

Social work education in Uganda: A paradigm shift through community social labs approach

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Abstract

The Department of Social Work at Makerere University, Uganda, implemented the social labs model, which this paper examines as an innovative approach to address the limitations of traditional practicum models in social work education. Guided by experiential learning theory and the concept of communities of practice, the study applied the social labs methodology to inform data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The data for this study were collected through four separate focus group discussions, involving a total of 40 undergraduate and graduate students. These students were purposely selected due to their involvement in social labs located in the Eastern and Northern regions of Uganda. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes and patterns in the collected data, providing valuable insights into the perspectives and realities of students from specific regions. The findings indicated that students faced challenges in the traditional field practicum, including insufficient supervision, limited time for practical application, and inadequate practical training, hindering the integration of theory and practice. In contrast, the social labs model enhanced practical experience through community engagement and fostered a supportive learning environment. However, it faces challenges such as limited partnerships, funding constraints, insufficient pre-placement preparation, and restricted field-based learning opportunities. This research highlights the potential of social labs, informed by experiential learning theory and communities of practice, to address deficiencies in social work education and provides a basis for developing more impactful learning opportunities.

Keywords: Social Labs, traditional social work field practicum, block placement

Introduction

Social work education is a discipline focused on practice that necessitates both academic instruction and practical field experience (Juneau et al., 2022; Papouli, 2014). It emphasizes both cognitive and experiential learning, highlighting the greater benefits of direct field education. (Juneau et al., 2022; Papouli, 2014). Field learning plays a critical role in knowledge acquisition and professional development, particularly through placements such as

practicums and internships, which enhance the quality of social programs and societal well-being (Amadasun, 2021; Bogo, 2015; Papouli, 2014).

Placements offer social workers essential opportunities to develop critical skills and knowledge (Amadasun, 2021; Birkenmaier et al., 2012; Juneau et al., 2022). Through these experiences, students can deepen their understanding, effectively integrate theoretical knowledge with practical application, evaluate potential solutions, and address social, political, and economic disparities (Amadasun, 2021; Papouli, 2014). Collectively, these advantages contribute to greater self-awareness, the development of professional networks, and the incorporation of essential knowledge, values, and skills into one's professional identity (Amadasun, 2021; Papouli, 2014).

Furthermore, field learning plays a vital role in personal growth by providing valuable interactions with diverse individuals, groups, and professionals, while also encouraging the exploration of new ideas and self-reflection (Papouli, 2014). It's important to note, as Papouli (2014) indicates, that this transformative process is not instantaneous (Papouli, 2014). For social work students to develop strong professional identities, a curriculum that effectively integrates academic theory, current practice approaches, and practical fieldwork experiences is crucial (Amadasun, 2021; Birkenmaier et al., 2012; Charles et al., 2014; Juneau et al., 2022; Sarid et al., 2009).

Traditional practicums often face challenges, including limited integration of classroom knowledge with real-world application, restricted opportunities for client interaction, and a lack of connection between fieldwork and academic content (Dhemba, 2012; Liu et al., 2013). Effective field practicums rely on adequate faculty supervision, a sufficient number of field placement agencies, and enough qualified social workers (Dhemba, 2012; Liu et al., 2013). Makerere University employs an engaged scholarship approach, placing students in practical settings to deepen their learning. This method encourages interaction between students, communities, and the university, fostering mutual learning through social labs (Mathiassen, 2017).

Social labs offer a collaborative and community-focused approach to tackling complex issues through the design and implementation of interventions, as highlighted by Chitere (2018). Over the past two decades, this methodology has been applied to challenges such as poverty eradication, water sustainability, climate change, media transformation, and social innovation (Hassan, 2014). While providing a practical means to address core social problems, it's noted that social labs may not be universally applicable (Hassan, 2014; Timmermans et al., 2020). The social lab methodology enables researchers to investigate societal challenges alongside experts and stakeholders, concurrently fostering collaboration in developing and testing potential solutions. As a participatory

action research method, social labs bridge theory and practice through their real-world orientation (Timmermans et al., 2020), and provide an adaptable approach grounded in experiential learning theory, promoting a systematic cyclical exchange between conceptual ideas and practical experience (Moon, 2004). Building on existing social lab frameworks (Hassan, 2014) and action research principles, Timmermans and colleagues (2020) have offered a theoretical conceptualization of a scientific social lab methodology suitable for research settings (Timmermans et al., 2020).

