



REVIEW OF RESEARCH STUDIES AND LITERATURE ON SOCIAL WORK HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

In this paper the researcher has made an effort to bring together relevant literature pertaining to studies on social work higher education. Empirical studies and research articles published on social work education in India in a number of journals, as well as content that has been published in websites have been used for this purpose. The review has been conducted to understand the different findings and perspectives on social work higher education in India. Social work educators and researchers have analyzed social work education in India and have presented their views and opinions mostly in a general sense, despite locating the discussion within a theoretical framework. However, the paper found out that very few empirical researches on social work higher education have been carried out in India, and none of them specifically focuses on specializations in the social work higher education system in the country. The objective of this review is to highlight gaps in social work education and suggest areas of improvement.

Keywords: social work higher education, field work, social work pedagogy, theory and practice in social work

INTRODUCTION

The Social Work profession as defined by the International Federation for Social Work (IFSW) together with the International Association of School of Social Work (IASSW) is a profession that “promotes social change problem solving in human relationships and

the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilizing theories of human behavior and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work” (IASSW 2000).

Very few studies have been conducted on social work higher education in India, and none among them specifically focuses on specializations in the social work higher

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education system in the country such as urban and rural community development, human resource development, family studies, medical and psychiatric social work, correctional social work practices, etc. This paper reviews some such studies in an attempt to highlight gaps in social work education, as well as suggest areas of improvement.

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH STUDIES ON SOCIAL WORK HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

Indian social work educators, while they are active practitioners, fall behind in documenting their work and sharing such work through publications, and thus the knowledge corpus on social work in India is seen to be significantly less than its western counterpart. Further, since field work practiced is not documented scientifically and systematically by schools of social work and field work agencies, there is a lack of a legacy and research findings that can guide young educators in the country. Particularly felt is the lack of knowledge about field work and social work practice in urban and rural community development. Observing trends in research articles published in the Indian Journal of Social Work, Mumbai, from 1971 to 1990, Vijayalakshmi et al (1996) point out that only one percent of 102 articles published between 1971 to 1980 were on field instructions and no articles were published between 1981 to 1990, indicating that only one article was published by a journal on social work instructions on field work in twenty years. They also note that only a negligible number of articles on this topic has appeared after 1990 to date. As said study illustrates, there is huge gap in understanding the Indian context of social work education that seriously hinders prospects for strengthening the social work praxis and pedagogy.

As far as the researcher could find, no doctoral level attempt has been made to study field work practices in social work education in relation to urban and rural community development specialization. The only study providing field work instructions on social work education in India is D'Souza's study in (1978). It laid down a theoretical base for field instruction by comparing the patterns of field work instructions in 14 schools of social work in India, and emphasized the need for innovative pedagogical skills and techniques in field instructions. Further, it called for special units in schools of social work that specialize in field instructions, thereby contributing to improve the quality of the latter. Macchhiwala and D'souza (1983), Mittal and D'souza (1987), D'lima and Anand (1993), Mehta (1996) and Cardoz (2004), in their respective studies on schools of social work, have identified the following: 1) Graduates demonstrated low preference for industrial and administrative field placements 2) Graduates were moderately satisfied with field work training 3) Compared to senior graduates, junior ones were more satisfied with field work 4) Supervisors proved to be the most major source of support to students during field work 5) Graduates were satisfied with faculty supervisors more than agency supervisors (as cited in Chougule 2015).

None of these studies has attempted to study the relevance between theory taught in the class room and field work practice in the field work agency in an open community setup specifically in the social work higher education system of India. Studies have focused only on the perceptions of graduate students on field work trainings. In spite of suggestions made by different researchers, very few or no studies have been conducted to investigate the specific needs of Indian social work education or bridge the gap between theories taught in the classroom

and practice in the field.

A nationwide study made by Desai (1994) studied students, the social work education system, and social work teachers in 31 out of 34 schools of social work in India. It explored the educational background of students enrolled in schools of social work and the professional qualifications of the faculty in schools of social work. In this light, the satisfaction levels of students in field work were also studied. The study concluded that field work requires particular attention with respect to the selection of the field work agency as well as staff selection for supervision to ensure not only satisfaction but also quality. Despite this vast study and the subsequent suggestions made to the second review committee on social work higher education, no major changes took place in relation to the situation of social work education teaching and field work practice in India.

In Maharashtra a study was made on five schools of social work by Narayana (1997) focusing on factors that influence students' motivation for practicing social work. The study concluded that the majority of students expressed satisfaction with field work experiences. However, the study also revealed that the students placed for field work in four out of five schools of social work were investing less than ten hours per week which is below the standard prescribed norm of fifteen hours per week in masters' programmes in social work in India. As rightly pointed out by the study, field work supervision and placement of students in field work settings is a difficult task now a days. There is no standard format or regulation as to where and how many students should be placed in a particular field work setting.

