

Effect of Field Supervision and Support System in Enhancing the Quality of Field Practicum in Social Work Education

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Abstract

Fieldwork practicum is critical in social work education for shaping MSW students into professional social workers. An ineffective fieldwork practicum deteriorates the quality of social work education. Because fieldwork practicum helps the trainees to experiment the acquired theoretical knowledge in real-world situations. Hence, this study examined the improvements necessary to bring a practical fieldwork practicum syllabus. For this, the paper examined the 'activities' performed and the 'support system' received by trainees during their fieldwork practicum.

The study used an explanatory research design by conducting an online survey among 100 Master of Social Work trainees from Kerala. The variables selected to evaluate the effectiveness of the fieldwork practicum were Fieldwork activities carried out, Support systems, and Social work skills acquired. The hierarchical linear regression test revealed that the activities of the trainees and their support systems played a significant role in acquiring better social work skills during fieldwork. The mediation analysis revealed that the 'support system' is a decisive factor in developing one's social work skills while performing different 'activities' during fieldwork.

Keywords: *Social Work Education, Field Work Practicum, Mediation Analysis, Field Supervision and Social Work Skill.*

INTRODUCTION

The International Federation of Social Workers stated, "Social work is a game changer that finds positive ways forward in challenging situations. They help people build the kind of environments in which they want to live

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through co-determination, co-production and social responsibility. Economic health cannot be achieved without social health” (IFSW, n.d.). Thus, social work can be considered a discipline and a profession. Social work is obliged to bring social change, empowerment, and conscientisation among individuals, groups, and communities (Eriksson & Bjerger, 2019). The tenets of the profession are executed through trained professional social workers. While considering the story of India, professional social work training was started in 1936 in limited institutions. However, in recent times, many institutions were mushroomed recently, majorly in the private sector. The Second UGC Committee in 1978 suggested the need of government-oriented social work education against this extensive commercialisation. They identified three core issues faced in social work education: the curriculum, teacher-student ratio, and fieldwork. They pointed out the flaws in approaches adopted by the distance mode of social work education in fieldwork and classroom learning (Siddiqui, 2015) (Nair, 1981). They also suggested strengthening the fieldwork practicum by including ‘Faculty Development Programmes’ for academicians who engaged in fieldwork training (University Grants Commission, 1991).

Currently, the social work education has two components, i) Classroom Learning and ii) Fieldwork Practicum. The theories, values, methods and ethics related social work profession are introduced in the classroom learning sessions (Singh, 2015). These sessions provide in-depth understanding about the social work discipline, methods and approaches used in social work profession, skills, values & ethics embodied in social work profession and so on. The learnings from the classroom session are practice in the fieldwork practicum sessions, the second component. This provides wide exposure and then experience to the trainees by allowing them to mingle with professional social workers from different areas—medical, community, children, women, transgender, etc. (Raschick, Maypole, & Day, 1998)

Fieldwork Practicum

Brown and Gloyne, in 1966 has, defined the fieldwork practicum as “Any kind of practical experience in a social organisation or agency if this experience has been deliberately arranged for the education of students who are undertaking courses partly or wholly designed for those who intend to become social workers” (Brown & Gloyne, 1966). Various previous literatures stated that fieldwork practicum is very important factor in social work education (Horejsi & Garthwait, 2002) (Royse, Dhooper, & Rompf, 2002). The fieldwork practicum helps the social work trainees practise what they learned in theories in the classroom sessions (Bellefeuille & Hemingway, 2006) (Lager & Robbins, 2004). Thus, it is evident that fieldwork practicum plays a crucial role in attaining different social work competencies and skills required during the trainees’ professional lives.

As mentioned earlier, many have highlighted the need of fieldwork practicum in social work education. Dean Schneck (1995) stated that “Field practice can and should be an equal covariable in the determination of the agenda for education” and “Knowledge can inform practice, but practice can reform knowledge”. Secondly, Bogo and Vayda (1991) pointed out that “One factor leading to the improvement of social service delivery is the transfer of new knowledge and service methods to the service providers, and that the interface of field teachers with the professional schools of social work is one avenue for such a transfer”. Hence, the social work institution considers fieldwork practicum an important factor. The institution ensures a fruitful relationship between trainees and the fieldwork institutions as part of the fieldwork practicum. Thus, it can be inferred that the fieldwork institution acts as a bridge between trainees and the members of the community (Riesch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000).

