STUDENTS' EVALUATION OF THEIR AGENCY-BASED FIELD INSTRUCTION: Insights and Implications for Future Field Placements

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This paper reviews the University of the Philippines - Department of Social Work (UP-DSW) students' evaluation of their agency-based fieldwork experiences for the period 2006-2008. The review focuses on the three elements of field instruction, namely: the students, the agency, and field supervision. In general, the students rated their first field instruction course positively in terms of their perceived performance. The agencies were also favorably rated, with majority of the students saying that partnerships with these agencies were worth continuing. Likewise, students perceived that supervision provided by the faculty and agency supervisors was adequate. The paper concludes with some points drawn from the review of the students' evaluation that can enhance the effectiveness of the field instruction program.

Introduction

Field instruction is one of the core curricular areas of social work education. It links the demands of developing competencies in the classroom to the preparation of students for actual social work practice. It is meant to broaden the students' understanding of settings and client populations, as well as to expand their understanding of the social work helping process.

The undergraduate field instruction (FI) program of the Department of Social Work, University of the Philippines is composed of two courses: agency-based FI (5 units) and community-based FI (15 units). These two courses are taken up by students during the first and second semesters of their senior years. By the end of the two courses, students must have fulfilled at least 1,000 hours of

supervised field practice, a requirement for taking the social work licensure examinations in the Philippines.

A member of the social work faculty is appointed as coordinator to facilitate the placement of all students and to ensure that their learning needs match the field opportunities available. The FI coordinator conducts a survey of possible agencies in various field settings that could offer learning opportunities for the students.

The pre-placement phase includes an assessment of the students' readiness for fieldwork based on their academic performance and physical fitness, as well as matching preferences with available learning resources. Careful selection of agency settings is a critical activity since this influences the integration of theory and practice in the field, the students' adjustment, and their performance in FI.

This paper reviews the students' evaluation of their agency-based FI from 2006 to 2008. As an exploratory study, it seeks to cull some factors which contribute to the students' performance in fieldwork. It also seeks to generate some lessons which can enhance the effectiveness of the FI program.

Except for the final grades earned by the students, all data presented are from the compiled students' evaluation of their first fieldwork course. While the course is equivalent to only 5 units (compared with the 15-unit community-based FI course), it is seen as critical since it provides the first concrete learning experiences for students to integrate theory with practice and to test their suitability for the social work profession.

The Nature and Characteristics of Agency-based FI

The agency-based field placement aims at developing beginning competencies of students in applying the social work problem-solving process with individuals, families, and other small groups. As a five unit course, students report to their assigned agencies for 20 hours or two and a half days a week.

They are expected to handle a minimum of five individual cases and a group in order to demonstrate the following beginning generalist attitudes and skills:

- beginning competence in establishing meaningful helping relationships with people; engaging his/her clientele in the scientific social work problem-solving process and enabling them to plan and mobilize appropriate resources;
- ability to evolve his/her concept of a just society by understanding how the economic, political and socio-cultural structures affect the social functioning of clients;
- ability to function within a structured setting while at the same time maintaining a critical-analytical and constructive stance about the agency's policies and programs towards more effective service delivery;
- documentary/recording skills, including doing an evaluative write-up/ case study of his/her field experience; and,
- developing identification with the social work profession.

A Conceptual Framework for the Review of the Students' Evaluation

This paper will focus basically on three elements of field instruction: the students, the agency, and field supervision. All of these contribute to the effectiveness of the field instruction. The meaningful presence of each of these elements can make a big difference in the overall outcome of the field instruction program.

First and foremost, field instruction is primarily meant for the students. They are the very reason why field instruction exists. Since social work is a practice profession, it is imperative for students not only to recognize its theoretical underpinnings but also to be competent in their application. Through the field instruction courses, students are given opportunities to apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills that they have developed in the classroom to actual social work practice. Hence, field instruction is viewed as an opportunity for the

students to enhance their learning through actual practice with real life clients ("learning by doing").

