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Social work field education in Wallaga University, Ethiopia: Challenges and opportunities from the perspectives of students, faculty liaisons and agency supervisors

Nimonam Daraje AMANU and Taye Dida AREDO

ABSTRACT

Social work field education is the core of social work education, which helps socialize students to perform the role of the practitioner. Multifaceted challenges, however, affected its effectiveness. The study aimed to investigate the challenges and opportunities of social work field education from the students', faculty liaisons', and agency supervisors' perspectives. The study employed exploratory research as there was no well-developed literature so far. Data collected through focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and key informant interviews from 35 purposely selected respondents were thematically analyzed. Results of the study revealed field education as a good opportunity where students practically examine, critique, and test the knowledge, skills, values, and principles in academic courses. The study further revealed various challenges, including shortage of allotted time; inconsistent supervision/guidance; school management negligence; faculty liaisons job overload; inaccessibility and unsuitability of agencies and more hindered the effective implementation of field education. The study implied that the nature of commitment and relationship among the key actors of field education, including the faculty liaisons, university, students, agency supervisors and the placement agency determines the effectiveness of field education. Therefore, strong collaboration, commitments and more were suggested to be harnessed to ensure the success of field education.

KEY TERMS: agency supervisors, challenges, Ethiopia, faculty liaisons, field education, opportunities, social work, students, Wallaga

AXEREERAA (Afan Oromo)

Barnootni dirree, saayinsii hawaasaa keessatti iddoo olaanaa qaba. Kaayyoon qorannoo kanaa danqaawwaniifi carraawwan jiran ifa gochuudha. Af-gaaffiifi waliin-dubbiin gareewwanii tooftalee ragaaleen qorannoo kanaa itti funaanamani dha. Ragaan kunis kan funaaname namoota filataman 35 irraati. Bu'aan qorannichaa akka agarsiisutti, barnootni dirree barattootni wanta daree keessatti baratan qabatamaan maal akka fakkaatu akka hubataniif isaan gargaara. Garuu, danqaawwan kanneen akka hanqina yeroo; miira maal na dhibdee; baay'achuu hojii; mijaawuu fi qaqqabummaa dhabuu dhaabbileewwanii; hanqachuu gargaarsaa fi kanneen biroo milkaa'ina barnoota dirreetti warren gufuu ta'anidha. Kanaafuu, kana irra aanuuf walitti dhufeenyi barattoota, barsiisotaafi hojjetoota dhaabbilee dirreen itti bahamuu akkasumas kutannoon waliin hojjechuu isaanii murteessaa waan ta'eef jajjabeffamuu qaba.

JECHOOTA IJOO: barnoota dirree, carraawwan, danqaawwan, gageessitoota barnoota dirree, Itoophiyaa to'attoota dhaabbileewwanii, Wallagga

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Author/s details

Nimonam Daraje Amanu, Lecturer, Department of Social Work, College of Social Sciences and Humanities, Wallaga University, Ethiopia, Email: marartu2018@gmail.com

Taye Dida Aredo, Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, College of Social Sciences and Humanities, Wallaga University, Ethiopia.

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INTRODUCTION

Social work field education is a central form of instruction and learning in which a profession socializes its students to perform the role of practitioner. It is a key training activity for the student, providing opportunities to integrate theories and concepts learned with practice and thus fostering the implementation of evidence-informed practice. It is believed to prepare students to be self-initiating, critically reflective, innovative and able to solve problems across a wide range of issues and a diverse range of contexts. Not only the students, but also agency supervisors, faculty liaisons, placement agency and the placing institution could be the beneficiaries since it plausibly serves as a vehicle for experience sharing and enhancing collaboration. There were, however, multifaceted challenges that affect the effectiveness of field education. Shortage of allotted time against the curriculum; failure of school supervisors in persistently guiding/monitoring students; failure of agency supervisors in playing their supervisory roles; and absence of accessible and suitable agencies were some of the major challenges debilitating the effectiveness of field education.

