

Community Fieldwork Experiences: Socio-Cultural Challenges, Communication, and Adaptation Strategies among students of Social Work in Meghalaya

Dr. Lindsay Murray M Sangma¹, Gamre Chima R. Marak²

^{1,2}Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Tura, Meghalaya, India, Captain Williamson Sangma State University, Meghalaya

Abstract

A community fieldwork setting plays an integral part for students to learn about community settings for developing new skills and cultural competence from community perspectives. Despite rich cultural and linguistic diversity in Meghalaya, students encounter various different challenges related to communication and socio-cultural problems during fieldwork placements. These challenges includes different social norms, language barriers, difficulty in building trust with community members, unfamiliar social norms and customs, not willing to cooperate with students. This paper entirely focuses on socio-cultural challenges, communication problems and adaptation strategies. Data was collected through structured questionnaire and descriptive design was adopted where students studying in different social work institutions of Meghalaya were selected for the study. The findings shows that students exposed to community settings for fieldwork enhances their fieldwork education about community and people's lives , cultural competence, promotes culturally responsive social work practice and improve communication skills in community settings.

Keywords: Fieldwork, Community, Socio-Cultural Challenges, Communication, Adaptation Strategies, Meghalaya

Introduction

Socio-cultural refers to the values, traditions, behaviors, beliefs between social and cultural factors which every individuals and communities experiences. Socio-cultural factors play a significant role in shaping human behavior and community life. Different dimension in the society influences how people perceives it, maintain their relationships, social norms, roles and patterns of interaction, on the other hand our cultural dimensions like shared beliefs, customs, language, values, traditions and the practices by the community shapes the identity of a group, together these dimensions shows how decisions should be made, maintain interpersonal relationships, and deal with social situations (Dildora, 2024).

Cultural competence is one of the ideas that explain how social workers should work effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds. Two important concepts like cultural competence focuses on the knowledge, skills, and abilities that social workers need to handle cultural issues in their practice. In contrast, cultural sensitivity emphasizes self-reflection, respect, humility, and awareness of cultural

differences when working with people from diverse backgrounds. Together, these ideas are referred to as cultural concepts. Studies differ in how they define culturally diverse service users. Some studies describe them as people from different ethnic groups, religions, language backgrounds, or those with unique cultural experiences (Volckmar-Eeg & Enoksen, 2020).

During fieldwork placement it provides an opportunity for students to experience socio-cultural diversity and they also face different kinds of challenges too, where students working with community people, interact daily and come across several challenges like language barrier, belief systems, cultural practices, lifestyles differs from theirs, customs they follow, traditional beliefs and authority, religious beliefs and varying community expectations. Such challenges can initially make it difficult for students to establish rapport, build trust with community members, and work effectively. According to (Matthew & Lough, 2016), identified cultural value differences, language and communication barriers, cultural shock and identity-related as major challenges experiences among social work students during field placements. These challenges affected students' interactions with people and supervisors where they need better understanding of cultural understanding and adaptability first.

Similarly, (Nasreen & Singh, 2020), (Volckmar-Eeg & Enoksen, 2020)observed that community fieldwork exposes students to complex social and cultural realities, requiring them to understand local contexts, develop communication skills, and adapt their interventions to community needs. Another similar study by (Grieve, Ta, & Ross, 2023), found that communication differences, including culturally appropriate language use, non-verbal communication, and understanding local social norms, significantly influenced students' ability to perform effectively during social work placements.

At the same time, exposure to diverse socio-cultural settings offers valuable learning experiences that enhance students' cultural competence, communication skills, empathy, and professional adaptability. In the context of Meghalaya, the socio-cultural environment is particularly distinctive due to the presence of diverse indigenous communities such as the Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia tribes, each possessing unique languages, traditions, customary laws, and social institutions. Social work students undertaking community fieldwork in these settings are likely to encounter varied socio-cultural realities that require flexibility, cultural sensitivity, and adaptive communication skills. Understanding these socio-cultural dimensions is therefore essential for promoting meaningful community engagement and ensuring effective social work practice.

Methodology

Research Design

A descriptive research design was adopted to examine the experiences of social work students in their community fieldwork in the areas of socio-culture, communication and their preferred strategies to adapt to the challenges.

Research objectives

1. To examine the community fieldwork experiences with respect to community interaction, communication barriers, socio-cultural challenges and community cooperation.
2. To identify the strategies adopted by students to overcome the socio-cultural and communication challenges during fieldwork.

