

From Classroom to Community: Pedagogical Reflections on Camp-Based Social Work Training in Western Odisha, India

Dr. Madan Biswal

Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Sambalpur University, Odisha

Abstract:

Fieldwork in social work is one of the foundational components of social work education which creates opportunities for students to apply theoretical knowledge in practice and engage with real-world social issues. This paper examines the pedagogical and practical significance of camp-based field training through the lens of a 15-day fieldwork camp conducted in 2023 in a remote village of Western Odisha, India, organized by the Department of Social Work, Sambalpur University. Drawing on over a decade of experience as a social work educator and fieldwork supervisor, the author presents a reflective analysis of student-led community interventions carried out during the camp. Prior to the field engagement, a pilot study was conducted to gain firsthand understanding of the community. Secondary data were also collected from the panchayat office, government websites, and census reports to construct a detailed socio-economic profile of the village. During the camp, students were divided into four groups to address key community issues: Self-Help Groups (SHGs), education-related challenges among school-going children, concerns of the elderly population, and livelihood enhancement for the local Kumbhar (potter) community. Using tools such as observation, interview schedules, and focus group discussions, students conducted need assessments and designed appropriate interventions under the direct supervision of the author.

The paper underscores the value of immersive, experiential learning in shaping competent, ethically grounded social work professionals. The findings affirm that camp-based fieldwork not only deepens students' understanding of complex rural realities but also equips them with practical skills necessary for both micro and macro-level social work practice.

Keywords: Social Work Education, Fieldwork Training, Community Intervention, Experiential Learning, Reflective Practice.

Introduction

Fieldwork is considered the cornerstone of professional social work education, providing students with opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings. In India, fieldwork has been an integral part of social work education for more than eight decades, shaped by both indigenous needs and global professional standards (Dash & Roy, 2020; Nair, Juvva, & Nadkarni, 2020). It is the most essential component of social work education for professional social workers to build robust professional values, knowledge, attitude, skills and techniques of social work. Dash and Roy (2020) offer a detailed overview of social work practices, including skill-building camps, concurrent and block fieldwork models, and the incorporation of alternative practice frameworks. These institutional models play a significant role in ensuring theory–practice integration and professional development. Social work as a profession has an abiding and deep concern that needs to be addressed, remedied, improved or changed for a fuller (a richer) development of human environmental potentials (Tippa& Mane, 2018; Fortune et al, 2001; Knight, 2000). In both classroom and field settings, the process of learning is critical for students to help them acquire, practice, and improve the values, skills, and knowledge needed for the profession (Tippa& Mane, 2020). Fieldwork helps the students to understand the real-life situation by visiting field and developing intervention strategy and problem-solving skills. Davys and Beddoe (2000) believe that to provide the student with an opportunity to put theory into practice is the primary focus of the ‘field’ experience. The first process involves subjective reflection about students’ understanding and reactions to the practice situation (Bogo and Vayada, 1998). The second process involves conceptualization of the practice situations and interventions, through making connections to theory, providing conceptual frameworks and supplying explanations from the field instructor (Fortune, McCarthy and Abramson, 2001; Knight, 2001). Social work students get exposure of working in the complexities of social problems and learn the application of social work skills to handle the everyday problems. Social work training through fieldwork is essential to equip students with the skills, knowledge and attitude needed to apply in both micro and macro social work practice. The pedagogy of field instruction typically involves a triadic relationship between the student, the faculty supervisor, and the agency. Nair et al. (2020) provide an extensive analysis of this triad and emphasize reflective practice, supervision models, and social justice-oriented teaching strategies. Andrews (2023) highlights the need for strengthening supervision quality in postgraduate programs by training mentors and encouraging blended learning techniques. Besides community placement, agency placement, exposure visits and summer internship, camp-based fieldwork is one of the most dynamic approaches to social work education which offers students the opportunity to have practical, hands-on experiences in real life settings. It engages students with diverse populations and work on various social issues simultaneously enhancing their personal and professional development. Csiernik (2001) reviewed the activities social work students engaged in during the course of a practicum analysing one year of fieldwork practicum. The present paper is based on the experience of the social work educator (researcher) visit to remote areas for camp-based fieldwork with the students in 2023. The researcher has supervised the students during camp-based fieldwork for more than a dozen of times during his career as a social work educator in the Department of Social Work, Sambalpur University, Odisha, India. The present paper, though primarily focuses on the camp-based fieldwork conducted during 2023, the authors’ experiences over the years have been inherently given the present shape to this article.

