



Barriers in Fieldwork Practice for Social Work Students: Challenges and Pathways for Reform

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Abstract

Fieldwork practice assists on the basis of social work education, helping as the connection between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Despite its significance, social work trainees often face challenges that limit the effectiveness of field education. This study explores the barriers faced during fieldwork practice and identifies pathways for reform. A qualitative exploratory research design was adopted, involving 11 students from different semesters and backgrounds who had completed at least one field placement, purposively selected for this study, guided by data saturation. In 2025, primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion and thematically analyzed, completed by secondary data from previous literature. Findings exposed multiple barriers, including inadequate supervision, limited and inequitable placement opportunities, financial constraints, weak coordination between universities and field agencies, and cultural or community-based challenges. These obstacles often hinder students' confidence, learning outcomes, and professional readiness. However, students also identified valuable learning experiences such as improved communication, counseling skills, and professional identity development. Suggested reforms included structured supervision, expansion of placement opportunities, particularly in rural and community-based settings, financial stipends, institutional monitoring, and stronger collaboration between universities and field agencies. The study concludes that systemic reforms are essential to improve the accessibility, equity, and quality of field education. Strengthening supervision, diversifying placements, and ensuring financial and institutional support can better prepare social work students for professional roles, ultimately improving the overall quality and impact of social work education. In this study will benefit students, educators, and institutions by enhancing field placement experiences.

Keywords: social work education, fieldwork barriers, placement opportunities, institutional collaboration



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1. Background

Social work is a practice-based discipline that emphasizes the meaningful integration of classroom learning with real-life situations (Drisko & Grady, 2018; Woli, 2024). In this context, fieldwork practice plays a crucial role by acting as a bridge between theoretical understanding and practical application (Padda, 2024; Woli, 2023a). It offers students valuable opportunities to engage directly in real-life social work settings, helping them develop essential skills and professional competencies (Fantinelli et al., 2024). However, many students face notable challenges during their field placements (Wu et al., 2021). These challenges often include limited or inadequate supervision, a shortage of quality placement opportunities, weak coordination between academic institutions and field agencies, and unequal access to placements due to economic or geographical constraints (Ross & Ncube, 2018).

One of the primary challenges in social work education is the limited availability of quality field placements, particularly in rural or underserved areas (Landsman & Rathman, 2023). Many students struggle to secure placements that not only align with their learning objectives but also offer a diverse range of practical experiences (Carvalho et al., 2025). Additionally, inadequate supervision by qualified field instructors remains a persistent concern (Oli & Woli, 2025). Without appropriate guidance and constructive feedback, students may feel disconnected from their educational goals and insufficiently prepared for professional practice (Matthew & Lough, 2017). Moreover, insufficient coordination between universities and fieldwork practice often leads to fragmented and inconsistent learning experiences for the agency (Hernandez Garcia et al., 2025). When academic institutions do not collaborate effectively with placement organizations, students may encounter unclear expectations, ambiguous roles, and gaps between theoretical knowledge and practical application (Grafstrom et al., 2025). Furthermore, structural inequalities continue to affect the accessibility and quality of field education (Peer, 2020). Marginalized pupils, including those from low-income families, ethnic minority groups, or geographically isolated regions, frequently face challenges such as discrimination, financial constraints, and limited access to supportive resources, which further restrict their opportunities for meaningful placements (Loganathan et al., 2023).

Research shows that such barriers negatively affect students' confidence, learning outcomes, and readiness for professional roles (Wayne et al., 2010). Addressing these challenges is crucial to enhancing the quality and impact of social work education (Afrouz & Crisp, 2021).

Field education is often described as the cornerstone of social work education, as it connects academic instruction with practical experience (Gursansky & Le Sueur, 2012). Despite its importance, it continues to face persistent obstacles (Oli & Woli, 2024). Recent literature highlights issues such as limited availability of placements, inadequate supervision, lack of institutional support, and inequities in learning experience (Cornish et al., 2025). These challenges are further compounded by external pressures, including limited funding, growing student enrollment, and structural inequalities within both educational institutions and partner organizations (Hamer & Lang, 2015).

Many students express feeling unprepared and inadequately supported, largely due to limited meaningful engagement during their field placements and weak integration between field experiences, academic instruction, and social agency (Marginson, 2016). Furthermore, marginalized pupils frequently encounter distinct challenges such as discrimination, financial constraints, and geographic isolation, which further hinder their access to quality learning opportunities (Thiem & Dasgupta, 2022; Woli, 2022).