Study Area

Students enrolled in Social Work programmes offered by various institutions in Meghalaya.

Study Population

Students enrolled in Social Work programmes who were undergoing fieldwork placements in different agencies across Meghalaya as a compulsory component of their academic curriculum.

Sample Size

The sample consisted of 115 social work students from both urban and rural institutions of Meghalaya.

Sampling Technique

The study was based on primary data collected using a structured questionnaire. A convenience sampling technique was employed, and participants were selected based on their willingness to participate in the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

A structured questionnaire was administered using Google Forms following the respondents' informed consent. The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistics and presented in the form of tables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1: Interaction with the Community during fieldwork

Interaction with Community	Frequency	Percentage
Daily	50	43%
Weekly	39	34%
Occasionally	20	17%
Rarely	5	4%
Never	1	1%
Total	115	100%

The findings of the study indicate that a majority of the respondents had an interaction with the community on a daily basis (43%), followed by weekly interactions (34%). 17% of the respondents reported interacting occasionally, 4% of them interacted rarely, and only 1% has never interacted with the community during their fieldwork. This informs us that most Social Work students had regular engagement with the community, which provides them with the opportunity to gain practical experience and develop meaningful relationships during their fieldwork.

Table 2: Does cultural differences create challenges

Cultural Differences creates challenges	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	42	37%
No	44	38%
Sometimes	29	25%
Total	115	100%

The findings reveal that a slightly higher proportion of respondents (38%) reported that cultural differences did not create challenges, while 37% of the respondents have stated that they did experience such challenges. In addition, 25% have indicated that cultural differences sometimes posed challenges. These findings suggest that although many students were able to adapt to diverse cultural settings, a considerable proportion still encountered socio-cultural challenges in their fieldwork experiences.

Table 3: Communication difficulties during fieldwork

Communication difficulties	Frequency	Percentage
Frequently	11	10%
Sometimes	84	73%
Rarely	13	11%
Never	7	6%
Total	115	100%

The findings indicate that communication difficulties were a common experience among the respondents during community fieldwork. A majority of the students (73%) reported experiencing communication difficulties some of the times, while 10% of the respondents encountered the difficulties frequently. Whereas, 11% of the respondents rarely experienced the difficulties, and 6% reported never facing communication difficulties.

These findings suggest that although communication barriers were not a constant challenge, they were a recurring challenge for most Social Work students during their fieldwork.

Table 4: Factors contributing to communication difficulties

Factors which made communication difficult	Frequency	Percentage
Differences in language	31	27%
Differences in dialect/accent	6	5%
Lack of trust from community members	14	12%
Lack of participation from the community members	36	31%
Hesitation while communicating	24	21%
Lack of cultural understanding	4	3%
Total	115	100%

The findings reveal that the most common factor contributing to communication difficulties during fieldwork placements was the lack of participation from community members (31%), which is followed by differences in language (27%) and the hesitation that comes while communicating (21%). 12% of the respondents felt that lack of trust from community members was a factor, other respondents felt that differences in dialect or accent (5%) and lack of cultural understanding (3%) was a factor.

The findings suggest that communication barriers were influenced not only by linguistic differences but also by community engagement and the students' confidence while interacting with the community.

Table 5: Community Groups difficult to work with

Groups that were difficult to work with	Frequency	Percentage
Children	37	32%
Adolescents	16	14%
Youth	15	13%
Women	13	11%
Elderly persons	23	20%
Community leaders	11	10%
Total	115	100%

The findings suggest that 32% of the respondents have reported children to be the most difficult group to work with during community fieldwork. This was followed by 20% of the respondents choosing elderly persons, 13% have chosen youth, 11% of the respondents reported women and 10% answered community leaders as the most difficult group to work with during fieldwork placements.

The findings reveal that students experienced varying levels of difficulty when working with different groups in the community, with children and elderly persons presenting to be considered as being greater challenges during fieldwork.

Table 6: Level of Community Cooperation

Level of cooperation	Frequency	Percentage
Highly Cooperative	14	12%
Cooperative	68	59%
Neutral	33	29%
Uncooperative	0	0%
Total	115	100%

The findings of the study suggest that a majority of the respondents (59%) perceived the community as being cooperative during their fieldwork, while 12% of the respondents have reported the community to be highly cooperative. 29% of the respondents felt that the level of cooperation of the community was neutral, and none of the respondents reported the community of being uncooperative.