During the fieldwork practicum period, the social work trainees face many constraints, and the work pressure from the fieldwork agency is one such. Because many fieldwork institutions use social work trainees to execute their work, they use this to reduce their scarce human resources, i.e., certificated employees, which also saves their money and resources. Secondly, the clients are facing problems with the fieldwork institution’s work since the trainees working on the task are not competent to deal with the critical situations of the clients. Thirdly, there is work pressure from educational institutions. All training institutions follow a particular curriculum framework, under which the trainees have to complete different activities listed in the fieldwork practicum syllabus. Most of the time, the trainees do not get enough time to finish all those things. However, the institutions never consider these reasons for non-completion of the work. Fundraising is another constraint faced by the social work trainees, the fourth limitation during their fieldwork time. Since the students have to spend the expenses from their pockets, they are prevented from doing many other activities (Jarman-Rohde, McFall, Kolar, & Strom, 1997). The last constraint the social work trainee faces during the fieldwork practicum is the inability to join with any reputed fieldwork institutions. The educational institutions do not make an attempt to place their trainees in any reputed fieldwork agencies. The fieldwork trainees are believed to get better experiences only if they get opportunities to work with good fieldwork institutions.

The activities planned and carried out by the trainees during the fieldwork practicum are very important for attaining many qualities required for a professional social worker. Hence, the fieldwork curriculum always tries to include activities like orientation visits, rural camps, concurrent field visits, Internships, and block placements in their schedule.

These activities help the trainees to understand various duties and roles, skills, and competencies needs to be played by a social worker during their professional life. The Orientation Visits are activities set up by an educational institution immediately after the induction program to introduce the major initiatives carried out as part of the social work discipline. This provides an idea about the nature of the social work profession. The second one is the Rural camp, which is also organised by the institution through which the trainees get exposure with a particular community namely, a tribal community, a disaster-affected community, a vulnerable community or a slum. The trainees must stay there and work with them for a particular period. The third one is the Concurrent Field Work in which the trainees have to work in a social work agency along with their daily theory classes. This gives them many opportunities to practice what they are learning in their theory classes. Finally, the Block Placement/Internship is a complete field activity where the trainees continuously work in a fieldwork agency for a particular period and practice what they learned during their classroom sessions. The name of these programs would change in accordance with educational institutions or curriculum programs however, the intention behind those programs is the same everywhere.

The study has identified three components: Activities carried out in the field, support system and skills acquired from the field to satisfy the fieldwork practicum's ultimate aim—transform a social work trainee into a professional social worker.

Activities Carried Out in the Field:

The 'Activities Carried Out ' are tasks done by the trainees during their fieldwork time. This plays a crucial role in determining the impact of the fieldwork practicum. If the trainee cannot perform these activities properly during their practicum period, they may lack understanding of various roles, duties, skills and competencies required for a social worker. However, engaging in various tasks during fieldwork enables them to grasp the diverse skills, values, techniques, and methods integral to the profession (Riesch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000).

The activities carried out by the trainees during the fieldwork period can be categorised into three levels, i.e., at micro, mezzo, and macro levels. At the micro-level, the trainees are introduced to an individual or family to interact, identify their problems and find solutions. This is called Casework in Social Work. Ideally, social casework is a primary method used in social work to solve the problems of an individual using techniques of restoring, controlling and social functioning. This is considered as a one-to-one activity (Ajibo, Mbah, & Anazonwu, 2017) (Perlman, 1957). At mezzo level, the trainees are introduced to a group where they identify their problems and

solve their problems, called Group work. Group work is a primary method used in social work which deals the problem of small groups. The members of this group should be limited, and they must possess similar kinds of problems to solve. Even though group work activities are related to small groups, the resultant outcome is expected from each individual in that group (Ajibo, Mbah, & Anazonwu, 2017) (Brown A. , 2017). Finally, at the macro level, the trainee interacts with a community, works with them, identifies their problems and suggests solutions. The Social Work discipline called it as Community Organisation (Ajibo, Mbah, & Anazonwu, 2017) (Parmar, 2014). When the trainees practice at these levels, they get an opportunity to acquire various social work skills, values, and roles. In addition to these methods, there are three more methods in social work discipline: Social Work Research, Social Action and Social Welfare Administration.