BACKGROUND

Social work is a professional discipline that basis on a unified curriculum consisting of both theory and field education components (International Federation of Social Work, 2004). The theoretical foundations of social work(the African theory of education and African philosophy of education) emphasize ubuntu-field education as a product of socialization, which is about learning from each other ultimately providing an opportunity to translate theories into practice and thus help advance experiences (African Social Work Network, 2021).

Uche, Ebue and Eme (2014) showed that field practice is the crux of social work education as it enables students learn and apply the learned theories to the amelioration of actual life social problems and needs. Sanjoy (2021) also revealed that rural camp (field work in the community with the community) provides an opportunity for the practitioners to gain hands-on experiences through deeply engaging into the deep-seated situations of communities delving into their natural settings.

Schmidt and Rautenbach (2016) portrayed that field work experience plays a central role in the curricula of social work schools all over the world. It was indicated that social work students move from class-based learning to learning by doing, which marks their entrance into the world of the profession and the demands of learning through practice. Dhembba (2012) invariably asserted field education as an opportunity for aligning theoretical knowledge and learning with the needs of society, which gives students the opportunity to take responsibility for addressing people's problems.

Bell and Anscombe (2013) portrayed that field education had significant positive impacts on students' learning, building skills, knowledge and competencies. Kebede (2019), similarly, indicated that social work education is necessitated to provide a unique set of knowledge, value and skill to its educators that could be realized through field education.

Nonetheless, evidences show that field education faces multifaceted challenges in the course of implementation. Ideally, the theoretical and practical components of social work education are of equal importance though there are indications that field education is marginalized (Dhembba, 2012). Tanga (2012), correspondingly, revealed that fieldwork is marginalised as peripheral activity compared to its academic counterparts and therefore leaving social work educators, students and field supervisors' to far-reaching challenges.

Given the evidence that social work field education was not well developed and studied across the country, Ethiopia, in general and at the study area, Wallaga University and its catchment areas, in particular the study aimed to investigate challenges and opportunities of social work field education from the perspectives of students, faculty liaisons and agency supervisors.

LITERATURE OVERVIEW

Field placements are an opportunity for students to put into practice their academic learning, to garner additional knowledge, skills and values, and to work effectively with different service users. Social work students are placed mostly at human service agencies to maximize the benefits from implementing the theoretical knowledge, skills and values that were taught at university (Nadesan, 2020). It is a basic precept of social work education that the two interrelated components of curriculum in which both theory and academia are of equal importance within the curriculum, and each contributes to the development of the requisite competencies of professional practice (Wheeler, Fortune and Warner, 2015).

According to Vishanthie and David (2004), the standards of field education's curriculum should consistently aspire towards the following points. These include: (1) school programmed objectives and its expected outcomes; (2) clear plans for the organization, implementation and evaluation of the theory and practice; (3) recognition and development of indigenous culture; (4) constant review and development of the curricula; (5) developing skills of

critical thinking and attitudes of reasoning; (6) learning opportunities to ensure that students are prepared for practice; (7) planned co-ordination and collaboration of the school and the agency; (8) provision of orientation for fieldwork supervisors or instructors; (9) inclusion and participation of field instructors in curriculum development; (10) partnership between the educational institution and the agency; (11) accessing field education manual to fieldwork instructors and supervisors; and (12) ensuring that adequate and appropriate resources are made available.

Gebru and Doja (2021) depicted that field education was characterized by lack of trained social workers at agencies, limited awareness and commitment, misconceptions of field work, expectations, distance and uncomfortable practice environment, language barriers and report writing problems. Likewise, Dhemba (2012) stipulated that acute shortage of appropriate social service agencies, shortage of qualified and experienced supervisors, negligence, inadequate funding and timing of fieldwork, absence of meaningful communication between school and its staff and more were among the challenges field education grappled with.

It was quite evident that the critical review of the aforementioned literatures had shown that only one study on the subject matter (Gebru & Doja, 2021) was conducted in the Ethiopian settings. The study itself, however, was limited to challenges and, in fact, it attempted to infer the contextual realities of the study area from the others. Therefore, among possible gaps that call for investigation, the current study examined challenges and opportunities of social work field education from the perspectives of the main actors of field education-students, faculty liaisons and agency supervisors.