Setting of the camp-based Fieldwork

Camp-based fieldwork is an experiential learning in which the students of social work are placed in camps with a focus on helping individuals develop coping skills, increase social inclusion and promote mental and physical well-being. It allows the students to put theoretical knowledge into practice in the areas of community building, problem solving, conflict resolution and emotional support etc. The present paper is derived from the camp-based fieldwork conducted in a remote

Panchayat of Sambalpur district of western Odisha during November, 2023. The camp was set in Garmunda village of Basantpur Panchayat of Samabalpur district from where the students move to other villages of the same panchayat for their academic activities.

Basantpur village is located in Burla tehsil of Sambalpur district in Odisha, India. It is situated 27km away from sub-district headquarter Burla (tehsildar office) and 27km away from district headquarter Sambalpur. The total geographical area of village is 1426 hectares. Basantpur has a total population of 1,899 peoples, out of which male population is 943 while female population is 956. Literacy rate of basantpur village is 58.56% out of which 67.97% males and 49.27% females are literate. There are about 431 houses in basantpur village.

Table-1: Overview of the Basantpur village for Camp-based Fieldwork

Particulars	Male	Female	Total
Total population	943	956	1,899
Literate Population	641	471	1,112
Illiterate Population	302	485	787
Scheduled Caste	191	198	389
Scheduled Tribe	286	319	605
Total workers	637	453	1,090

Source: Census 2011

Garmunda is a medium size village that is located in Burla Block of Sambalpur district of Odisha with total 328 families. The village has a total population of 1357 of which 689 are males while 668 are females as per Population Census 2011. The child population of the village between the age group of 0-6 is 156 which makes up 11.50% of total population of the village. Average sex Ratio of Garmunda village is 970 which is lower than Odisha state average 979. Child sex ratio for the Garmunda as per census is 926, lower than Odisha average of 941. Garmunda village has higher literacy rate compared to Odisha. In 2011, literacy rate of Garmunda village was 78.43% compared to 72.87% of Odisha. Male literacy in the village stands at 87.99% while female literacy rate was 68.63%.

Table-2: Overview of the Garmunda village for Camp-based Fieldwork

Particulars	Male	Female	Total
Total population	689	668	1,357
Literate Population	87.99 %	68.63 %	78.43 %
Scheduled Caste	323	164	389
Scheduled Tribe	149	154	303
Total workers	425	245	670
Child (0-6)	81	75	156

Source: Census 2011

Methodology

Before finalising the camp-based fieldwork, pilot study was conducted by the author to have firsthand knowledge regarding the community. To have more deeper understanding about the community, data have been collected from panchayat office, district website of the government and at the same time census data have been collected to have better idea about profile of the community. The paper is based on the experiences of the author as social work educator and fieldwork supervisor for more than one decade. Though the past experience of the author is inherently running through the writings of this paper, the primary focus is on the camp-based fieldwork organised and coordinated by the author in 2023 in a remote village of western Odisha, India. The author along with the students stayed for fifteen days with the villagers as part of the camp-based fieldwork of Department of Social Work, Sambalpur University, Odisha. The paper is based on the observation

and community intervention activities organised during the camp-based fieldwork by the social work students under direct supervision of the author. The students are divided into groups and are assigned with the task of community intervention in four different areas of Self-help Groups, Issues relating to school-going children, Issues relating to aged population and pottery. Pottery being one of the dominants of occupations of the Kumbhar community of the locality, intervention was developed to help the community to have profitable earnings out of their skills of pottery. Before developing the intervention activities, data collection tools like observation, interview schedule, focus group discussion have been used during the fieldwork.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to:

1. Explore the pedagogical significance of camp-based fieldwork in social work education as a model for experiential and community-based learning.
2. Document the process and outcomes of a 15-day camp-based field training conducted in a remote village of Western Odisha, focusing on real-life community engagement.
3. Analyse student-led interventions in four key areas—Self-Help Groups, school-going children, elderly population, and pottery livelihoods—and their impact on the community.
4. Assess the role of supervision, reflection, and participatory methods in enhancing students' professional competencies and readiness for social work practice.

Activities Undertaken during the Camp-based Fieldwork

1. Census study

To give an experience of data collection and the skill of handling the field situation through establishing relationship with the community members for smooth collection of the data, the students were asked to collect data for census study. The data was compiled and analysed by the students to have a comprehensive idea about the field areas and it was used for dissertation writing.

2. Application of Social Work Methods

Social group work being one of the primary methods of social work, the social work trainees applied the method with the school going children during the Camp-based fieldwork. Since the fieldwork was for a period of fifteen days, the trainees organised different competitions among the children. After exploration of the different problems in the community, the trainees organised an awareness rally in which the school children and teachers had also participated.

