that three students have framed their research problems from this experience. When research is initiated from the field experiences, it is where we encourage students to write from their knowledge of the world.

The training on RBM helped the students to understand how social work projects can be thought of in terms of cost effectiveness and how effectively social work projects can be managed, which earlier was thought of and practised by the management sector. This training opened a new avenue of training and development in their placements. To quote Ishan (name changed), “My placement here at CSR has a strong backing on the RBM training I got from our innovative project. Like how we were initiated to think out of the box, our team here develops innovative programmes here.” Nina’s (name changed) words also support this view. “I approached an NGO for job placement. They did not have a vacancy; but they gave me an opportunity to present before them what I could do as a professional social worker in that organisation. The reflections made during this project helped me to ‘think out of the box’ and fetched me a good job in that organisation”.

A qualitative analysis of the study project stated some of the reflections the students made based on the exposure they got. Out of the 34 who had participated in the project, 21 said that this exposure helped them to better qualify for their job placements. They were able to market themselves better, according to the field demands. To quote Chandan (name changed) “The tag of this innovative project was something which distinguished me from other candidates. I was quite confident in substantiating my competencies.”

Conclusion

The project experiment and experience throw light on the need for practice-teaching-research nexus as a means to develop the profession. Globally, professional social work demands competent, ethical and professional social workers who can diligently use their innovation and creativity to meet the needs of the society. This field based learning exposure was a means to reflect on the implementation of practice-teaching-research nexus in developing the competencies of social work students. By reinforcing the link between practice and effective knowledge building, we, social work educators are adopting a holistic practitioner-researcher-educator role. Therefore, a structured social work curriculum should have opportunities to incorporate these innovations so that students as well as educators are well informed about the developments in the field. This will help to develop a research informed professional culture that draws together teaching, research, community engagement and field practice education in meaningful ways.

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