This paper checks the promptness possessed by the trainees in doing the above activities. This is checked by assessing the frequency of practising the below six items. A Five point scale is used for checking the frequency of practices such as Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Almost Every Time and Every Time. The items are listed in the below table:

Table 1: Items in Activities Carried Out

Sl. No.	Practising Items	Tool Used
	Skills	5-Point Scale (Likert)
	Values	5-Point Scale (Likert)
	Roles	5-Point Scale (Likert)
	Casework	5-Point Scale (Likert)
	Group work	5-Point Scale (Likert)
	Community Organisation	5-Point Scale (Likert)

Support System

The rookie trainees are ignorant about the nature of social work as a subject and a discipline. They get only limited information from the classroom sessions. The fieldwork practicum is an effective way to solve all the problems faced by the trainees because it help them to suss the reality in the profession and challenges behind it. However, a disciplined action is required during the fieldwork period in order to achieve it. The social work training institutions and fieldwork institution are the two agencies help them to practice the fieldwork in a disciplined way. The activities carried out by trainees during their fieldwork are assessed by the faculty member of the educational institution and the supervisor in the fieldwork agency. The collaborative work of these two parties ensure the successful accomplishment of the fieldwork practicum by the trainees (Singh, 2015). The faculty supervisor evaluates the amount of knowledge acquired by the

trainees during their field experiences, specifically the activities carried out by the trainees during the fieldwork period, to practice the theoretical concepts in practical settings. As the curriculum coordinators, they also oversee the overall performances of trainees throughout the practicum period (Doel & Shardlow, 2012) (Riesch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000).

However, the fieldwork agency supervisor is responsible for monitoring the tasks assigned by the agency during their fieldwork period. As an agency's representative, these supervisors closely monitor the activities carried out by the trainees, assess their performance, and provide corrections when necessary. Finally, the agency supervisor evaluates the trainees' strengths and weaknesses in the field and communicates them to the educational institution for further corrections (Doel & Shardlow, 2012) (Riesch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000).

This paper test the level of support received by the trainees during their fieldwork practicum period. The support from the training institution and support from the fieldwork agency is checked using 5 point Likert scale. The checkpoints used are Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often and Always. The components selected in the support system is tabled below:

Table 2: Items in Support System

Sl. No.	Support Provided	Tool Used
	From Educational Institution	5-Point Scale (Likert)
	From Fieldwork Agency	5-Point Scale (Likert)

Skills:

The ultimate aim of fieldwork practicum is to attain the necessary skills required for professional social workers. 'Skills' are the systematic and methodical approaches to performing activities effectively to achieve the desired outcomes (Arnoult, 1959). The social work discipline uses multiple theories from other disciplines to develop these skills. Hence, practitioners have to use appropriate theories from their knowledge base and wisdom wisely to address specific issues. This can be attained by understanding various theoretical perspectives like Humanistic, Managerial, Critical, Behavioral, and Psychodynamic frameworks. Forrester, Westlake, & Glynn, 2012 identified some essential skills required for a social worker, such as Empathy, Organizational Skills, Critical Thinking, and Active Listening (Forrester, Westlake, & Glynn, 2012). Additionally, the study identified some general skills required for the social worker, i.e., documentation and presentation skills.

Firstly, empathy is a skill used by the social worker to deal with the problems of clients in a casework setting, developed under the humanistic

approach (Karpets, 2017). This skill can be used to identify one person's problem and suggest a proper solution. Using this skill, serious problems of clients can be addressed (Spratt & Callan, 2004) (Forrester, Westlake, & Glynn, 2012). The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) defines empathy as the ability of one person to perceive, understand, experience, and respond to another person's emotional state. Secondly, the Organisational or Managerial Skills that are important for social workers to carry out their duties professionally and systematically. This skill improves the efficiency and accountability of social workers while they deliver services to others (Lees, Meyer, & Rafferty, 2013).

Thirdly, Active Listening skill which is a critical skill that acts as a gateway to enter the problems of a client (Forrester, Westlake, & Glynn, 2012). This skill helps the social workers to ask insightful questions to clients or groups. The reflective answers of the clients/groups are critical in identifying the nature of client or group problems. A skilled active listener can easily overcome the resistance from clients and encourage them to initiate communication about their concerns. Therefore, active listening skills go beyond merely hearing the words spoken by clients; it provide insights through gestures, actions, feelings, and thoughts of the clients/groups (Forrester, Westlake, & Glynn, 2012). Finally, the Critical Thinking skill which is an advanced skill required for a professional social worker to effectively address and resolve the issues of a client/group. Critical thinking skills are an effective way to understand extrinsic factors like power, oppression, discrimination, etc. These extrinsic factors may impede the intervention process while dealing with client/group problems (Forrester, Westlake, & Glynn, 2012). Hence, the social worker has to be very careful while selecting the necessary theories and approaches to use critical thinking skills (Adams, Dominelli, & Payne, 2009).

