

## Exploring the Essence of Fieldwork Training: A Phenomenological Study of Social Work Professionals

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### Abstract

Social work is a practice-based profession and academic discipline that helps individuals and communities address psychosocial issues, promote positive social change, and improve overall well-being, and requires adequate exposure and training during Social Work education. Fieldwork is considered an integral part of social work training, as it connects theoretical learning with practical application. It also allows candidates to work with diverse populations and communities, gaining practical experience in addressing social problems. The role of fieldwork in shaping professional identity, developing practical skills, and fostering reflective practice has been well documented, yet students experience several challenges during the fieldwork placements. This research explored the lived experiences of social work students during their fieldwork training using a Phenomenological Approach. In-depth interviews were conducted with seven social work students who completed fieldwork placements. The findings showed that fieldwork is crucial for bridging the gap between theory and practice. Key themes included: (1) bridging theory and practice, (2) development of professional competencies, (3) building emotional strength and personal growth, (4) the importance of supervision and peer support, and (5) formation of professional identity. While participants faced several challenges, fieldwork training helped them become more skilled, emotionally stronger, and clearer about their professional role as social workers. Hence, fieldwork remains a cornerstone in social work education; it shapes competent, resilient, and reflective practitioners.

**Keywords:** Fieldwork, Social Work Education, Training, Qualitative Research

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## **Introduction**

Fieldwork has always been an integral part of both social work education and practice. It integrates students' theoretical learning into practice and provides them with opportunities to work with diverse clients, organizations, and communities. Fieldwork incorporates the values of social work into practice, including empathy, social justice, and advocacy. Fieldwork plays a crucial role in shaping a student's professional identity. The role of the field supervisor and mentor is critical in helping students navigate these challenges and in supporting their development (Bogo & McKnight, 2006). Fieldwork provides the opportunity to observe experienced professionals, gain feedback, and thus reflect on professional practice

## **Literature review**

Among the better-known frameworks is Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984), which explains that learning occurs through the transformation of experience into knowledge. Fieldwork provides students with opportunities to apply their previously taught academic skills in real-world settings. Kolb's model includes four successive stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Fieldwork helps students go through all these stages through active participation, reflection on experiences, construction of new approaches, and putting those approaches to a practical test (Bogo, 2015). The literature stresses the importance of experiential learning in field education. According to Wilson (2016), field placements let students apply their social work knowledge and skills under supervision. This is an important factor in developing competencies such as case management, client advocacy, and crisis intervention. The depth of learning about human behavior and social environments enhances students' empathetic abilities and ethical decision-making (Hawkins & Shoheit, 2012).

Another critical aspect of fieldwork is reflective practice, which encourages students to reflect on their actions and learning. Using Schön's (1983) concept of reflective practice, students are encouraged to continuously monitor and reflect on their fieldwork. This helps them revisit their interventions, identify where they can do better, and bring that skill and insight to future practice. Reflective practice fosters professional competence in social work by fostering ethical awareness and personal growth in practice (Knott & Scragg, 2016). There is evidence that reflective practice in fieldwork enhances students' self-awareness and critical thinking. According to Collins (2008), reflection helps a student to manage emotional reactions, assess decision-making, and identify what should be different in practice. Supervision and peer

discussions reinforce the reflection process and are deemed safe for a student to process his/her field experience. Fieldwork involves emotionally challenging situations; hence, students are facilitated in developing emotional resilience. Emotional resilience is the process by which one manages stress, controls their emotional reactions, and maintains professional boundaries. The literature has outlined emotional challenges associated with working with vulnerable populations (Hochschild, 1983). Fieldwork exposes a student to traumatic and crisis situations, facilitating the student to strategize how to manage the emotional impact (Reupert, 2017). Emotional resilience is critical for preventing burnout and for helping a practitioner stay empathetic and committed to long-term social work practice (Collins, 2008). Field supervisors are instrumental in helping students navigate complex issues during supervision. Another important feature of fieldwork is self-care and emotional support. It equips students with self-care and stress-management skills to enhance emotional resilience (Knight, 2013). These skills are not limited to fieldwork practice but are also essential tools for maintaining mental health throughout one's career.

Fieldwork is highly relevant to the formation of professional identity as students transition from learners to professionals. Professional identity, in itself, is an individual's understanding of self in relation to the values, ethics, and roles of the profession. Research has established that fieldwork enhances students' ability to internalize social work values, including social justice, human rights, and advocacy. As students put these values into practice in fieldwork contexts, they realize they are gradually assuming the role of a social worker, thereby reinforcing their professional identity.