Social labs are recognized for their ability to facilitate collaboration, information sharing, and the creation of innovative strategies for tackling intricate societal challenges (Hassan, 2014; McGowan et al., 2017). They encourage creativity, adaptive problem-solving, and sustainable solutions through the application of systems thinking. In the African context, youth empowerment initiatives informed by social labs have been introduced to address socioeconomic issues (Murefu et al., 2017), with examples such as the Ubuntu Lab in Kenya, which partnered with local healthcare professionals to improve maternal and child health outcomes (Ndiwane & Mwansa, 2020). Rooted in experiential learning theory (Hassan, 2014; Timmermans et al., 2020), social labs emphasize the analysis of interconnected problems and the development of transformative solutions for social change (Timmermans et al., 2020).

The RESILIENT project is a six-year initiative currently being led by Makerere University. This project is a collaborative effort involving selected universities in Uganda, Rwanda, and Tanzania, with a central focus on the crucial work of indigenizing social work education within these East African contexts. A key and innovative component of the RESILIENT project is the active engagement of both undergraduate and master's-level social work students in dedicated social labs situated within rural Ugandan communities. In these immersive environments, the students gain first-hand experience by working directly alongside community members to gain a deep understanding of the locally specific social issues they face and collaboratively develop strategies to address them.

This practical social lab approach provides students with invaluable opportunities to actively grapple with real-world challenges. They are encouraged to collaborate closely not only with community members but also with academic experts and other relevant stakeholders. This collaborative spirit fosters the co-creation of potential solutions, which are then tested and refined based on their real-world impact. Utilizing an experiential learning model at its core, the project intentionally and seamlessly integrates theoretical knowledge acquired in the classroom with its practical application in the field. This is achieved through a continuous and iterative interaction between abstract

concepts and the complexities of real-world scenarios, an approach well-supported by existing research (Timmermans et al., 2020). Furthermore, by intentionally integrating established social lab frameworks with the principles of action research, the project also establishes a robust theoretical foundation for the application of scientific methods within community-based research contexts (Timmermans et al., 2020).

In addition to the experiential learning within the social labs, the RESILIENT project purposefully incorporates the formation and utilization of communities of practice. Within these communities, students actively engage in open dialogue and collaborative exploration aimed at tackling complex technological, social, and environmental issues identified within the rural communities (Marschalek et al., 2022). The RESILIENT project's embrace of this model directly aligns with the established concept of communities of practice, which are recognized as groups of individuals who share common professional or learning goals and activities. These groups naturally evolve over time, establishing their own shared norms, values, and practices. The effectiveness of such communities has been observed and documented across a diverse range of fields, including healthcare, school counseling, computer science education, and even practical skills instruction like painting (Pyrko et al., 2017; Wenger, 1998; Woodside et al., 2009). Recognizing the pedagogical benefits, educators increasingly encourage student participation in these communities as a powerful means to facilitate meaningful interactions between theoretical understanding and real-world situations, moving beyond a sole reliance on abstract theoretical models (Staempfli et al., 2016).

Research indicates that this active engagement often proves more effective in fostering deep learning compared to traditional classroom-based learning methods, as it enables students to observe, analyze, and understand diverse interpretations and behaviors in context (Klein & Connell, 2008; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Recognizing the inherent limitations of traditional practicum approaches in effectively enhancing the necessary professional training within social work education programs, this study endeavors to rigorously examine how the innovative social labs model, thoughtfully informed by both experiential learning theory and the principles of communities of practice, can effectively address these identified shortcomings within the specific Ugandan context.