The study findings report that the overall level of community cooperation was positive, which in turn helps in creating a supportive environment for the Social Work students to carry out their fieldwork activities.

Table 7: Strategies adopted to overcome socio-cultural challenges

Strategies which overcame socio-cultural challenges	Frequency	Percentage
Learning the local language	17	15%
Guidance from supervisors	15	13%
Support from community leaders	16	14%
Building rapport gradually	14	12%
Teamwork with co-workers	23	20%
Respecting local customs and traditions	30	26%

Total	115	100%
--------------	-----	------

The finding indicates that the most commonly adopted strategy for overcoming the socio-cultural challenges was respecting the local customs and the traditions of the community (26%), which was followed by teamwork with the co-workers (20%). Other respondents mentioned other strategies such as learning the local language (15%), seeking support from the community leaders (14%), obtaining guidance from supervisors (13%), and gradually building rapport with the community members (12%). These study findings highlights that students primarily relied on culturally sensitive practices, collaboration, and institutional support to effectively adapt to the various socio-cultural challenges encountered during fieldwork.

Discussion

The findings of the study show that community fieldwork provided Social Work students with regular opportunities to engage directly with communities, as a majority of the respondents interacted with the community either on a daily basis (43%) or weekly basis (34%). Regular interaction is an essential component of field education as it enables students to connect classroom learning with real life practice and develop professional competencies (Wayne et al., 2010). Although 38% of the respondents reported that cultural differences did not create challenges, a considerable number of respondents either experienced challenges (37%) or encountered them occasionally (25%). Communication difficulties were also common, with 73% of the respondents reporting that they faced difficulties. The major barriers identified were lack of community participation (31%), language barriers (27%), and experiencing hesitation while communicating (21%). These findings highlight that effective field practice requires not only communication skills but also cultural competence and community engagement (Cleak & Wilson, 2019).

The study also found that the respondents found children (32%) and elderly person (20%) to be the most difficult groups to work with during fieldwork. Despite facing such challenges, most of the respondents viewed the community as being cooperative (59%), which indicates a favourable environment for experiential learning. To overcome socio-cultural challenges, Social Work students mainly relied on respecting local customs and traditions (26%), teamwork with co-workers (20%), and learning the local language (15%). Similar observations were made by (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014), who have emphasised that supervision, cultural sensitivity, and collaborative learning strengthen students' professional competence during field education. To summarise, the findings highlight the need for institutions catering to Social Work to strengthen students' preparation for community fieldwork by enabling promotion of cultural competence, effective communication and supportive supervision.

Conclusion

Community fieldwork offers valuable learning experiences that enhance students' cultural competence, communication skills, empathy, and professional adaptability. However, socio-cultural and communication challenges, particularly language barriers and limited community participation, remain significant obstacles. The use of cultural sensitivity, respect for local customs, teamwork, and adaptation strategies demonstrates students' efforts to overcome these challenges. Therefore, Social Work institutions should strengthen fieldwork preparation by promoting cultural competence, communication skills, and effective supervision to enhance students' confidence and effectiveness in community practice

References

1. Cleak, H., & Wilson, J. (2019). *Making the most of field placement* (4th ed.). Cengage Learning.
2. Dildora, M. (2024). Sociocultural conditions of society as a determining factor of ecological culture. *International Journal of Scientific Trends* , 3 (12), 106–111.
3. Grieve, A., Ta, B., & Ross, B. (2023). Placement educators' perspectives of international social work students' sociopragmatic communication skills. *Advances in Health Sciences Education* , 28 (2), 347–368.
4. Kadushin, A., & Harkness, D. (2014). *Supervision in social work* (5th ed.). Columbia University Press.
5. Matthew, E. L., & Lough, B. J. (2016). Challenges Social Work Students Encounter in International Field Placements and Recommendations for Responsible Management. *Journal of Social Work Education* , 53 (1), 18–36.
6. Nasreen, A., & Singh, A. K. (2020). Field work practice in urban slums: Issues and challenges in a megapolis of India. *Social Work & Society International Online Journal* , 18 (2).
7. Volckmar-Eeg, M. G., & Enoksen, E. (2020). Navigating the multifaceted landscape of culture and social work: A qualitative evidence synthesis of cultural competence and cultural sensitivity in practice. *ournal of Comparative Social Work* , 102-126.
8. Wayne, J., Bogo, M., & Raskin, M. (2010). Field education as the signature pedagogy of social work education. *Journal of Social Work Education* , 46 (3), 327-339.