Learning by doing, however, does not exist in a vacuum. For the field instruction to materialize, it needs a context or setting, i.e., social welfare agencies as field settings which provide students the context to apply theory to practice.

According to Marasigan (1978), field instruction is usually characterized by its student-centeredness and agency-based qualities. Further, Wilson (1981) states that the selection of appropriate field instructors and agency settings are crucial for the success of any field instruction program. Blake (1985) supports Wilson's points, claiming that practice settings need to be appropriate for undergraduate level training which prepares students for beginning professional practice. Hopkin's study (2005) also reveals that students primarily viewed positive field placements as those providing a good learning environment and learning opportunities in their placement, e.g., developing a particular skill or working with a specific population.

Field supervision as the third element is also crucial. In field instruction, students are still beginning to develop their competencies. Hence it is imperative that they receive supervision. Kerson (1994) underscores the importance of supervision for the students' further learning, as well as for their socialization into the profession. Corlisse & Corlisse (1998) state that "educational supervision in a practicum setting is essential to learning: it is where the being, knowing, thinking and doing parts of becoming a social worker can be explored, developed and enhanced."

Matching a student's learning needs with the appropriate supervisory approach is indicative of effective supervision. As Kadushin (1985) states, it is important for both agency and faculty supervisors to keep in mind the critical functions of supervision and their significant contribution to students' field education and learning; supervisors must be able to balance the three major functions (administrative, educational, and supportive) in order to maximize the

students' learning potential and to prepare them for effective professional practice in the future.

Other authors such as Graff (1975) and Corlisse & Corlisse (1998) share the view that supportive and educational functions are the most important components of supervision. Performing supportive roles is very vital in facilitating the rendition of the other two roles: educative and administrative. When students feel the genuine concern of the supervisors, learning becomes easier and compliance with the administrative requirements of the field instruction program becomes more possible for the students.

For this paper, some factors pertaining to the three elements will be looked into. With regard to the students, the perceived efforts they have exerted in meeting the course requirements and their perceptions of their performance in the field will be considered vis-a-vis their proposed final grades and over-all performance (as gauged by the final grades given by the faculty and agency supervisor after evaluation sessions with the students).
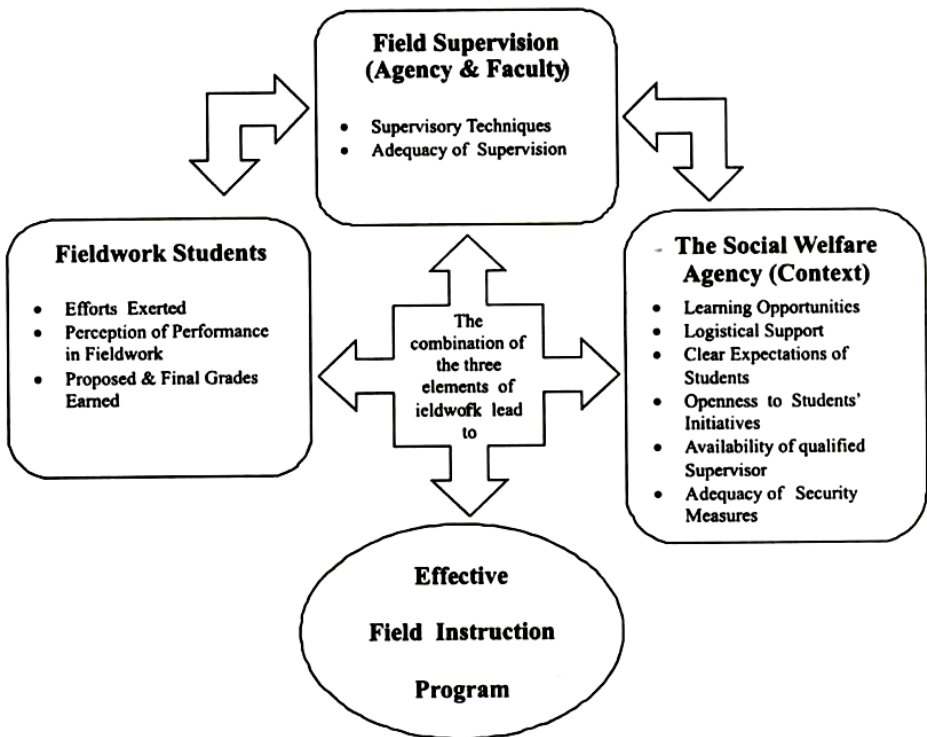
For the field placement agencies, factors included are: capacity of the agency to provide learning experiences; logistical support; clear expectations of students; openness to students' initiatives; and the availability of qualified supervisors and adequate security measures for students. As Marasigan (1978) and Wilson (1981) cite, these factors are some of the criteria in selecting field placement agencies for students.