This important study draws upon established theoretical frameworks closely related to field-based learning, notably the social labs methodology itself, experiential learning theory as articulated by Kolb and others, and the concept of communities of practice, to systematically analyze collected data and rigorously interpret the resulting findings. The research also seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the interconnected and systemic aspects of complex

social issues through the lens of direct experiential learning, specifically adopting Kolb's (2014) well-regarded four-stage cycle: concrete experience, reflective observation on that experience, abstract conceptualization based on the reflection, and active experimentation of the new concepts.

Through their active participation in the RESILIENT project, social work students are directly involved in the critical processes of problem identification within the communities, engaging in thoughtful discussion with community members about these issues, and collaboratively participating in the development and implementation of problem-solving strategies. This deep level of community partnership ultimately serves to significantly enhance the educational experiences of the students and equips these future social work professionals with valuable, practical hands-on experience that is directly relevant to the contexts in which they will be working.

Materials and Methods

Study design and setting

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological qualitative research design, drawing upon the framework of Creswell & Poth (2012). This methodological approach allowed for an examination of the effectiveness of Social Labs as an alternative to traditional practicum models for social work students at Makerere University.

The research was conducted in the rural districts of Gulu and Luuka. Gulu, situated in the northern region, is a post-conflict area grappling with substantial poverty, violence, school dropouts, and a significant number of street children. Luuka district is characterized by high incidences of school dropouts, child labor, teenage pregnancies, child marriages, domestic violence, and widespread poverty. These districts present significant challenges to child well-being, making them relevant settings for the placement of social work students.

Participant recruitment

The study we conducted focused on the experiences of adult social work students from Makerere University who undertook their fieldwork practicum within the RESILIENT project social labs in Uganda. To gain in-depth insights, purposive sampling was employed to select students who could offer rich narratives about their involvement and informed perspectives on the social labs approach.

Prior to commencing the study, all ethical considerations were addressed. Ethical approval was obtained from the Makerere University School of Social Sciences Ethics Committee, as well as from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST). The participant groups comprised a total of 26 social work students, with a gender distribution of 20 females and 6 males.

These students were drawn from two academic cohorts, with 8 students from the 2022 cohort and 18 from the 2023 cohort. The sample included both undergraduate and graduate students, specifically 8 undergraduates and 14 graduates, with ages ranging from 22 to 35 years. The gender disparity in the sample (20 females, 6 males) reflects existing enrollment patterns in social work programs, where female students are the majority. The selection of both undergraduate and graduate students from the 2022 and 2023 cohorts was intentional to capture diverse perspectives across different academic levels and stages of training, enriching the study's findings. Their fieldwork placements were spread across two districts to ensure a variety of experiences and contextual understanding, with 16 students placed in Gulu district and 10 in Luuka district. Throughout the process, the study ensured that all participants were fully informed about the study's objectives, the potential benefits and risks associated with their participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any point.

Methods of data collection

The study employed focus group discussions (FGDs) to collect data from 26 undergraduate and graduate students. FGDs were selected as the preferred qualitative method because they facilitate the gathering of rich insights and a range of perspectives from the student participants. The objective was to understand the collective experiences and varied viewpoints of social lab students, as opposed to focusing on individual interactions which would be the case with in-depth interviews.

The FGDs were conducted in English with three groups, each comprising 6 to 10 participants, and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The researcher facilitated the discussions using a structured FGD guide and also made relevant observational notes. The discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently word-processed, as informed by established methodologies (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Green & Thorogood, 2018).

Data analysis

The study employed an inductive thematic approach to analyze data gathered from focus group discussions (FGDs). This method facilitates the organic emergence of themes directly from the data, allowing patterns and meanings to surface without the constraints of a pre-determined theoretical framework (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Green & Thorogood, 2018).