In addition to the above-mentioned skills, the social workers need two general skills. The first one is the Documentation skill, which is essential for safeguarding clients' and social workers' legal and ethical rights. Proper documentation brings scope for future research by preserving records, photographs, video recordings, and similar materials. The documentation follows a structured procedural code by incorporating chronological reports, summary accounts of client interactions, and detailed process reports that outline all activities related to clients (Eliot, 1928). For a trainee social worker, the documentation process helps gain insights into the practices employed by professional social workers in the past (Reamer, 2005). The second skill is Presentation skill, which is essential for a social worker to convey ideas, problems, and solutions in an organised way.

Through this study, the researcher tries to identify the level of attainment of various skills during the fieldwork practicum period that are

necessary for a professional social worker. The study used a 5-point Likert scale to identify this. The options used in the scale were Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often and Always. The components used to assess the overall Skills are mentioned in the below table:

Table 3: Items in Skill Attainment Conceptual Framework

Sl. No	Skills Learned	Tool Selected
	Empathy	5-Point Scale (Likert)
	Organisation	5-Point Scale (Likert)
	Active Listening	5-Point Scale (Likert)
	Critical Thinking	5-Point Scale (Likert)
	Documentation	5-Point Scale (Likert)
	Presentation	5-Point Scale (Likert)

The effectiveness of current curriculum in strengthening fieldwork practicum in MSW training is being assessed by evaluating three variables identified by the researcher. These variables include 'activities carried out' (V1), 'support system' (V2), and 'skills attained' (V3). Each variable is further analysed through various sub-variables to gauge its impact on the overall fieldwork experience and the professional development of MSW trainees.

To develop the first variable, 'Activities Carried Out' (V1), the researcher scrutinised the fundamental components of social work education, encompassing Skills (Sv1), values (Sv2), and roles (Sv3) incumbent upon trainees during fieldwork training. Additionally, the researcher assessed the application of three primary social work methods: case work (Sv4), group work (Sv5), and community organisation (Sv6) which practiced during fieldwork training. For evaluating the second variable, 'support system' (V2), the researcher identified the extent of support received by trainees from both the educational institution (Sv7) and the fieldwork agency (Sv8).

Finally, the researcher formulated the last variable, 'The skills attained' (V3), by evaluating the proficiency levels attained by trainees during

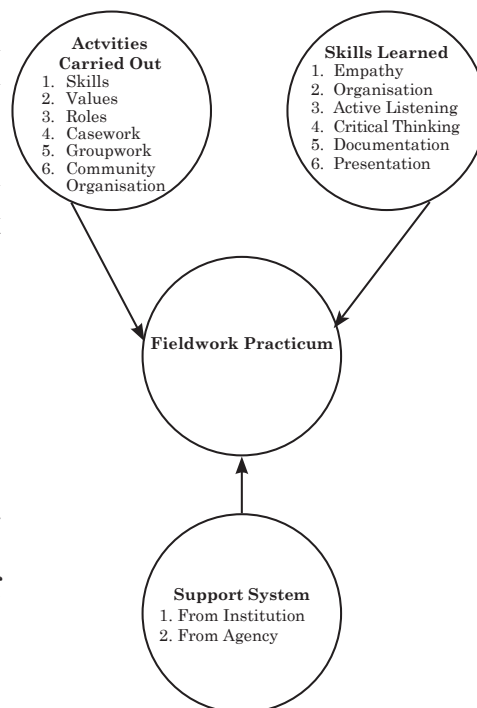


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

fieldwork training. These encompass a range of skills including empathy (Sv9), organisational skills (Sv10), active listening skills (Sv11), critical thinking skills (Sv12), documentation skills (Sv13), and presentation skills (Sv14).

During the analysis, the researcher investigated the influence of Variable 1 (V1) on enhancing Variable 3 (V3) during the implementation of fieldwork practicum. Additionally, the researcher explored the mediating effect of Variable 2 (V2) in enhancing Variable 3 (V3).