The adequacy of supervision provided by the faculty and agency supervisors, as perceived by the students, will also be looked into. Likewise, supervisory techniques utilized and the strong points and areas for improvement in general will also be discussed.

The following diagram illustrates the elements which are reviewed in this paper. In an attempt to provide a logically coherent structure to the discussion, factors pertaining to the student, agency and supervisor will be

organized and interpreted vis-a-vis the fields of practice /categories of social welfare agencies: child welfare, health, community service and client specific.
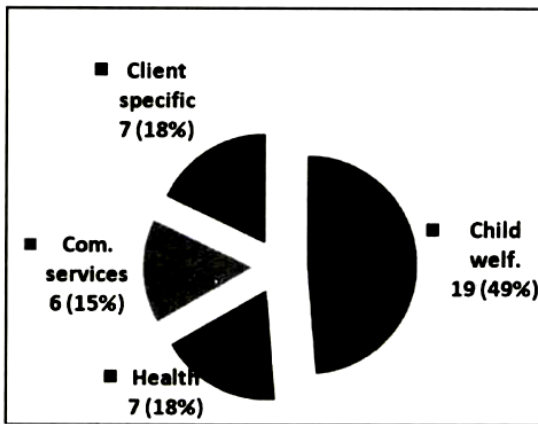
A Conceptual Framework

Field Supervision (Agency & Faculty)
- Supervisory Techniques
- Adequacy of Supervision

Fieldwork Students
- Efforts Exerted
- Perception of Performance in Fieldwork
- Proposed & Final Grades Earned

The combination of the three elements of ieldwofk lead to

The Social Welfare Agency (Context)
- Learning Opportunities
- Logistical Support
- Clear Expectations of Students
- Openness to Students' Initiatives
- Availability of qualified Supervisor
- Adequacy of Security Measures

Effective Field Instruction Program

The Fieldwork Students

Figure 1: Distribution of SW Students by Fields of Practice (n=39)

A total of 39 students enrolled during the three-year period under review. Majority of the students on fieldwork placement were female, which is reflective of the overall students' population of the Department of Social Work. Almost half or 49% were placed in child welfare because of the students' expressed preference to work with children. In assigning students to specific agencies, the matching of students' practice inclination to the available learning opportunities that can be provided by social welfare agencies in developing beginning social work competency was given premium.

The students' performance was objectively measured by the final grades they obtained at the end of their fieldwork. The bases for grading include, but are not limited to: the actual workload in terms of individual clients and groups handled by the students, number of hours earned in field instruction, concrete outputs such as social case studies, case recordings and other documentation; application of social work knowledge; and, demonstration of basic social work competencies such as interviewing, assessing, and documenting. The final grades agreed upon by the agency and the faculty supervisors after evaluation sessions with the students can range from 1 to 5 with the following qualitative equivalents:

UP Grading System		Students' Final Grades	
Grade Points	Qualitative	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
1.0 - 1.25	Excellent	9	23
1.5 - 1.75	Very Good	24	61
2.0 - 2.25	Good	4	10
2.5 - 2.75	Satisfactory	1	3
3.00	Pass	1	3

Table 1: Students' Final Grade (n=39)

Table 1 shows that generally, the students performed well in their FI courses in the past three years, as indicated by their grades. More than two thirds or 84% (n=33) of the students had grades of *excellent* and *very good*. Only two students were at the lower end but still had *satisfactory* to *pass* ratings.