The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed and then imported into Atlas Ti8, a qualitative data management software, to identify recurring points made by the participants. The transcripts underwent multiple readings to develop a thorough understanding of the key themes. Following this initial understanding, the codes generated by the software were organized, and

potential themes were extracted. These potential themes were then further examined to confirm their connection to the original basic codes. This thematic network process supported the meaningful presentation of our findings and the structuring of the final report around the identified themes and sub-themes (Green & Thorogood, 2018).

The study's findings indicate that while traditional practicums have certain limitations, social labs offer significant contributions to learning. Despite some challenges identified in the effective implementation of social labs, students consistently expressed positive feedback. They reported feeling more integrated and gaining valuable experience through their practical participation in social labs. This led to the overarching themes of experiential learning and experimentation, highlighting a positive impact on the students' overall experience.

Results

The inductive thematic analysis identified three main themes: (1) student experiences with traditional field practicum, (2) contributions of social labs model to fieldwork learning, and (3) challenges of the social labs model in social work education.

Table 2: Presentation of themes and subthemes

Main themes	Sub-themes
Experience with traditional fieldwork practicum	• Limited supervision • Supervision by non-social workers • Unrealistic expectations
Contributions of social labs	• Knowledge sharing and creation • Fostering partnerships and collaborations • Diverse stakeholder engagement and support • Fostering Teamwork
Limitations of the social labs	• Inadequate time allocated for fieldwork • Language Barrier • Insufficient financial resources

The participants' perspectives on the identified themes and sub-themes are presented below, incorporating direct excerpts from their responses to support each point. Qualifying comments have also been included to provide further context.

Theme 1: Experiences with the traditional fieldwork practicum

When participants responded to the questions, they shared their experiences and opinions regarding traditional field practicum placements. These responses have been organized into several sub-themes for clarity and analysis.

Limited supervision

The participants in the study have indicated that they encountered supervisory challenges during their placements in traditional practicum settings. This feedback emerged from comments shared in the focus group discussions. Specifically, participants pointed out that the insufficient effective supervision and limited time within traditional field practicums create a significant disconnect between theoretical knowledge and practical application. They underscored the crucial role of effective supervision in facilitating students' learning and professional development. Furthermore, they expressed concern that the absence of such supervision undermines the value and effectiveness of the traditional practicum experience.

"A participant noted they only saw their university supervisor once before placement and never again during the internship" (Focus Group Discussion, Northern Uganda).

Supervision by non-social workers

Based on the feedback received from participants, it appears that students in traditional field placements often do not benefit from professional supervision and guidance. Their concerns are reflected in the following points:

"...social workers are being supervised by non-social workers... who lack the core social work principles and ethics..." (Focus Group Discussion, Luuka District).

"...my former supervisor was an accountant...we had nothing in common...He did not even know what social work is... (Focus Group Discussion, Gulu District).

Unrealistic expectations

The participants shared some common experiences regarding their traditional practicum placements. A key theme that emerged was a mismatch in expectations upon entering these sites, which unfortunately led to disappointment for many. Specifically, participants anticipated opportunities to directly apply their classroom knowledge in diverse real-world settings. Conversely, the placement agencies often expected students to possess a foundational understanding of workplace norms prior to their arrival. This divergence in expectations resulted in unmet needs on both sides. Interestingly, several participants mentioned receiving cameras from their host agencies to document activities through photography. The sentiments expressed by a number of participants effectively summarize the shared experiences of the majority.

“One participant used to think that when you go to an agency to do fieldwork, everyone you find there knows social work but they were disappointed...” (Focus Group Discussion, Luuka District).

...Another participant was not inducted on their roles, as a social worker. The expressed that; I went to that place with high hopes of applying the theories I had learnt in class, but it did not happen... (Focus Group Discussion, Luuka District).

The participants indicated a disconnect between their coursework and fieldwork experiences in traditional placements. They reported fewer interactions with faculty and less support, which made it challenging to connect theoretical knowledge with practical application. Consequently, many students found it difficult to integrate what they learned in the classroom with their real-world placement experiences.