Despite the recognized importance of field education in social work, persistent challenges such as limited placements, inadequate supervision, and inequities in access

continue to hinder students' learning and professional development (Simon et al., 2022). Existing research has not fully addressed these barriers or provided comprehensive strategies to make field education more equitable, effective, and aligned with professional standards (Jackson, 2015). This study seeks to fill this gap by critically examining the obstacles faced by social work students and suggesting practical reforms to enhance the accessibility, quality, and inclusiveness of fieldwork practice.

This study aims to explore the barriers faced by social work students during fieldwork and understand how these challenges affect their learning, professional development, and readiness for practice. It also seeks to identify practical pathways for reform to enhance the quality, equity, and effectiveness of fieldwork practice, ultimately strengthening social work education and improving student outcomes. This Study fulfills and takes the objectives tries to answer the following questions:

- What barriers do social work students face during fieldwork, and how do these affect their learning and professional growth?
- What reforms can improve the quality and effectiveness of fieldwork education?

1.1 Literature Review

Edmond et al. (2006) emphasize that fieldwork in social work education is widely recognized as an essential component of professional preparation, bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Brown et al. (2022) indicate that meaningful engagement in field placements enhances students' critical thinking, problem-solving skills, ethical reasoning, and overall professional identity. According to Pierszalowski et al. (2021), numerous studies have revealed important obstacles preventing fieldwork from being effective. Woli (2023b) argues that the scarcity of high-quality placements, particularly in underserved or rural areas, is a major obstacle that limits students' exposure to diverse social issues and demographics. Matthew and Lough, (2017) argue that inadequate supervision marked by limited guidance, feedback, and mentorship negatively affects students' confidence, learning outcomes, and preparedness for professional roles. Klein (2003) notes that weak coordination between academic institutions and field agencies often results in fragmented learning experiences, unclear expectations, and challenges in applying theoretical knowledge to practice.

Halabieh et al. (2022) emphasize that structural inequalities remain a persistent concern in field education, as students from marginalized backgrounds, low-income families, ethnic minority groups, or geographically isolated areas often face financial, social, and logistical barriers that restrict their access to quality placements. Sato et al. (2024) argue that these inequities highlight the need for inclusive field education models that ensure equitable learning opportunities for all students. Erdley et al. (2014) highlight that addressing these barriers is essential for developing competent social work professionals and enhancing the overall quality of social work education. Liu et al. (2013) note that despite recognition of these challenges, there is limited research providing comprehensive strategies to reform field education and improve accessibility, supervision, and learning outcomes. This research seeks to fill this gap by exploring barriers and identifying practical pathways for reform.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

According to Bergsteiner et al. (2010), the Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) serves as the foundation for this investigation. It asserts that a cyclical process of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation leads to effective learning. Fieldwork provides students with concrete experiences in real-world social work settings, enabling them to reflect critically on practice, develop professional competencies, and apply theoretical knowledge (McGuire & Lay, 2020).

Additionally, Zembylas (2018) explains that Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 1970) informs this research by highlighting the role of education in addressing structural inequalities. Hora et al. (2021) explain that, by applying this lens, Woli (2023) examines how barriers in field placements such as inequitable access, inadequate supervision, and systemic constraints affect students' learning and professional development.

2. Research Methodology

A qualitative exploratory research design is used in this study to explore social work students' experiences during fieldwork placements. A qualitative approach is suitable for gathering complex and in-depth information about obstacles, individual experiences, and perceptions that are difficult to quantify using quantitative techniques. Students studying social work who had finished at least one fieldwork placement made up the study population. The study population included individuals from urban and rural areas, including marginalized communities, and eleven participants were selected through purposive sampling, data were collected in 2025. Focus group discussions (FGDs) and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Although FGDs promoted interaction among participants and highlighted shared perspectives on obstacles and possible reforms, semi-structured interviews enabled participants to provide detailed explanations of fieldwork challenges.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved coding interview and FGD transcripts, identifying recurring patterns, and developing overarching themes related to fieldwork barriers and reform pathways. The study closely followed ethical guidelines, which include informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary involvement, and the freedom to discontinue participation at any time. Participants who shared delicate experiences of marginalization or institutional difficulties had their identities carefully protected.