METHOD

Study design

The study employed exploratory research with phenomenology as experiences related to the subject matter was little known. Accordingly, the challenges and opportunities of field education from the perspectives of students, faculty liaisons and placement agencies were explored in detail. As cross-sectional research is useful to obtain an overall picture at one point in time, the perspectives of respondents were captured by taking a cross-section of them at one time.

Study area

The study was conducted at one of the Ethiopian higher educational institutions, Wallaga University, and its catchment areas. Wallaga University is located in Oromia regional state, western part of Ethiopia. The University has two campuses (Gimbi and Shambo Campus) in addition to the main campus located at Nekemte- East Wallaga zonal capital city. Most of the time, field placement gets administered at different human service providing organizations located around the two campuses (Nekemte and Gimbi) due to proximity and location of the department at Gimbi campus.

Participants of the study and inclusion criteria

The study included students, who experienced field education placement; academic staff members in social work department (faculty liaisons), and agency supervisors as participants of the study. Accordingly, second and third year students, experienced field liaisons and agency supervisors were recruited believed to reveal needed data.

Sampling technique and sample size

The study used purposive sampling. It is an appropriate kind of sampling as the judgment of researchers in selecting cases with a specific purpose in mind was mattered. Accordingly, participants plausibly best suited to the study objectives were purposely selected. And, the sample size for the study was determined based on data saturation. To this end, data were collected from 35 respondents through in-depth interviews, key informant interviews and focus group discussions until data saturation point.

Method of data collection

While deciding about the method of data collection, researchers are needed to consider primary and secondary types of data. Accordingly, the study employed in-depth interviews, key informants interviews, FGDs and document reviews as primary data sources. To this end, 10 students from second and third year were interviewed in an in-depth manner. 11 key informants (5 faculty liaisons and 6 agency supervisors) were also interviewed. Furthermore, two FGDs (1 FGD comprising six students, and the remaining 1 FGD encompassing eight members from students, faculty liaisons and agency supervisors) were held. Document review, field education manual,

which was revised by the school of social work Addis Ababa University (2012), was consulted. Secondary data sources, including journals, articles, published and unpublished materials to complement the primary data were also reviewed.

Method of data analysis

The study employed thematic data analysis as coding, categorizing and theme are the common elements of qualitative research. Since coding involves a systematic recording of data, codes to cover key themes, ideas and concepts that were collected from the study site were used. And then, categories and sub-categories for the identified codes were developed. Then, detailed analyses were categorized according to their similarities and differences of ideas, and thus thematic ideas were categorized based on the research questions. Finally, headings and sub-headings for the categorized themes were developed and presented.

Ethical considerations

A brief pre-interview introduction was held to introduce the purpose, benefits and risks of the study. Accordingly, the participants who were willing to participate gave their consents and interviewed. For the purpose of confidentiality, pseudo names were used and their general rights were upheld.

RESULTS

Opportunities of field education

As findings of the study disclosed, remarkable opportunities were guaranteed from field education. It was shown, for instance, that field practice helped students connect theory with practice and subsequently developed a professional identity consistent with social work knowledge, skills and values. Hinsarmu, one of the key informants from faculty liaisons, unveiled: *“Field education helps students apply theory learned in the classroom into practice and provides them with the experience of real life settings which ultimately help in augmenting their future professional development.”*

Fayfayo, furthered that field education was considered as a central aspect of social work education and has even been considered as the core of the profession as its practice-orientation makes the department unique from other social sciences. Invariably, Barsan, an in-depth interviewee- student, unveiled:

At the outset, I chose department of social work influenced by its field practice. Students from other departments’ graduates without practically seeing what the world of work looks like. But, as you know, we begin to recognize what the world of work is commencing from first year. I, personally, eagerly yearn the time for field placement; I enjoy and learn a lot out of it.