Theme 2: Enhancing practical learning through social labs

During the focus group discussions, participants shared their perspectives on how social labs contribute to social work education. These insights have been organized into the following sub-themes:

Knowledge sharing and creation

The responses from all participants highlighted social labs as a valuable connection between social work theory and its practical application. This is primarily because they integrate classroom-based learning with hands-on field education. Participants felt that the atmosphere within social labs fostered both the creation and exchange of knowledge. Some of the specific viewpoints shared by participants can be seen in the excerpts provided below.

“We have previously focused much on the theory we learned in class, but when we participated in these social labs, we learned greatly from the community” (Focus Group Discussion, Luuka District).

“Now we apply creativity and collectively develop innovative ways of solving social problems. (Focus Group Discussion, Luuka District).

Another participant confirmed that the “Social lab is making learning better by integrating theory and practice, for example, the social-ecological, which looks at how the environment affects an individual's life” (Focus Group Discussion, Luuka District).

Fostering partnerships and collaborations.

Social labs have allowed the university to strengthen ties with local communities through partnerships and collaborations, training youth, girls, and caregivers on menstrual hygiene and liquid soap. Through initiatives like school

fees saving groups and peer-to-peer motivational clubs, school attendance, retention rates, and reading and expression skills among learners have improved. By training communities on practical initiatives, students demonstrated the experimental nature of social interventions compared to project-based ones, while demonstrating that such local solutions will sustain even after students leave. Below is an excerpt:

Even the men participated in making the reusable sanitary pads during the social lab placements. This is something you rarely see in community initiatives. I have experienced real hands-on training in this social lab, and I want to do it again (Focus Group Discussion, Luuka District).

Diverse stakeholder engagement and support

This study benefited from the active involvement of several key groups. Stakeholders, community members, local leaders, the university, and peers all contributed significantly by offering support through indigenous assistance, pre-placement training, and continuous technical guidance. This collaborative and comprehensive approach played a crucial role in enhancing student understanding and problem-solving abilities.

“Community stakeholders participated in community dialogues and some volunteered to be members of the child Protection Committees formed” (Focus Group Discussion, Luuka District).

Social labs promote teamwork

Social labs provided a unique opportunity for participants to engage with a diverse range of individuals within their communities, a departure from typical field practicums. Students tackled critical issues such as child marriage, absenteeism, high school dropouts, child neglect, and abuse. Their approach involved consulting with various stakeholders, including representatives from government, civil society organizations, and the local community. Following these consultations, students collaborated directly with communities to co-design sustainable solutions, effectively demonstrating the inherently social aspect of these social labs. “...we had a community meeting at the school to pass ordinances and by-laws condemning absenteeism... penalties were set for anyone who defaults” (Focus Group Discussion, Gulu District).

During the transect walk and home visits, we all took part. It did not matter whether you were a police officer or a parish chief. We all went around the community identifying resources and planning together... we were one team (Focus Group Discussion, Luuka District).

Participants intimated that “even men participated in activity mapping and community activities, something they found interesting” (Focus Group Discussion, Luuka District).

Main theme 3: Challenges hindering the successful implementation of the social labs

The study participants highlighted several potential challenges that could impede the successful implementation of social labs. These challenges, along with supporting sub-themes and illustrative quotes, are detailed below:

Inadequate time allocated for field work

Participants highlighted that the current time allocated for social labs was insufficient. They expressed that limited time can hinder meaningful community immersion, the development of effective interventions, and ultimately affect the long-term impact and continuity of projects.

“...for the side of the department in terms of timing, the social labs need more time if we are to adapt them, they should extend the time in the field...”

Focus Group Discussion, Luuka District

“...Participants felt the ten weeks were enough to achieve all the goals, especially when the schools closed earlier, yet they were also working in schools” (Focus Group Discussion, Gulu District).

Language Barrier

Participants highlighted a significant challenge related to their language proficiency. This skill is essential for effective communication and addressing community needs. Specifically, for students involved in social labs, the ability to communicate in local languages is crucial for building rapport and collaborating effectively with community members.