Further inquiry to see whether there were specific settings where the students performed well revealed that of the nine students who got a grade of 1-1.25, six had their fieldwork in agencies catering to specific client groups and adult individuals. While many students preferred to be assigned to child welfare agencies under the belief that dealing with children would be relatively easier, the data suggest that some students can still excel in their fieldwork even when they have to deal with adult clients. It can also be noted that among the students assigned to *community service* agencies, no one obtained a grade of either 1.0 or 1.25. Furthermore, it was also in this field of practice that a student got the lowest grade of 3.0. However the present data may not be sufficient to make any conclusion about placements in this field of practice.
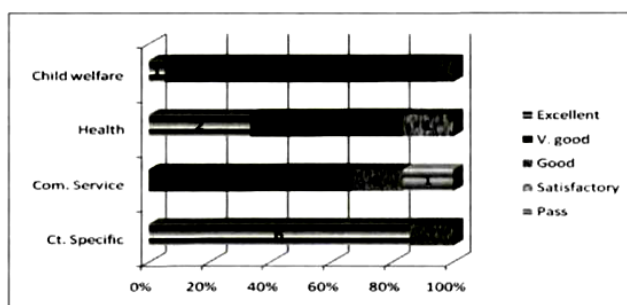

Figure 2: Final Grades of the Students by Fields of Practice

Almost all of students placed in the child welfare setting obtained a grade of 1.5-1.75 or *very good*, with two students getting an *excellent* and *good* rating. This suggests that the perceived level of comfort of the majority of the students in working with a particular client group may be related to their good performance.

The students' responses regarding their efforts to meet the course requirements and perceptions on their performance are shown below:
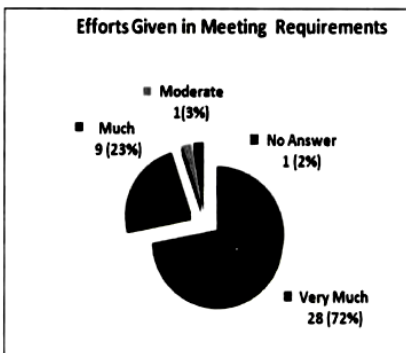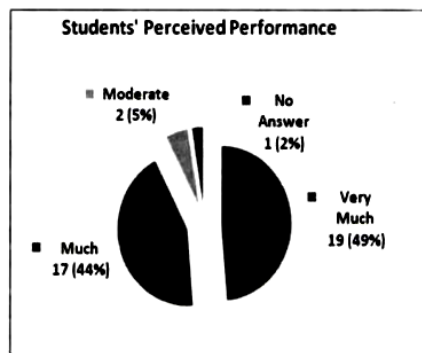

Figure 3: Students' Efforts

Fig 4: Students' Perceived Performance

Although majority or 72 % (n=28) of the students replied that they exerted *very much* in terms of efforts in meeting the requirements, only 49% (n=19) perceived their performance to be *very high*. There was one student who did not answer both items.

The fact that nobody indicated that they exerted *"little effort"* or *"no effort at all"* could indicate that the students took their fieldwork course seriously. As Corlisse (1998) noted, it is necessary for the starting professional to take fieldwork seriously in order to acquire the skills and awareness essential to becoming an effective helper. Furthermore, individuals who disregard the importance of fieldwork will learn less and probably bring this negative attitude into their professional careers later on.

A comparison of the students' self-rating and final grades obtained reveals that 44% (n= 17) gave themselves a rating of excellent or 1-1.25 but only six of them obtained this as their final grade. Of the 15 students who gave themselves a grade of 1.5-1.75, 11 correspondingly got this as their final grade while one got even a higher mark of 1-1.25 and three got grades of 2-2.25. The two students who got relatively lower grades appear to have expected this, with one not even indicating a self-rating.