Methodology

This study investigates the effectiveness of fieldwork practicum in enhancing practical knowledge within the social work profession. Three key components of the fieldwork practicum are scrutinised: i) activities during fieldwork, ii) available support systems during fieldwork practice, and iii) skills acquired through fieldwork practice. The literature has successfully stated that a successful fieldwork practicum is essential for a successful social work practice. Thus, this study progresses through the assumption that activities by the trainees and support received during the fieldwork practicum are directly associated with their skill acquisition. Hence, the study considered the activities carried out by the trainees as the independent variable and the skills acquired by trainees as the dependent variable. Alongside this, the researcher investigated the mediating role played by the 'support system' in improving skill acquisition.

The researcher conducted an inquiry study to test the stated assumptions. Hence, the researcher employed an explanatory research design in a pragmatic paradigm and adopted a quantitative approach. The researcher used a survey method for the data collection, which was collected from 100 MSW trainees belonging to the 2019-21 and 2020-2022 batches. The survey was administered using a self-designed scale through an online platform, Google Forms. This study was conducted during COVID-19 pandemic, the students got guidance through online platforms, many students faced challenges in getting regular guidance. In order to validate the assumptions, the researcher employed two statistical tests: hierarchical linear regression and mediation analysis technique. All statistical analyses were conducted using Jamovi, an open-source software.

Analysis

In this section, the researcher endeavours to validate the assumptions outlined in the methodology. The session unfolds in three sections: first, a presentation of the respondents' socio-demographic details; second, the execution of hierarchical linear regression aimed at predicting the influence exerted by the independent variables on enhancing the dependent variable;

and third, an assessment employing mediation testing to evaluate the mediating impact of the support system received by trainees during their fieldwork practicum.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

In this study, 100 MSW trainees participated, with 78 percent being female and 22 percent male. Upon assessing the nature of institutions, the researcher identified three categories based on administration and financial support: Government Institutions, Government-Aided Institutions, and Private Institutions. It was observed that 53 percent of respondents were from aided institutions, 28 percent from private institutions, and 19 percent from government institutions. Regarding the social category of respondents, 69 percent were from the General Category, 28 percent from the OBC Category, while only 3 percent represented the SC (Scheduled Caste) Category, with no participants from the Scheduled Tribe Category.

Predicting the Influence of Activities and Support Systems on Skill Attainment in Fieldwork Practicum

In order to predict the role played by different activities and support system in a fieldwork practicum in developing social work skills necessary for a professional social worker. This is assessed with a hierarchical multiple regression test in which the level of *Skill Attainment* (V_3) by the social work trainees as the dependent variable (DV) and 'Activities Carried Out' in the field (V_1) and 'Support System' (V_2) as the independent variables (IV). The regression test performed in two blocks, i.e., Block 1—*Activities Carried Out* (IV_1) and Block 2—*Activities Carried Out* (IV_1) & *Support System* (IV_2). The result of the tests were explained in the below:

Model Fit Measures

Table 4: Hierarchical Regression Table (Model Fit Measurement)

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Overall Model Test			
				F	df1	df2	p
1	0.652	0.426	0.42	72.6	1	98	<.001
2	0.696	0.484	0.473	45.5	2	97	<.001

The result showed that both the models in the test showed a statistically significant result. The *Activities Carried Out* (Block 1) has explained a 42.6% variance in the level of *Skill Attainment*, i.e., $R^2 = 0.426$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.420$, $F(1, 98) = 72.6$, $p < 0.01$. However, the *Activities Carried out & Support System* jointly showed 47.3% of variance in the level of *Skill Attainment*, i.e., $R^2 = 0.484$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.473$, $F(1, 97) = 45.5$, $p < 0.01$ (Table 4)

Model Comparisons

Table 5: Hierarchical Regression (Model Comparison)

Model	Model	ΔR^2	F	df1	df2	p
1	2	0.0583	11	1	97	0.001

In the model comparison, 5.8% of additional variance, i.e., $R^2_{Change} = 0.058$, $F_{Changes}(1, 97) = 10.966$, $p = 0.001$ which explain that the inclusion of *Support System* brought additional variance in the level of *Skill Attainment*. The below table explains the variance of each predictor (independent variables) in the regression model (Table 5).