3. Organisation of rally in collaboration with the school teachers and students

Organising rally for awareness creation has been part of the social work fieldwork training from very beginning. Rally is organised for creation of awareness on different social issues like illiteracy, alcoholism, casteism, female foeticide, health and sanitation etc. Based on the exploration of the social issues by the social work trainees, rally was organised by taking together the students of the schools located in the sample village. The preparation of the placards by collecting materials from the villages typically called the 'Judad'. Some waste materials are also used for the preparation of the placards. The trainees wrote the slogans for the rally and the school students were trained to use the slogans during the rally.

4. Use of participant observation to understand the cultural activity

The trainees used the method of participant observation to understand the cultural components of the sample locality. Diwali was celebrated in the village during the period of the study and the social work trainees celebrated Diwali among the villagers in the Camp as well as in the village.

They not only celebrated Diwali as a festival but used it as an opportunity to apply the method of participant observation to have a holistic understanding of the cultural dynamics.

Social Work Intervention Activities

The students are divided into four groups to work on the issues of social importance. Initially after having a proper rapport establishment in the village, the social work trainees identified the basic issues that were profound in the village. After a through analysis of the issues, the trainees started intervention work to make the camp-based fieldwork more impactful. The issues on which the trainees worked are

- A. Self-help Groups
- B. Issues relating to school-going children
- C. Pottery
- D. Issues relating to aged population

A. Self-Help Groups (SHGs)

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have become vital engines of rural development and women's empowerment across the country. Marginalised women have got economic independence and more liberty as well as they have economic contribution to the family in the western part of Odisha by way of small-scale enterprises like leaf-plate making, poultry farming, tailoring etc. The social work trainees interacted with the members of the self-help groups very closely during the camp-based fieldwork. The social work trainees during the fieldwork assisted and trained the members of the SHG in book keeping training, capacity building sessions and awareness programmes on government schemes. The trainees could know about the journey of the SHGs members from their inception to the present shape walking through many ups and downs and their sustenance. The trainees could see the live examples of the power of micro finance and collective strength of the women fight patriarchy and improve their social stand. This does not mean that the SHGs do not have limitations or challenges. The trainees tried their best with guidance of the field supervisor to improve the condition of the SHGs members by interacting and having counselling sessions with the family members of the members of the SHGs in the village.

B. Issues Relating to School-going Children

The social work trainees during the camp-based fieldwork worked with the issues like irregular attendance and early drop out of the school going children. The trainees have sessions regarding the exploration of the strength and weaknesses of the students through SWOC (Strength, Weakness, Opportunities, Challenges) technique. The trainees are engaged with various counselling sessions of the students. they also interacted with the parents of the students when required. The trainees were involved with educational activities, interactive learning sessions and health and hygiene awareness programmes. After having the SWOC analysis the trainees organised dance and songs competitions among the students to boost their moral and encourage the students to grow in the areas of interest and capacity. Prize distribution ceremony was organised in the school after the competition where the students invite their parents to participate as part of the prize distribution ceremony.

C. Pottery and Indigenous Livelihood

Pottery occupied high place as part of the livelihood activity of the communities like *Kumbhars* in Bargarh district. The social work trainees observed the traditional pottery making process and got the opportunity to understand the socio-economic struggles of the artisans. The potters shared their challenges of rising raw materials, low income from pottery and declining interest among the young generations to continue the same. The trainees explored the local market linkages and at the same time tried to document this traditional knowledge. The trainees could understand how preservation

of the traditional knowledge and cultural heritage is highly important for the social development. Social work can contribute to the development of this craft through government scheme like “Make in Odisha” which was discussed among the potters. Collection of case studies was an important part of the learning sessions with the potter community.

D. Issues Relating to the Aged Population

The social work trainees during the camp-based fieldwork are engaged with the aged to understand better their psycho-social needs and elder care services in the family. The negligence of elderly in family is not uncommon in many parts of the country. The trainees participated in personal interview and focus group discussions among the elderly in the community. They also participate in formal meetings with the family members of the elderly. The trainees did family counselling to the family members of the elderly regarding proper care and support to be provided to the elderly. The trainees tried to ensure that no elderly should face neglect and lack of care in their families. The elderly of the migrant families are more vulnerable and face social isolation, hence special care was taken to have special counselling with the elderly of the migrant families. The trainees enquired regarding the health check-ups and community events, participation of the elderly in socio-cultural activities and religious activities. The trainees also created awareness regarding government schemes and programmes meant for the welfare of the elderly in Odisha.