Field supervisors hold a pivotal role in enhancing students' professional identity. According to Bogo and McKnight (2006), supervisors help students navigate the complexities of practice, thereby enhancing students' confidence and competence. The mentorship during fieldwork and the feedback provided help students understand themselves and their professional roles and responsibilities. Fieldwork also enhances ethical decision-making. According to Beddoe (2017), fieldwork often places students in situations that present ethical challenges, thereby necessitating critical thinking and reflection on their choices. Working through such difficulties enhances a commitment to ethical practice and builds on the professional identity already developed by students.

Supervision is an essential component of fieldwork, in which students are provided guidance to address such demands. The role of field supervisors is as mentors who provide feedback and endorse reflective practice to help students apply their theoretical knowledge to practice (Bogo and McKnight, 2006). Good supervision tends to yield desirable outcomes, including heightened confidence, improved problem-solving ability, and emotional resilience (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014). Supervision enhances reflective practice, in which a supervisor encourages a student to reflect on their actions, decisions, and feelings. The process facilitates

a student's efforts to address challenges encountered during fieldwork and enhances professional growth (Hawkins &Shohet, 2012).

### **Research gap**

Despite extensive literature on fieldwork in social work education, several gaps remain. Existing studies largely emphasize theoretical frameworks such as experiential learning and reflective practice, while paying comparatively little attention to students' and professionals' subjective experiences. While supervision is recognized as essential, there is insufficient exploration of how supervisory relationships and styles influence emotional resilience, confidence, and the formation of professional identity. Additionally, emotional challenges in fieldwork are often discussed in general terms, with a lack of in-depth understanding of how individuals cope with stress and trauma in real-time or across different practice settings. The link between reflective practice and measurable professional competence also remains underexplored. Furthermore, much of the existing research is rooted in Western contexts, creating a gap in understanding fieldwork experiences within diverse cultural settings, particularly in countries like India.

### **Methods & materials**

#### **a. Aims and objectives:**

This study aimed to understand social workers' subjective experiences during fieldwork, focusing on how these experiences shape their learning and professional growth. The study has explored, through in-depth interviews, how fieldwork shapes social workers into competent, resilient, and reflective practitioners.

#### **b. Research Design**

A qualitative approach was chosen because it best captures the personal experiences of social workers who once engaged in fieldwork. Qualitative approaches allow for deeper probing of perspectives, challenges, and growth during their practical training. The study adopted a phenomenological research design to explore and understand participants' subjective experiences of fieldwork training.

#### **c. Sample Selection:**

The participants were selected through a purposive sampling process based on individuals with varied fieldwork experience during their social work education. From this pool, a total of seven social workers were interviewed and no further interviews were conducted as data saturation was achieved.

**d. Data Collection Methods:**

The data was collected through a semi-structured interview guide. Open-ended, in-depth questions allowed the participants to reflect on experiences, emotions, and learning processes. Data collection was carried out by the researchers who received training from Qualitative Research experts. The interview was initiated after rapport building and began with the first question from the semi-structured interview guide; questions were also tailored to the participant’s responses, as applicable.

**Some interview questions included are as follows:** How has fieldwork contributed to your professional development as a social worker?, How did you overcome the challenges faced during fieldwork placements?, What role did supervision and peer support play in your fieldwork experience?

Interviews were conducted virtually to accommodate the participants ‘convenience, with a maximum duration of 45 minutes. Interruptions due to internet issues, phone calls, etc., led to temporary pauses, and necessary measures were undertaken before resuming. And if clarification was needed, participants were asked to repeat or confirm their statements. The entire process, including start and end times, was documented through audio recordings and field notes.

**e. Data Management and Analysis:**

Audio recordings of in-depth interviews were labeled, with backup copies stored in password-protected computers accessible only to the researchers. Socio-demographic data were meticulously entered into an Excel spreadsheet, with each participant assigned a unique identifier (e.g., SWP1, SWP22, etc.) to maintain consistency across datasets. Following the transcription and translation of the relevant verbatim quotes, data were organized and manually analyzed using thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke’s (2006) model.

**Results**

The study included an in-depth interview with seven social workers selected through purposive sampling who had undergone fieldwork training during their social work education.

**Table 1:** *Details of the participants*

Participant	Social Workers
SWP1	<i>Social Work Intern</i>
SWP2	<i>Social work Intern</i>
SWP3	<i>Community organizer</i>
SWP4	<i>Mental Health Professional</i>
SWP5	<i>Community organizer</i>
SWP6	<i>Social work Intern</i>
SWP7	<i>Program coordinator</i>

Five main themes emerged from the thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase process. These themes reflect the lived experiences of the seven social work trainees during their fieldwork. Each theme is illustrated with relevant verbatim extracts.