And then because they sent three people there that is X, some girl Y and all of them did not know the language apart from Z who is also visually impaired so they had a big challenge while there (Focus Group Discussion, Gulu District).

Insufficient financial resources to implement social labs

During the discussions, the majority of participants expressed the belief that the students are operating with limited financial resources. Their views were well-summarized by the following comment made during the session:

“Regarding departmental finances, the allocated amount was insufficient. In my parish, serving three villages, with one located 7km away and requiring daily visits, proved to be costly” (Focus group discussion, Gulu District).

High Stakeholder Expectations

The success of social labs is closely linked to effective stakeholder management and the harmonization of different interests. During the social lab sessions, there was no compensation for community members to participate in meetings. This is contrary to the common practice in Uganda, where providing compensation for transport and meals is typical. This deviation from the norm appeared to affect the commitment and attendance of community members at many of the dialogues.

“Participants mentioned that the leaders had high expectations, particularly for financial compensation for mobilizing meeting attendees” (Focus group discussion, Gulu District).

And while all leaders attended the first meeting, none attended the second, prompting the participants to mobilize the community for meetings.

Discussion

This study explores the experiences of social work students during their fieldwork practicum, specifically their participation in community social labs within two rural districts in Uganda. The findings underscore the common limitations of traditional fieldwork practicums and demonstrate the considerable advantages and positive influence of the social labs model in this setting.

While the social labs approach generally served as an effective framework for the students' practical learning and community engagement, the study also revealed specific challenges and issues they encountered. These obstacles, as detailed in our research, occasionally impede their capacity to achieve their maximum potential impact within the communities. Furthermore, the research offers insights into the wider shortcomings of standard fieldwork practicums as currently structured and implemented in the Ugandan context. Based on these observations, the study suggests potential areas and strategies for improving the effectiveness of social work fieldwork education in Uganda. The study has identified limitations in traditional field practicums in Uganda, including insufficient supervision, supervisors lacking social work backgrounds, and differing expectations. Specifically, supervisors often made infrequent site visits and offered limited guidance. The university's model of a single visit per student is insufficient. Some supervisors lacked social work backgrounds, hindering the transfer of core principles and ethics. While traditional practicums aimed to develop social work networks, many students are now in non-social work settings that limit professional growth and result in deficiencies in crucial competencies such as ethical principles, human rights, social justice, policy practice, and system integration. Study findings highlight a growing difficulty in securing suitable field practicum placements for students in Uganda, mirroring wider graduate employment challenges. A key factor is also the insufficient accreditation of potential host agencies and supervisors. The current placement process in Uganda is often a lengthy trial-and-error approach, which is inefficient and risks placing students in organizations that may not offer genuine practical experience, thus limiting the benefits of field education and hindering professional skill development.

The research findings strongly suggest that to effectively promote meaningful experiential learning through traditional field practices, a fundamental redesign

of the placement process is necessary. This redesign should prioritize the integration of participatory research and practice methodologies. This is particularly important when considering the various work-related and financial pressures that can significantly impact the effectiveness and duration of long-term field learning experiences, as evidenced by the insights of Bogo and colleagues (Bogo, 2015; Kuusisto et al., 2024; McKee et al., 2015). By incorporating participatory elements, we aim to create a more robust and mutually beneficial system for both students and host organizations.

The study specifically examined the dynamic interplay between theoretical knowledge acquired in academic settings and its practical application in real-world community contexts. The results of this study clearly indicate a significant pattern: students actively adapted their existing knowledge and skill sets to effectively align with the established practices of indigenous communities. This process of adaptation was transformative, leading to a deeper and more nuanced understanding that incorporated valuable insights gleaned directly from indigenous beliefs and ways of life. Furthermore, the study highlighted the remarkable ability of social labs to serve as effective platforms for collaboration. By fostering meaningful interactions between academic theoretical frameworks and the rich practical experiences present within communities, these labs facilitated the co-creation of knowledge, the development of relevant interventions, and the informed shaping of policies. This aligns with the insights of Van de Ven (2007), emphasizing the power of such collaborative environments.