A study made by Lawani (2002) on 'Social Work Education and Field Work Training' in

two colleges of Shivaji University Kolhapur found out that students of social work were not placed in open community settings. The study also points to the lack of a thorough literature review developed on field work training, and the dissatisfaction of faculty supervisors with field work training imparted by sample colleges. This study reveals that since no student is placed in open community settings by their respective schools, many end up getting placements through agencies without specific guidelines to do field work. This has resulted in fieldwork placements and practices that are not uniform across all schools of social work education.

Subhedar (2001) wrote the first text book in India on 'Field Work Training in Social Work' which proved to be of immense use both to students of social work and field work supervisors. He has addressed every component of field work training in social work, and has also suggested a standard format for reporting field work. The concern here is that no follow-up to this attempt has been made either as an advanced version on field work education India, or simply updating this work with the latest developments in social work education both in theory and practice. In fact, many schools are not seen to be following the guidelines prescribed by this excellent book.

It is essential to mention a systematic doctoral study by Balakrishnan (2006) on 'Social Work Education: Supervisor- Student Relationship in Field Work Practice' in seven schools of social work across five different states of India. The study touches on the relationship between the student and the supervisor, goals of supervision, students' and supervisors' perception towards each other, etc. It revealed that supervisors who used updated information when supervising, were receptive towards regular feedback on

their supervision, were prepared for meetings with students, helped their students with academic and personal concerns, included comments in students' recordings, and dealt with students' anxieties marked a generally better relationship with students than those who did not.

Another doctoral study made by Poulouse (2003) titled 'Professional Social Work Education in Kerala: Problems and Prospects', conducted in four schools of social work in Kerala, focused on the perceptions and experiences of professional social work students, teachers, and practitioners on the role of professional social work education in the present day. Social work education responds to societal needs and competence of professional social workers to deal with societal issues is strongly called for. The study found that professional social workers are at a loss as to how to manage issues like AIDS, suicide, broken family issues, and community problems. The study has made suggestions that every part of the master's curriculum must strengthen the student's understanding and appreciation of a scientific and analytical approach to building knowledge for the efficient delivery and constructive evaluation of social work practice.

In the recent doctoral study of Desai (2013) titled 'Paradigms of Social Work Praxis: The Case of Street Children', focus was on two dimensions; one with respect to social work education and training, and the other with respect to social work practice with street children. The Study was conducted in eleven institutes of social work in major cities of India. The study concludes that theory and practice are intertwined in both Social Work education/training and social work practice with street children, and this mutual relationship between theory and practice should be strengthened for the enrichment of

both.

Another doctoral study by Tirmare (2013) was on 'Study of Institutions of Social Work Education and Role of Social Work Educators in Developing Indigenous Knowledge' with a view to understand the curriculum aspects, curriculum setup, facilities available, and knowledge development by schools of social work. Fifteen schools of social work from all over the nation were selected for the study. The study concluded that more efforts are required as principal agents to align the theoretical framework, models, components, and strategies of social work knowledge with the local socio-cultural and economic context to make the knowledge relevant to peoples' need.

CRITICAL VIEWS ON SOCIAL WORK HIGHER EDUCATION

As previously pointed out, there has been very little empirical research based studies on social work higher education and training, especially on social work higher education in different specializations such as urban and rural community development, human resource development, family studies, medical and psychiatric social work, correctional social work practices, etc. The studies cited above were some doctoral theses which cover a few aspects of social work education. Presented below are some critical views on social work higher education.

K. K. Jacob (1994), in his analysis of fifty year's history of social work education in India, has explored the opportunities and challenges in social work education. He explains that the identity of social workers continues to be a major concern in the professional practitioner community, but in the interest of critical analysis, academic development and, most of all, devising solutions for social problems, the sharp distinction made by social workers

between themselves and social scientists will have to be blurred. He argues that while practice is indeed important, the contribution by social scientists to theoretically understand social work cannot be undermined. Hence according to Jacob, a change in the approach of social work practitioners towards contemporary discourses is very much called for (Mazumdar 1994).

In their article titled 'The 5-year MSW-MSW program: a new curricular option', Simon et al (2010) described and analyzed the development and implementation of a five year BSW-MSW program that made use of a pedagogical and programmatic rationale. This approach soon replaced its traditional counterpart. It focuses on economic factors and student retention as important determinants of social work pedagogy (as cited in Jyothi 2014).

Bodhi's (2011) critical take on the professional and intellectual crisis of Social Work Education in India throws into relief the establishment and growth of the profession in the country. This writing takes into account the discourse on the social work profession and its evolution through the years (as cited in Jyothi 2014).

The attempts of defining and institutionalizing social work started right from the inception of social work higher education in India in 1936 with the establishment of the first institution for social work in Mumbai, now known as the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS). The TISS course on social work is a well-established one with years of reputation to its credit. Human resource and management (HRM) is a core component of this course. The course enjoys high demand in the market. However, fieldwork which is regarded as a must by social work educators and employers due to its consideration as a prospective job training activity has not been taken very seriously

by many social work institutions, including the TISS (Bodhi 2011). Further, as per the UGC Review Committees on Social Work Education (1978), undergraduate courses of social work constitute the foundation for the postgraduate level (as cited in D'Souza 1978). Despite this, the TISS has in some instances declined to admit graduates to the postgraduate level, thus arresting the academic growth of emerging practitioners.