**Table 2: Themes and Sub-themes derived**

Theme	Sub-themes
1. Bridging Theory and Practice	1.1. <i>Making theory come alive</i> 1.2. <i>Learning through real situations</i>
2. Development of Professional Competencies	2.1. <i>Communication and relationship building</i> 2.2. <i>Assessment, planning and decision-making</i>
3. Building Emotional Strength and Personal Growth	3.1. <i>Managing difficult feelings</i> 3.2. <i>Importance of self-care</i>
4. The Importance of Supervision and Peer Support	4.1. <i>Support from supervisors</i> 4.2. <i>Value of peer support</i>
5. Formation of Professional Identity	5.1. <i>Strengthening commitment to social justice</i> 5.2. <i>Understanding the bigger picture</i>

**Theme 1: Bridging Theory and Practice**

One of the most prominent themes that emerged from this study is that fieldwork is an important connecting point between classroom learning and translating that knowledge into practice. Respondents reported that being placed in the field allowed them to apply what they learned in the classroom through real-world experiences, thereby enhancing their understanding of the principles of social work.

SWP1 said, “... *in the classroom, we learn about theories of human behavior and social systems, but it wasn't until I worked directly with clients that I truly understood how those theories play out in real life. My field placement brought my education to life.*”

SWP2 added, “... *theory is the backbone of our practice, but fieldwork is where we see its application. You can read all the textbooks you want, but nothing compares to being in the field, learning from real-life experiences.*”

SWP6 mentioned, “...*classroom learning feels incomplete without field exposure.*”

**Theme 2: Development of Professional Competencies**

The results showed that fieldwork is crucial for helping students develop the skills they need to become social workers. There was an apparent development of key abilities concerning communication, assessment, and intervention techniques.

SWP3 reported, “... *before my fieldwork, I felt that only knowing the theory was not sufficient. Working with clients helped me enhance my interviewing skills and taught me how to connect with them and build trust, which is very important in our field.*”

SWP7 added, “... during my placement, I learned how to do assessments and create plans for clients. I was scared at first, but with each client I worked with, I became more confident.”

There were also indications that fieldwork helped participants enhance their critical thinking and decision-making skills. They had to tackle real-life challenges, thus making difficult choices.

SWP4 remembered, “... there was a situation whereby I had to advocate for what a client needed, which required deep critical thinking. That experience really taught me how important it is to think clearly and act responsibly.”

### **Theme 3: Building Emotional Strength and Personal Growth**

Another important finding was how fieldwork contributes to emotional growth and the increase in resiliency among students. Participants described that working with traumatic and impoverished situations had tested their emotional strength.

As SWP5 reflected, “... the emotional challenges of the fieldwork were not easy, yet they taught me many things about myself. I learned how to handle my feelings and ask for help when I needed it. It was a life-changing experience.”

This points out that though the fieldwork may be emotionally challenging, it develops resilience and helps gain insight into one's personality.

SWP2 said, “.. working with clients in crisis was sometimes overwhelming; however, I learned the importance of taking care of myself and processing my emotions. It made me realize that I need to take care of myself if I want to help others.”

This viewpoint highlights the importance of self-care in social work education. The participants emphasized self-care strategies and setting boundaries as essential for managing emotional demands in their work.

Many indicated that placements encouraged mental health discussions, promoting a supportive environment.

SWP6 said, “... we regularly had conversations with our supervisors about our emotional well-being. It was reassuring to know our mental health was valued.”

### **Theme 4: The Importance of Supervision and Peer Support**

The findings accentuated that supervision is one of the central components that make fieldwork experiences successful. Participants continued to report how good supervision provided the necessary guidance, emotional support, and useful feedback during the fieldwork experience.

SWP5 identified, “... *my supervisor was crucial in my learning. They gave me a safe space to talk about my challenges and fears, and their feedback helped me grow a lot as a practitioner.*”

This represents the importance of a good supervisory relationship in supporting learning and emotional health.

SWP1 reflected, “... *having a supportive supervisor made a big difference. They guided my professional growth and checked on my emotional well-being. I felt like I had someone looking out for me.*”

This presents the importance of emotional support in supervisory relationships. Furthermore, participants described peer support as an important factor that enhanced their field experience. They generally discussed with their peers, which is an important way to create a collaborative learning environment.

SWP2 identified, “... *talking about our experiences with fellow interns helped us process our feelings and learn from one another. It was a source of strength during tough times.*”

This supports the fact that peer relationships are meaningful in developing resilience.

#### **Theme 5: Formation of Professional Identity**

Finally, the findings showed how fieldwork shapes participants' professional identities. Most respondents reported reflecting on how fieldwork placements helped to clarify their values, beliefs, and commitment to social work.

SWP1 reported, “... *my fieldwork experience developed and strengthened my desire to be in the field. I realized the difference I could make in people's lives, and it motivated me to fight for justice.*”

This shows that fieldwork is not just a requirement of education, but an influential experience in one's career path and goals.