In terms of tangible contributions, our findings strongly emphasize the importance of social labs in several key areas. They are instrumental in facilitating the exchange of vital information among diverse stakeholders, actively promoting the meaningful engagement of these stakeholders in the learning and problem-solving processes, and providing invaluable experiential learning opportunities for students. The social lab framework offered students direct engagement in community consultation processes and dialogues. This first-hand experience allowed them to gain a practical understanding of the community's history and cultural context, effectively integrating teaching and scholarship in a meaningful way. Through this form of engaged scholarship, the social labs actively strengthened the bonds of university-community partnerships and cultivated an empowering environment, a crucial element that Benneworth (2013) identifies as essential for creating integrated teaching and learning opportunities that are truly aligned with the specific needs of the community (Benneworth, 2013).

Moreover, the study demonstrated that social labs fostered a powerful dynamic of reciprocal learning. Academics were able to share their specialized expertise while simultaneously gaining valuable insights and perspectives through their

direct engagement with community members (Hassan, 2014; Jacobson et al., 2005). The interpersonal connection between students, academics, and community members fostered a collaborative problem-solving approach. This allowed for culturally sensitive and sustainable solutions, minimizing community resistance. These interactions also developed students' cultural competence through collaborative engagement and mutual learning (Hassan, 2014). The findings of the study have reinforced the significant value of social labs in social work education. It was observed that by incorporating real-world experiences and focusing on genuine community needs through this method, we substantially improve what Gray & Schubert (2018) refer to as developmental social work methods. These methods are essential because they consider individuals within their larger social environments, directly addressing the many social inequalities present in our communities (Gray & Schubert, 2018). The direct community engagement fostered by social labs has proven very effective in mobilizing, empowering, and organizing local populations. This involvement significantly shapes local development projects and importantly contributes to the indigenization of social work practices in Uganda.

The collaborative environment of social labs encourages mutual respect, where the diverse knowledge and valuable insights of every participant are recognized and appreciated. By actively promoting community involvement, social labs naturally align with the core principles of indigenization, offering a platform for varied perspectives and shared decision-making. This ultimately cultivates a style of social work education that Ssenkubuge & Nsereko (2019) appropriately describe as both relevant and responsive to the specific needs of African communities (Ssenkubuge & Nsereko, 2019). The study revealed a noteworthy aspect of the students' participation in social labs: their capacity to identify the interconnectedness of social problems. Their engagement went beyond addressing superficial symptoms, indicating a grasp of the fundamental issues within communities. This hands-on experience effectively demonstrates the value of engaged scholarship, a method that numerous academics consider essential for boosting community empowerment and building strong collaborations between universities and the populations they support through impactful, real-world involvement (Hassan, 2014; Rodrigues et al., 2014; Romero-Frías & Robinson-García, 2017; Timmermans et al., 2020; Van de Ven, 2007).

The direct engagement inherent in these social labs has significantly enhanced students' understanding of the social work field. This is primarily due to the valuable experiential learning they receive through observation and direct practice with their peers, allowing for a deeper and more nuanced comprehension (Fischer et al., 2007; Woodside et al., 2009). The social lab settings have effectively functioned as vibrant communities of practice, playing

a key role in the development of community-based knowledge and strengthening the crucial engagement between universities and local communities (Edmonds-Cady & and Sosulski, 2012; Staempfli et al., 2016; Wenger et al., 2002).

Findings related to theoretical frameworks

Social labs facilitate collaborative problem-solving and the development of practical solutions through experiential learning. For instance, primary schools in Gulu district successfully implemented a school-feeding program, a school fees saving scheme, and enhanced child abuse case management. Additionally, students in Luuka district received training in making reusable sanitary pads. These examples highlight the successful application of theoretical knowledge and have enabled students to forge local connections and opportunities post-university via collaboration and knowledge sharing.