A report compiled by Desai et al (2000) titled "Social Work Knowledge, Development, and Dissemination" based on the proceedings of a workshop held at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai in 2000, brought together social work literature focusing on the social work profession in particular. The workshop discussed social work knowledge and its applicability to post-modern challenges, publication as a tool for communication in social work education, and the importance of academic publications over consumer publications in producing relatively impartial knowledge. The report holds that grounded theories should be generated using qualitative and quantitative research methodologies, and highlights the need for indigenous forms of social work knowledge. In this regard, it suggests that practice wisdom be utilized for the formation of an indigenous knowledge corpus, and that to complement this culture specific thinking and praxis be enhanced. The report also supports policy level interventions at every stage of social work education, training and social work practice. However, none of these suggestions were implemented either at the policy level or in actual social work practice following the discussion and writing of the report. It would have made a considerable difference if at least the workshop participants merged their efforts to implement these recommendations in their individual efforts and work, thereby setting the tone for a culture of praxis underpinned

by sound theoretical deliberation.

Cox (1982) in his article 'the educational expectable of social work students' concludes that social work education should invest a great amount of time in developing relevant curriculum and also negotiating potential difficulties in social work professional training. There are five main stakeholders that must be involved in the process of formulation of a social work curriculum as Aptekar (1971) explained: a) The student, b) the instructional staff, c) the professional school, d) the university and e) the community and society at large. By critically studying the social work curriculum, this study supports the debate that no such attempts have been made. The components of social work education namely supervision, field work placement in different settings, professional training, and innovative teaching and learning methodology should be scientifically and analytically studied and implemented.

The Model Curriculum (2001) lays down technical mandates for teaching, learning, and practicing the social work profession. The mandates are in the form of credit distribution across the subject of social work education. It helps to understand the expectation of the UGC to standardize social work education. It is been observed that field work, field study, field practicum and field work curriculum are core yet often neglected parts of social work education. Scholars like Hamilton (1981) and Loevengerg (1978) deliberated on this aspect in great detail in their works. Content, mode, nature of fieldwork, examination of fieldwork, objectives of social work education, and how they can be achieved through field work experiences are discussed in these papers. Marshall (1980) stressed that field practicum helps in concurrent learning of theory and actual practice skills, and also plays an important role in keeping practice education

abreast of changes in the community. Gangrade (1975) and Gerrand et al (1978) emphasize that supervised field work forms an integral part of social work education, and students must get supervised experiences in the field including particular skills and responsibilities. Khinduka (1963)³¹ in his article 'The role of supervision in social work education' opines that the norms of evaluation of fieldwork practicum include the attitude of the students, their feelings of security and stability, capacity to observe, relationship with authority, colleagues and supervisors, self control, interviewing skills, use of agency and community resources, uses of conference, writing reports, identification with the agency and the profession, relationship with clients, competence in handling cases, and the capacity to use supervision as a means of further learning.

The isolation of social work professionals from 'social work' is a serious concern related to the social work higher education system in India (Jacob 1994). Hence, the education system requires strong and heavy reforms in relation to the social work discipline. Professional social workers should take the lead and facilitate effective resolution of social problems based on sound theoretical discussions. They should enable systemic and structural changes. The cadre of students, course curriculum in education institutions, and the pedagogy of social work education have not as yet adequately addressed contemporary issues and much less their roots. The state has not taken any serious measures to ensure quality education in social work either.

The American School of Social work and its impact on professional social work in India draws attention to the lack of a discourse on indigenous Indian literature on the country's rich and unspoken legacy of social work. The

replication of the American or British social work model in India is redundant because the Indian socio-political and cultural contexts are different from America or Britain (Bodhi 2011). A knowledge corpus on indigenous literature of social work education can be created through experiments in teaching and learning in social work education. According to Muzumdar (1997), an anthological understanding of social work education will be an immediate solution for the lack of creative writings on indigenous literature on social work in India.

NEED FOR FURTHER STUDIES AND CONCLUSION

The current review revealed that there is an urgent need for studying social work higher education from different dimensions/specializations such as urban and rural community development, human resource development, family studies, medical and psychiatric social work, correctional social work practices, etc. It has stressed that hand in hand with the need to systematically study small components of social work education like the relationship between field work supervision and theoretical papers taught in class rooms, and also the applicability of social work methods in the Indian context, there is also a strong need for revisions in the macro, structural aspects of social work higher education. This will be in the interest both of the student/practitioner community itself and the wider society that would benefit from the updated knowledge and innovative practices of the former.

In terms of further research, it is important to study fieldwork recording and reporting mechanisms in social work higher education, and there is a need for innovation in these areas. Excellent text books such as Subhedar's (2001) work can constitute the foundation for this kind of attempt. Further,

connections between social work methods and practice should be studied in greater detail for the development of standard field work practice and pedagogy.

The objective of this review has been to highlight gaps in social work education and suggest areas of improvement, which has hopefully been achieved.

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