SWP7 shared, “... *through my interactions with clients, I obtained greater insight into understanding social issues. It gave me a sense of connection to a community and reminded me why I was committed to social justice.*”

This connection to a greater cause provided a sense of purpose for these careers.

SWP5 reflected, “... *working in the field showed me that social work is about more than just helping individuals; it's about addressing the root causes of social issues. I feel empowered to be a change agent now.*”

SWP4 added, “... *all these experiences have helped me see myself as a future professional rather than as a student.*”

These statements highlight how fieldwork instills a sense of responsibility and advocacy in future social workers.

## **Discussion**

This study provides valuable insight into how fieldwork helps students learn and develop as social work students. Key findings indicate that fieldwork bridges the gap between classroom learning and practice, enhances professional development, and fortifies psychological resilience. A number of overarching themes have been identified, providing further insight into how fieldwork positions the student to practice as a competent, resilient, and reflective social worker. First, most participants reported that fieldwork helped apply theoretical knowledge acquired in the classroom to practice. In this way, it supports learning approaches such as Kolb's (1984) model, in which students progress through a series of stages: experience, reflection, and the testing of new ideas. It enables students to understand social work more fully through the actual practice of social work. Other studies also report similar results; Bogo (2015) and Wilson (2016) also found that fieldwork facilitates advanced critical thinking and decision-making. The study also identified that fieldwork was crucial for developing key professional competencies such as assessment, communication, and intervention planning (Knight, 2013). Participants reported feeling more confident while working with clients, indicating that practice is crucial for learning these skills. This supports the assertion of Bogo and McKnight (2006) that fieldwork assists students in managing complex client needs while maintaining professional boundaries and ethics. Participants also developed enhanced reflective skills, which aligned with Schön's (1983) concept of reflective practice, in which students learn to think deeply about their practice and make informed decisions. In relation to psychological resilience, the study demonstrated that fieldwork facilitated student development by helping them manage emotionally challenging situations. Participants discussed strategies for coping, such as self-care, to manage the demands of their placement. This is supported by Reupert (2017), who asserts that psychological resilience is necessary for long-term retention within the profession. It also furthers Hochschild's (1983) belief that social work is often emotionally laborious, particularly when working with vulnerable populations.

Supervision was equally important in helping students stay emotionally strong. According to Collins (2008), guidance through supervision helped participants cope with difficult emotional situations; this assertion is supported by respondents' statements. Supervision and colleagues' assistance also played a significant role in personal and professional development. Through this network, students were able to share their experiences and develop resilience. The study also reveals that supervision enhances students' professional growth. Supervisors acted like mentors, offering emotional support and guidance in linking theory to practice. This is in agreement with Kadushin and Harkness' (2014) perceptions that supervision forms the gateway to learning reflective practice.

Another notable point concerns the value of peer support, which is rarely discussed in the research findings. Group debriefing provided opportunities to share challenges and

collectively find solutions among peers. This affirms Hawkins and Shoheit's argument that learning in groups is an important aspect of social work education.

This study also illustrates how fieldwork enables students to develop professional identity. The development of professional identity is similar to the process of internalizing the profession's values and ethics (Weiss-Gal and Welbourne, 2008). Several participants reported that field experiences had also clarified their career plans, solidified their commitment to social justice, or enhanced their sense of professionalism. Such findings are consistent with other studies indicating how field placements promote student transition from learners to professionals (Benbenishty et al., 2011).

### **Limitation of the study**

The study is geographically confined to English-speaking Social Workers who underwent fieldwork training as part of the Social Work education curriculum from Karnataka State, which may not reflect experiences from other regions or contexts. Additionally, the qualitative design relies on self-reported data, which may be influenced by personal bias or selective recall. The use of virtual interviews may have restricted deeper interaction and observation of non-verbal cues.

### **Conclusion**

The study underscores the significance of reflective practice and supervision in enhancing learning outcomes. Supervision emerged as a key supportive mechanism, offering guidance, feedback, and a safe space for emotional processing, while peer support further strengthened coping and learning. Importantly, fieldwork played a transformative role in shaping professional identity, helping participants internalize core social work values such as social justice, empathy, and ethical responsibility. Despite the challenges of emotional labor and ethical dilemmas, these experiences contributed positively to the growth of competent, reflective, and resilient practitioners.

Overall, the study reaffirms that fieldwork is not merely a curricular requirement but a foundational component of social work education that fosters holistic professional development. It emphasizes the need for structured supervision, culturally relevant training approaches, and stronger emotional support systems to enhance fieldwork experiences. Future research should explore diverse field settings and adopt longitudinal perspectives to better understand the sustained impact of fieldwork on professional identity and practice.

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