3. Results

A total of 11 participants (social work students from semester 4, 6, 7, and 8) took part in this study. Their responses are presented thematically, supported by selected verbatim quotes. Thematic analysis of interviews and focus group discussions revealed major themes related to barriers in fieldwork practice and potential pathways for reform. The findings from the participants' responses are organized thematically according to the research questions:

Fieldwork Placements Completed: Most students had completed at least one placement, with senior-level students reporting three or more. A greater number of placements offered wider exposure to practice settings, while fewer placements were seen as limiting practical learning opportunities. Of the 11 participants, 7 had completed 1 to 2 placements, whereas 4 senior students had completed 3 or more. *"I have completed two placements so far, one in a community-based organization and another in a child welfare agency."* (P3)

Overall Experience of Fieldwork: The majority of students said that their fieldwork experience was both difficult and rewarding. While many emphasized the importance of practical learning experiences, many also acknowledged that they had trouble adjusting in the beginning and dealing with heavy workloads. In particular, 3 participants complained of being frustrated by ambiguous role expectations, and 8 participants described their experiences as both rewarding and stressful. *"It was rewarding to interact with clients, but at first, I felt lost because everything was so new."* (P6)

Valuable Learning Experiences: Participants identified key learning outcomes such as communication with clients, case documentation, counseling skills, and community

engagement. Several students emphasized that fieldwork improved their confidence, empathy, and professional identity. All 11 participants highlighted learning opportunities, the most common experiences included communication (9 participants), case documentation (7 participants), and community engagement (6 participants). *“The most valuable part for me was learning how to talk with clients respectfully and confidently.”* (P2)

Adjustment Difficulties: Respondents reported facing difficulties in adapting to the organizational environment, building trust with community members, and balancing academic responsibilities alongside field tasks. 9 participants reported challenges adapting to organizational culture, while 6 struggled with balancing academic and fieldwork demands. *“In the beginning, it was very hard to adjust because the workload in the agency and college assignments came together.”* (P5)

Supervision and Mentorship Challenges: A recurring concern was the inconsistency of supervision. Some supervisors provided meaningful guidance, while others were either too busy or showed minimal involvement. This created confusion regarding roles and responsibilities. 7 participants mentioned irregular or insufficient supervision, while 4 felt well-guided. *“Sometimes the supervisor was too busy, so i had to figure things out on my own.”* (P7)

Institutional and Organizational Barriers: Students frequently reported issues such as lack of resources, heavy workloads, and unclear role definitions. In certain placements, students felt they were used more as assistants than as learners, which limited professional development. 10 participants reported a lack of resources and workload issues, and 8 noted unclear roles. *“We did not even have enough materials to work with, and most of the time we were treated as extra staff, not learners.”* (P1)

Cultural, Social, and Community Barriers: In rural areas, language differences, cultural norms, and community mistrust posed significant barriers. Some students noted that gender expectations also restricted their participation in certain activities. 6 participants faced cultural or language-related barriers in rural placements. *“In the village, i struggled because people did not trust me easily, and my language was different from theirs.”* (P4)

Personal Challenges: Students struggled with financial burdens (transportation and food costs), time management between field and coursework, and emotional stress while handling sensitive cases. 9 participants reported financial burdens, 7 noted time management struggles, and 5 emphasized emotional stress. *“Travelling to the placement every day was costly for me, and sometimes i even skipped meals to save money.”* (P8)

Support from University/College: Support from institutions varied. Some students received orientation and periodic faculty visits, while others experienced minimal support. Many suggested that universities need to be more proactive in monitoring placements. Only 4 participants felt adequately supported by their universities. The remaining 7 described support as limited or absent. *“The college gave orientation in the beginning, but later they rarely followed up on our problems.”* (P6)

Helpfulness of Supervisors/Faculty: While some supervisors were approachable and motivating, others failed to provide feedback. This inconsistency created unequal learning conditions among students. 5 participants praised their supervisors for constructive feedback,

while 6 described them as unresponsive or inconsistent. “*One of my faculty members really guided me with feedback, which helped me a lot.*” (P3)

Coping Strategies: To overcome challenges, students relied on peer support, reflective journaling, discussions with faculty, and self-directed learning. A few also emphasized resilience and motivation as key coping tools. Students commonly relied on peer support (3 participants), self-study (6 participants), and resilience (2 participants). “*I shared my problems with my friends, and we supported each other whenever things were hard.*” (P9)