Students from group discussants also mentioned that they get happy when they engage in field practice as it offers them personal freedom and an opportunity to put into practice their theoretical learning. Misomsa resonated: *“Theory alone could easily be forgotten, but when translated into practice, it gets instilled into your mind as glue. If you are committed, you do have a freedom to explore a lot.”*

Focus group discussants encompassing students, faculty liaisons and agency supervisors exhibited that field education incontrovertibly is a terrific opportunity not only for the students, but also for agency, agency supervisors and faculty liaisons as there were mutual benefits. Dechasa, an agency supervisor, recounted:

I recognize that students’ placement to our agency contributes a lot. Whenever they get placed, they do not idly sit and watch what we do. They engage in different activities and lessen our burdens and thus in turn gain practical experiences. Frankly speaking, there are instances we learn theories from them and put in to practice. You know, assuming a certain position does not mean that you know everything. Field liaisons, who regularly come to our agency and monitor their students, also confirm us that they add to what they know confessing that learning is always infinite.

Beshana, a faculty liaison, concomitantly asserted that field education has been interleaved into social work education for it is the core competent area of practice aiming at facilitating ways for students to be equipped with practical knowledge and skills obtained from the real world experience. *“It helps students’ in order for them dig deep deep-seated social problems and at the same time help them identify potential research areas,”* he added.

Field practice was also maintained to pave ways for employment opportunity as the focus group discussants comprising students, faculty liaisons and agency supervisors demonstrated. Dinaras, one of the discussants from

agency supervisors, unveiled: *“Our agency, most of the time, prefers to give employment opportunity for competitive practitioners after graduation than ‘outsiders.’ As they are the product of our mentorship, we consider them as readily available resource at our disposal.”*

Similarly, Degaga, one of the faculty liaisons, implied that field education has a role in creating job opportunity for social work students in agency where they had practiced. It was implied that agencies, most of the time, give them a priority when they compete for vacancy since their potential was learned during field practice. With this, Milko, a student from the group discussants, uncovered: *“My placement agency has promised to employ me right after my graduation being impressed by my contribution and thus I am very thrilled and counting down the remaining days of my graduation.”* Robale, one of the faculty liaisons, also stated: *“Not only students, there were instances when our colleagues get employed in a very attractive salary owing to a social capital developed during field practice.”*

Challenges of field education

Challenges related to social work department

The study revealed that field education was the foundation of social work profession; however, there were different challenges that it entangled with. Sartu, a key informant from faculty liaisons, reflected that the allocated time for field education, most of the time, was far below the standard. Besides, Tiki, a key informant from faculty liaisons, stated: *“The attention given for field education was really annoying vis-à-vis its importance. There were times we required to complete it in less than a week though the course weighs four credit hours.”* Moyibon, an agency supervisor, confirmed: *“Last semester, students placed into our agency stayed only five days. Let alone supervising them, they returned without knowing them. ‘What could be learned in such a short period of time?’ Whatever the reason behind, I believe that it was unacceptable.”*

Digajara, one of the key informants from faculty liaisons acting as a field coordinator, acknowledged the extreme shortage of the allocated time and attributed it to the top administrative structures. He reflected:

As a department, we want the field education given equal value with other courses and thus implemented as per the curriculum. The top concerned bodies, however, advertently ignore what is depicted on the curriculum. They worry more for the budget intended to be utilized than the required quality of practice.

Hinsarmu, a faculty liaison, lamented: *“Leaving behind the curriculum, some faculty liaisons, students, college dean and the academic director considers field education just a formality as the concluding part of the course.”*

Lack of proper monitoring of placed students was also identified among the challenges mostly encountered. Key informants from the faculty liaisons indicated that they could not follow and support their students as ought to be. Running field education in line with other regular tasks [teaching, researches and community services] was reported to be overburdening. Therefore, staff members, most of the time, were busy with the duty they utmost value and thus ignore the additional tasks of following/supervising students.

Likewise, Digajara-acting as a field coordinator indicated that the department head was in charge of field education coordination attributed to absence of responsible coordinator while at the same time assuming several roles ranging from regular office work through teaching, community service and research. This was partly true for other field liaisons too. Therefore, the attention supposed to be given for field education was unarguably overlooked.