Experiential learning, a crucial aspect of field instruction, encourages students to collaborate with professionals in communities of practice. This method allows students to observe and integrate diverse perspectives, transitioning from rote learning to active meaning-making. Classroom activities, case studies, role-playing, and client interactions further support this process. Consequently, community placements offer significant learning opportunities through intentional reflection, conceptualization, and active experimentation, moving beyond theoretical models.

Fieldwork education is essential for social work training, providing students with the opportunity to apply classroom knowledge, values, and skills, thereby nurturing their growth into competent social work practitioners. As noted by Bogo (2015), fieldwork offers a supportive learning environment for applying theory to practice and reflecting on experiences through increasing complexity, with students engaging in progressively more challenging practicum experiences throughout their training (Savaya, Peleg-Oren, Stange & Geron, 2003).

Limitations

However, the findings also bring to light certain obstacles encountered within the social lab framework. These include challenges such as limitations in teamwork dynamics, difficulties arising from language barriers, financial constraints impacting implementation, the need for more comprehensive training prior to field deployment, and the constraint of limited time allocated for engagement. It is worth noting that students often expressed a need for more thorough training and increased hands-on experience, which are essential for truly tailored and impactful experiential learning. The current four- to ten-week

timeframe appears to be insufficient for fostering effective and sustained community engagement and for the thoughtful design of truly sustainable programs. Furthermore, students' varying levels of proficiency in the local native languages sometimes hindered the collaborative process of knowledge co-creation.

Recommendations

Moving forward, to significantly enhance practical social work field education through social labs, social work scholars must work towards aligning expectations across all stakeholder groups involved. There is also a need to rigorously assess the robustness and adaptability of the social lab model itself and ensure more direct and consistent engagement with existing communities of practice. Integrating academic research findings and actively involving stakeholders in consultative training and planning procedures will be paramount. Despite these challenges, the fundamental value of social labs in facilitating essential experiential learning within social work programs remains clear. They provide a vital avenue for equipping students with competent skills and effectively integrating theoretical knowledge with practical application through meaningful field activities (Amadasun, 2021; Dhemba, 2012; Papouli, 2014). The social lab approach has demonstrated its effectiveness as a social experiment in accelerating and enhancing existing community-driven social innovation processes. For example, initiatives such as the revitalization of savings and community support groups have benefited from this approach.

Conclusion

Social Lab students were able to identify several limitations inherent in the traditional field practicum model. In contrast, it emerged that social labs offer significant contributions to learning and development for future social workers. While recognizing the considerable value of social labs, the participants also noted certain limitations associated with this approach.

From student perspective, social labs represent an essential instrument for the indigenization of social work education within the African context. These labs effectively foster community involvement, value local expertise, and integrate indigenous knowledge through innovative platforms that prioritize hands-on experiential learning. We believe that embracing these concepts will ultimately lead to a more culturally relevant, contextually specific, and responsive social work practice within our communities. From a Ugandan perspective, it was discovered that the social lab model is more practical and engaging approach to field learning when compared to traditional placement models. The daily engagement facilitated by social labs between students, and the communities served significantly augmented participant comprehension of the local environment and enhanced their ability to make a meaningful impact. Students experienced first-hand how social labs facilitate collaborative problem-solving,

encourage experiential learning, and promote collective social learning, building upon methodologies like Hassan's Social Lab approach to enhance the development of effective solutions.

The success of this model was evident in various initiatives such as school nutrition programs, educational savings programs, efforts to address child maltreatment, and the training of learners in the production and use of reusable sanitary pads. The social labs model clearly demonstrated its capacity to effectively link the community with the university, fostering strong collaborative relationships and facilitating the growth of valuable knowledge. Social Labs foster community engagement and personal growth by integrating formal education with experiential learning, enhancing local solutions, and reducing resistance through reciprocal learning and community knowledge integration.

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