Suggested Improvements: Students strongly recommended structured supervision, regular evaluation, financial stipends, and clear guidelines regarding fieldwork expectations, all participants recommended reforms, the most frequent suggestions were financial pays (9 participants), structured supervision (8 participants), and clear guidelines (6 participants). “*If students got even a small stipend and regular mentoring, it would make fieldwork easier.*” (P2)

Support Needed for Effectiveness: Participants emphasized the need for institutional monitoring, consistent supervision, financial assistance, and psychological counseling services to make fieldwork more effective. Institutional monitoring (7 participants), financial support (9 participants), and psychological counseling (5 participants) were emphasized as necessary. “*We need not only financial help but also emotional support because fieldwork is mentally exhausting.*” (P7)

3.1 Pathways for Reform

In addition to highlighting the barriers, participants suggested several pathways for reform to improve the effectiveness of fieldwork practice. A central recommendation was the strengthening of supervision through structured training and regular monitoring of field instructors. Students emphasized that well-prepared and accountable supervisors would enhance both the quality of guidance and the overall learning experience.

Another key suggestion involved the expansion of placement opportunities, particularly in rural and community-based organizations. Participants noted that such placements would not only diversify students’ experiences but also expose them to pressing social issues beyond urban settings, thereby enriching their professional competence.

The issue of financial constraints was also raised, with participants advocating for financial support in the form of stipends or travel allowances. According to them, such assistance would reduce the economic burden on disadvantaged students and promote equitable participation in fieldwork placements.

Finally, participants highlighted the importance of enhancing collaboration between universities and field agencies. They stressed that clear expectations, structured learning agreements, and mutual accountability would ensure that students’ academic learning objectives align with practical fieldwork experiences.

Collectively, these recommendations point toward systemic reforms that could address existing gaps and build a more supportive, inclusive and effective field education system for social work students.

3.2 Expected Contributions

This research is expected to identify specific barriers encountered by social work students during fieldwork practice and examine how these challenges affect their learning, professional development, and readiness for practice. In addition, the study aims to provide evidence-based recommendations to strengthen fieldwork education, focusing on strategies

that promote equitable access, enhance supervision, and improve collaboration between universities and field agencies.

4. Discussion

The results of this study show that social work students face a number of difficulties when conducting fieldwork, such as poor supervision, few placement options, limited funding, and a lack of cooperation between academic institutions and field organizations. These challenges are consistent with previous studies, which have emphasized structural gaps in field education and their impact on students' professional development (Hossain et al., 2025).

A recurring concern expressed by participants was the lack of structured supervision and the limited accountability of field instructors. Participants frequently voiced concerns about field instructors' limited accountability and lack of structured supervision. This finding supports Mahesh and Miller, (2025) argument that the quality of mentoring directly shapes students' ability to integrate theory into practice.

Similar to this, Nepal's fieldwork opportunities continue to be primarily urban, as evidenced by the limited number of placements available, especially in rural and community-based settings. These restrictions limit students' exposure to various social realities, which in turn limits their ability to develop essential professional skills (Singh, 2025).

Another major barrier that surfaced was the issue of financial constraints. Prior research has shown that socioeconomic differences impede equitable access to field education, and students from underprivileged backgrounds reported challenges covering living and travel costs during placements (Hora et al., 2021). More participation and inclusion would result from addressing these disparities with stipends or allowances.

The study emphasizes the importance of enhanced collaboration between universities/campuses and field agencies, including clear expectations, structured learning agreements, and mutual accountability. Participants also highlighted the need for systemic reforms such as strengthening supervision, expanding placement opportunities, and providing financial support. Together, these measures are crucial for creating a more equitable and effective fieldwork system that prepares social work students for professional practice.

5. Conclusion

This study emphasizes the different obstacles that social work students encounter while conducting fieldwork, such as insufficient supervision, a lack of placement opportunities, financial limitations, and a lack of cooperation between field agencies and universities. According to the results, systemic changes are necessary to address these issues, including bolstering institutional partnerships, increasing placement opportunities, strengthening supervision, and offering financial support. Universities/campuses and field agencies can prepare students for professional practice by putting these strategies into practice and fostering a more encouraging, fair, and productive fieldwork environment. These observations might be a useful manual for institutions, educators, and legislators who want to improve the standard of social work education. Future research should explore how fieldwork challenges affect students over time and examine the role of better supervision, funding, and university - agency collaboration in enhancing social work education.

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