Lessons and Challenges during Fieldwork Training

Despite its significance, fieldwork training in India faces numerous challenges. Tippa and Mane (2018) identify issues such as insufficient preparation of placement agencies, inadequate supervision, and a lack of contextualized curriculum. These gaps often result in a disconnect between classroom learning and field experiences. Similarly, Jeyarani and Jebaseelan (n.d.) report that students perceive a lack of coherence between theoretical modules and agency expectations. The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted fieldwork training. Negi and Azeez (2022) found that students experienced virtual placements as “neither social work-oriented nor experiential,” citing ethical dilemmas, lack of interaction, and inadequate learning. However, Syiemlieh et al. (2024) illustrate how fieldwork guidelines developed by a university in Meghalaya enabled autonomy and competency-building, even during remote placements.

Cultural sensitivity

Dash and Roy (2020) advocate for incorporating local knowledge systems and culturally relevant models into the fieldwork curriculum. Similarly, Tippa and Mane (2018) call for participatory, community-cantered approaches that respond to India’s diverse socio-cultural landscape. The initial challenge as well as learning for the students was to adapt to the situation of the village and cope with the villagers for better rapport establishment. Since the village was heterogenous and multi-ethnic, the students took initial few hours to make themselves feel comfortable with the villagers and make the villagers feel comfortable with them. On the day of our arrival in the village, we conducted a meeting with the villagers in the evening and let the villagers know about the team and the purpose of our stay in their village for the coming fifteen days. The villagers showed their interest and support on the team. The meeting was basically a point of interaction to establish proper rapport with the villagers and to create a friendly and supportive environment for the students. the village was culturally sensitive relating to matters of caste, gender and age. Though the trainees took some time to understand the cultural dynamics, they could adapt to the situation in a proper manner.

Development of Practical Skills

Quality fieldwork practice occurs when learning is optimal and can be individualized to the students’ learning needs. In this context, it believed that fieldwork practicum in social work designed, supervised, coordinated and evaluated based on criteria by which students demonstrate

the achievement of program objectives (Pardeck, 2005). The students got practical skills like in the areas of group work, group therapy, and community mobilisation. The students learned the skill of assessing the needs of the individuals and different groups, provide support at their level and linked the needy people with the administration and planned for some interventions. The students conducted the census survey as part of their training which gave them hands on experience on research skill. They also conducted groupwork with school going children and interventions activities with the children of the sample fieldwork villages. After having a thorough understanding of the problems of the locality, interventions activities were conducted in the form of organising rally in collaboration with the schools of the locality to create awareness among the people. Crips, Lister and Duton (2006) state that self-assessment and peer assessments focus on the students' capacities to assess themselves, to make judgments about their learning and to evaluate what has been learnt.

Building Relationships and Teamwork

Camp-based fieldwork was organised in a remote village of western Odisha and the students had to adapt to the village life and observe their lifestyle being among villagers. Since the students were staying inside the village, the villagers were also getting influenced by the discussions and intervention activities of the students. The trainees had to establish a good rapport with the people and participate in the activities of the people. The social work trainees had to work in teams with the community members, school teachers and local leaders. This collaborative approach encouraged the trainees for teamwork, communication and sharing of different expertise to ensure holistic support for camp participants.

This collaborative approach encourages teamwork, communication, and the sharing of different expertise to ensure holistic support for camp participants. By engaging with multidisciplinary teams, students learn how to adapt their social work methods to various contexts and collaborate with other professionals.

Community Engagement and Social Empowerment

Working with the individuals from diverse background and handling unique challenges was one of the most rewarding aspects of the camp-based fieldwork. The social work trainees worked with children, youth, students, self-help group members and learnt about the social determinants that impact well-being. The trainees became part of the community-based programmes and experiences the power of collective action and tried their best to empower the community to address their own needs.

Conclusion

Camp-based fieldwork in social work education is a powerful tool for preparing students for professional practice. camp-based training is not only a powerful pedagogical tool but should be recognized as signature pedagogy in Indian social work education, aligning with insights from Tippa & Mane (2018) and Larrison & Korr (2013). It allows students to learn through direct engagement with communities, fosters personal growth, and equips them with the practical skills needed to address complex social issues. Camp-based fieldwork in Western Odisha exemplifies the transformative potential of rural practicum in social work education. As Roy (2021) and others assert, this model immerses students in local socio-cultural realities, fostering critical reflexivity and enabling them to “think and perform like social workers” The experiences gained through this model of training are invaluable for building competent, empathetic, and effective social workers who are prepared to make meaningful contributions to society. Through camp-based experiences, students gain not only technical expertise but also the human connection and resilience necessary to succeed in the field of social work. However, as Midya (2023) observes, challenges such as language barriers and ethical complexities must be anticipated and addressed through structured orientation. Embedding rural camps within a well-supervised, theory-integrated curriculum—as

outlined in the UGC guidelines and Ghosh & Kurian's framework—can ensure that field experiences translate into professional competence.

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