Concomitantly, student group discussants revealed that they were not provided with the required support from their respective faculty liaisons. Habiba, one of the discussants, stated: *“Except the first day of my placement, I did not contact my faculty liaison either at the agency or through phone.”* Adinan, similarly, exhibited:

I was placed into field education for the third times with three different assigned faculty liaisons; however, I did not see any of them properly guiding me. I physically saw them only on the first day when they gave us orientation along with the department head and on the last day during evaluation.

Similarly, Bashana, a faculty liaison, unveiled: *“Ideally, faculty liaisons recognize regular visits to the placement agencies as mandatory. But, practically visits by the liaisons were not regular and in few cases most never visit the agencies more than once.”*

Sinan, a key informant from the agency supervisors, indicated that there were few committed liaisons, who regularly supervise and monitor their students; however, most of them were not as such concerned. As a subsequent, Fayfayo, a faculty liaison, uncovered: *“Students, most of the time, failed to achieve the objective of their placement and thus end up in false report production just to meet the minimum requirements.”*

Challenges related to agencies

The findings indicted lack of suitable and accessible agencies among the recurrent challenges encountered. At the area where the department of social work found and where most of the placements happen, there were extreme shortages of human service providing agencies. The area was dominated by passive government organizations. Exploring adequate and appropriate learning opportunities was seriously tough. Therefore, the experiences supposed to be schemed were inevitably compromised. Dagaga, a faculty liaison from the group discussants, stated:

We know that students placed in most of the government organizations seldom achieve the objective of their placement. Since we do not have alternative, we do so just for formality. To place them at a distant [Nekemte town] where relatively diversified and appropriate organizations exist, the budget issue gets pronounced.

Yobsan, an in-depth interviewee- student, added: *“I was placed for six days in one of the government offices, but I could not find a single case related to social work education. I worked non-social work activities like arranging files.”*

Agency supervisory issues were also among the uncovered key challenges. Idyllically, faculty liaisons recognize that agency supervisors need to have direct contact with the students and provide them guidance. They also acknowledge that there were tough limitations in this aspect which looks for much more work to be done. It was indicated that almost all of the agency supervisors were non-social workers. They were not familiar with social work theories and thus they were not competitively able to guide students in implementation of theory into practice.

Keyeron, an in-depth interviewee-student, reflected: *“The very purpose of our field placement was to translate theory into practice. But, we did not get real support either from the agency supervisors or faculty liaisons. I, personally, consider this as a mission unaccomplished.”* The key informants from agency supervisors also unequivocally indicated that there were no stronger communications between the university and placement agency before, while and after placement. Thus, most of them did not sufficiently know their roles and did not also cognize its seriousness. They simply accept students and give them offices, if any until they finalize their practice, but no meaningful support. Sichale, an in-depth interviewee, added: *“Though my agency supervisor was super willing to support me, he did not come across with any of the social work theories.* With this, Tiki, one of the key informants from faculty liaisons, stated: *“Let alone theories, there are agencies unaware of what social work is all about.”*

Challenges related to resources

As the findings indicated, shortage of resources, mainly of financial resource was among the tough challenges that hindered the successful execution of field practice. Group discussants [students and faculty liaisons] unveiled financial inadequacy as the toughest and persistent challenges both parties faced. Milko stated: *“The money we get provided with for field practice could not address our needs. Living aside tea/coffee, it could not cover our transportation cost required to be paid while traveling from dorm to agency and vice versa.”* Fayfayo also specified: *“We were given only 50 birr [\$ 0.83] per day. For God sake, ‘what can be done with this?’”* The key informants from faculty liaisons also shared the concerns of their students, but it was beyond their control as disclosed.