Model Coefficients - Skills

Table 6: Hierarchical Regression (Model Coefficients)

Predictor	Estimate	SE	95% Confidence Interval		t	p
			Lower	Upper		
Intercept	13.309	3.364	6.632	19.99	3.96	<.001
Practice	0.529	0.096	0.338	0.72	5.51	<.001
Support	0.736	0.222	0.295	1.178	3.31	0.001

The above table describe the effect of each variable (*Activities Carried out & Support System*) in the independent variable (*Skill Attained*). It shows that both the dependent variable shows statistically significant effect on the independent variable (Table 6).

The Mediating Role of Support Systems in Enhancing Skill Attainment during Fieldwork Practicum

The researcher aimed to evaluate the mediating effect of the support system while trainees performed various activities to acquire better social work skills during fieldwork practicum. A mediation analysis was employed for this assessment, where the Activities Carried Out (Practice) served as the Outcome variable (Independent Variable), Skills Attained (Skills) as the Predictor variable (Dependent Variable), and the Support System (Support) as the selected Mediating variable (Catalyst). This relationship is summarised in the following diagram.

Table 7: Mediation Analysis Table

	Coefficient	Std. Error	z Value	p Value
Total Effect				
Practice => Skills	0.709	0.082	8.610	0.000
Direct Effect				
Practice => Support	0.244	0.036	6.850	0.000

Support => Skills	0.736	0.219	3.360	0.001
Practice => Skills	0.529	0.095	5.590	0.000
Indirect Effect				
Practice => Skills	0.180	0.060	3.020	0.003

Total Effect= Effect of IV on DV without the effect of mediating variable; **Direct Effect**= Effect of IV on DV in the presence of mediating variable; **Indirect Effect**= The effect of IV on DV through the mediating variable

The mediation analysis revealed several significant findings. Firstly, the total effect of 'activities' on 'skills' attainment was found to be significant ($\beta = 0.709$, $SE = 0.082$, $z = 8.610$, $p < 0.001$). Secondly, the direct effect of 'activities' on 'support' was also significant ($\beta = 0.244$, $SE = 0.036$, $z = 6.850$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that engagement in 'activities' influenced the level of 'support' received. Additionally, the direct effect of 'support' on 'skills' attainment was significant ($\beta = 0.736$, $SE = 0.219$, $z = 3.360$, $p = 0.001$), demonstrating that the support system positively impacted 'skills' acquisition. Moreover, when considering the mediation pathway, the effect of 'activities' on skills attainment through the support system was significant ($\beta = 0.529$, $SE = 0.095$, $z = 5.590$, $p < 0.001$), highlighting the mediating role of the support system. Finally, the indirect effect of 'activities' on 'skills' attainment through the 'support system' was also significant ($\beta = 0.180$, $SE = 0.060$, $z = 3.020$, $p = 0.003$), further underscoring the importance of the support system in facilitating skills development during fieldwork practicum.

Here, a diagrammatic representation of the mediation assessment is displayed.

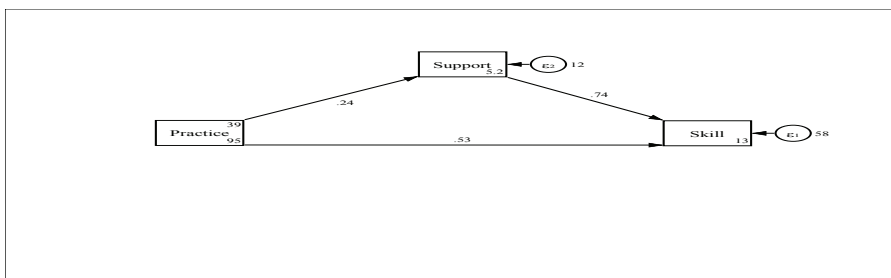


Figure 2: Mediation Diagram

Practice= Independent Variable (Var. Name: Activities Carried Out); Skills= Dependent Variable (Var. Name: Skills Acquired); Support= Mediating Variable (Var. Name: Support System)

The mediation analysis revealed a significant correlation between the 'activities' undertaken by MSW trainees during their fieldwork training

and the 'skills' they acquired. It was established that engaging in various activities had a notable net effect on skill development, underscoring the importance of diversifying activities for enhancing skill acquisition. The total effect of including different 'activities' for social work 'skill' attainment was substantial, highlighting the necessity of incorporating different activities in the field work practicum for enhancement of social work skills. Furthermore, the direct influence of 'activities' performed during the fieldwork practicum on 'skill' acquisition was elucidated, indicating the supportive role of institutions and agencies in influencing these variables. Moreover, the direct impact of the support system on skill acquisition acquires their significance in augmenting skill attainment during the fieldwork practicum.