Similarly, in-depth interviewee students shared problems related to transportation as a serious challenge. As implied, some agencies were very far from where the students live and thus it charged them additional costs from their pocket. Those who did not have, however, were obliged to travel on foot. As they spent their time on the way to agency, punctuality was unthinkable thereof. Hence, the quality of their practice and the time expected to be spent at the agency had got jeopardized. Invariably, dearth of allowances and transport facilities for the faculty liaisons hindered their efforts to monitor and support students at the placement site.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings revealed field education as the core of social work education as it centers on learning by doing, which help enhance the practitioners’ competitiveness. Similarly, Wheeler, Fortune and Warner (2015) and Dhemba (2012) exhibited field education as a central form of instruction and learning necessitated as an integral part of social work students’ total educational experience. Schmidt and Rautenbach (2016) congruently specified that the internship of social work students from class based learning to learning by doing marks their entrance into the world of the profession and the demands of learning through practice.

As the findings disclosed, notable opportunities, including but not limited to, translation of theory into practice and the resultant development of a professional identity consistent with social work knowledge, skills and values were guaranteed out of field education. Consistently, Nadesan (2020), and Bell and Anscombe (2013) discussed that field placements are an opportunity for students to put into practice their academic learning, to garner additional knowledge, skills, values, and the resultant professional competencies.

Regardless of the discussed golden opportunities, the study also unveiled that there were numbers of challenges that affected the effectiveness of field education. Consistent to Gebru and Doja (2021), Dhemba (2012) and Tanga (2012), shortage of allotted time; marginalization of field education; negligence of faculty liaisons; shortages of accessible and suitable agencies; shortage of financial resources; agency supervisors unfamiliarity with social work theories; lack of persistent communications; shortage of allowances and transportation facilities; and more were among the unveiled challenges.

Furthermore, the findings signposted that some of the standards of field education's curriculum (Vishanthie & David, 2004) made-up to be upheld, including constant review and development of the curricula; inclusion and participation of field instructors in curriculum development; accessing field education manual to fieldwork instructors and supervisors; planned co-ordination and collaboration of the school and the agency; ensured availability of adequate and appropriate resources; and recognition and development of indigenous culture were utterly compromised against the pledged academic rules and regulations of Ethiopian public higher education institutions (2013) in general and school of social work field education manual (2012) in particular.

SOCIAL WORK IMPLICATIONS

Although Ethiopia claims as one of the non-colonized countries in Africa, and is endowed with plenty of indigenous knowledge, skills and values, all of the social work theories, models and perspectives delivered in the classroom have been that of the Western's. Therefore, social workers in the higher educational institutions being with the practitioners at different agencies should strive to indigenize social work education in general and field education in particular so that local indigenous knowledge can be promoted.

In the study, various challenges of field education were uncovered in relation to academic staff, students, agency supervisors, agencies and the department. Therefore, in order for the field education get effective and efficient, all concerned stakeholders should be provided with regular and/or refresher trainings. Especially, the top management staffs, who advertently disregarded field education against the curriculum though expected to be the otherwise need to be strongly influenced.

The study also implied that the nature of commitment and relationship among the key actors of field education (faculty liaisons, university, students, agency supervisors and the placement agency) determines the effectiveness of field education. Therefore, strong collaboration, regular communications and a sense of ownership should be harnessed to ensure the success of field education.

CONCLUSION

The study disclosed that field education was very important for the effectiveness of social work education. It provides an opportunity to students to apply their knowledge, skills and values learned into practice as the very purpose of fieldwork is to acquaint students with actual social work practical situations. It was also identified as an arena where the students practically examine, critique and test the knowledge, skills, values, and principles in academic courses and ultimately contribute to the betterment of people's life. The study, however, identified that there were multifaceted challenges that affected the effectiveness of field education. The identified challenges were attributed to the main actors in the field education ranging from the department head acting as a field coordinator, faculty liaisons, the placing institution, students, and agency supervisors through placement agencies. Specifically put, shortage of allotted time against the curriculum; failure of school supervisors for persistent guidance/monitoring of students; failure of agency supervisors in playing their supervisory roles; and absence of accessible and suitable agencies were some of the major challenges disclosed. Therefore, the ultimate objective of field education- equipping students with required knowledge, values and skills was certainly compromised.

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