Consequently, the mediation pathway indicated that the connection between activities carried out during the fieldwork practicum and the attainment of skills was partially mediated by the support system. Thus, it is evident that the support system acted as a facilitator in promoting the skill development of MSW trainees during the fieldwork practicum. In summary, these findings underscored the interplay among activities, support systems, and skill attainment within the framework of fieldwork practicum in social work education.

Results

The above analysis found the pivotal roles played by the "activities" and the "support system" in a fieldwork practicum in fostering the development of "skills" essential for a professional social worker. Using two statistical assessments, the researcher substantiated these findings. The first assessment, hierarchical regression, affirmed that the "activities" undertaken and the "support" received by MSW trainees during fieldwork practice significantly contribute to the inculcation of requisite social work skills. The results showed that the 'activities' performed by trainees accounted for a 42 per cent impact on skill development, which was further increased to 47 per cent when the 'support system' was included. These results revealed that properly planned 'activities' during fieldwork practicum are imperative for improving social work skills. Hence, the trainees should be encouraged to incorporate activities related to primary and secondary methods in social work along with their fieldwork activities. This will foster the inculcation of various social work skills in MSW trainees.

The second assessment, the mediation analysis, declared that during the fieldwork, enhanced support from educational institutions and fieldwork agencies is essential for social work skill acquisition. Hence, the supervisor's support in the form of of guidance and monitoring is an obligatory factor during the fieldwork practicum period. This support

should be comprehensive and should extend from the planning of 'activities' to its evaluation. The support comes mainly from two groups: educational institutions and fieldwork agencies. Educational institutions provide theoretical support for trainees' activities. The fieldwork agencies facilitate exposure to what they learned from the theory through various activities in the field, which ultimately leads to their professional development. Therefore, the study concluded that the efficacy of both these groups determines the strength of the 'support system'.

Therefore, all social work educational institutions should keep some guidelines on rules, regulations, and directions to the supervisors, students and fieldwork agencies for better fieldwork practices. Hence, the educational institution must ensure the trainee's engagement in various activities provided by the fieldwork agencies in all social work methods, techniques, and skills. Additionally, the institutions must ensure that the selected fieldwork agencies have the proper exposure in different social work settings and can provide proper guidance, support, and monitoring to those activities.

Finally, the study addressed the case of online/distance mode of MSW training by considering that they follow a different training method against traditional training. Since distance/online education programs allow the flexibility of pursuing the course at one's own convenience, a different approach should be taken to ensure a proper support system to enhance the quality of fieldwork practicum. In this case, a unique fieldwork practicum curriculum should be designed which must ensure the exposure of trainees in various activities that can develop social work skills. The curriculum should permit only those fieldwork agencies with proper stakes on ongoing projects. In addition, the study centre should appoint a supervisor for each trainee, who must review the trainees' activities to ensure comprehensive skill acquisition. The supervisor should regularly contact the fieldwork agencies to ensure that they receive necessary support. If the agencies fail to provide the necessary support to the trainees, the supervisor has to reassign them into an appropriate institution.

Conclusion

The study "The Mediating Role of Support Systems in Fieldwork Practice of Social Work Education" examined the effectiveness of fieldwork practicum in transforming MSW trainees into professional social workers. This study assumed that the cause-effect relationship between variables such as the 'activities' in the fieldwork, the 'level of support' received, and the 'skills' attained would help to improve the efficacy of a fieldwork practicum.

An explanatory research design and survey method was adopted to validate these assumptions. For this purpose, the researcher developed a self-prepared scale and administered it among 100 MSW trainees from Kerala. For the analysis, the researcher administered two statistical assessments: hierarchical linear regression and mediation analysis.

The study found that the 'activities' carried out by trainees during the fieldwork practicum positively affected the development of their social work 'skills'. The 'support system' of the trainees is also an important factor in developing their social work skills. Therefore, while upgrading the curriculum related to fieldwork practicum, both the 'activities carried out' by the trainees and the 'support system' provided should be considered. Hence, the study suggests that for a skilful professional social work generation, curriculum framers should design a fieldwork practicum syllabus by considering all these factors for all the regular, online, or distance modes.

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