While there may have been discrepancies regarding the students' perceived performance, their expected grades and their actual grades, the data on the students' efforts in meeting course requirements indicate that the majority perceived that they invested much time and effort in their FI courses.

The Field Placement Agencies

A review of the field placement agencies during the period 2006 -2008 revealed that these partner agencies can be clustered into four fields of practice (Gutierrez,1978; Timberlake et al., 2008), namely:

1) **child welfare**, consisting of child caring institutions for street children, those who are sexually abused, abandoned or neglected, and victims of child trafficking;
2) **health**, including an orthopedic hospital and specialized medical centers;
3) **community services**, consisting of agencies providing educational assistance with values formation as the most common and major component of the programs and services; and,
4. **client-specific**, consisting of agencies for migrant workers and for recovering patients with mental disorders.

Of the 15 UP-DSW partner agencies, six were in child welfare, while the remaining nine agencies were equally distributed among health, community services and client-specific fields of practice. Majority or 10 of these agencies were non-governmental organizations (NGOs) while the remaining five were government organizations.

Students' Appraisal of Field Placement Agencies

The choice of field placement agencies is also critical in the effectiveness of field instruction based on their capacity to provide learning opportunities.
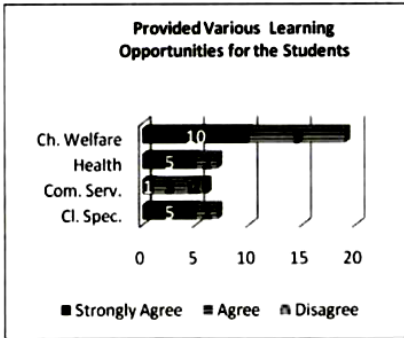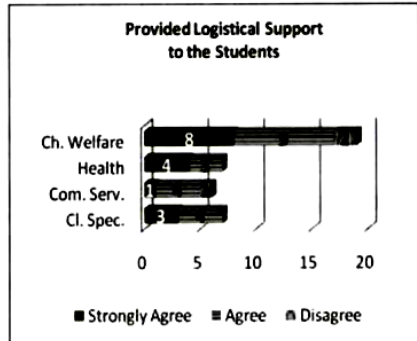

Figure 5: Learning Opportunities

Figure 6: Logistical Support Provided by the Agency

Except for those assigned in *community service* agencies, all the students said they were provided various learning opportunities by their respective agencies. Logistical support was likewise provided by most of the agencies such as reimbursement of expenses for group activities, provision of transportation allowance and meals. The latter appear to support Blake (1985) who stated that an atmosphere conducive for students' learning is one in which students feel that they are given importance, even through the simple provision of a place of their own where they could work.
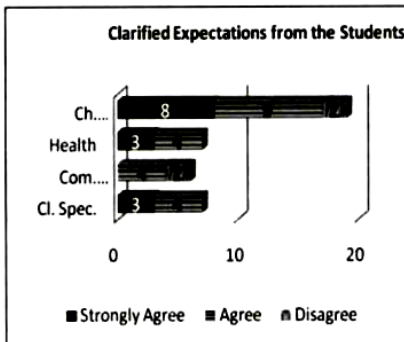

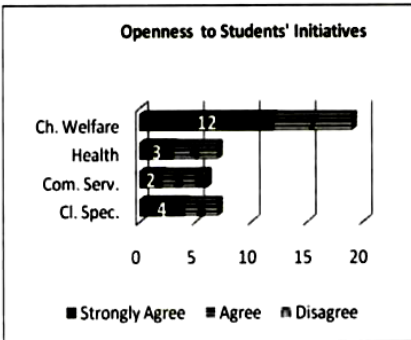**Figure 7: Clarified Expectations from Students**

Figure 8: Agency's Openness to Student's Initiatives

At the start of field placement, one important task is the clarification of expectations of each of the parties involved. This is done during the first "trialogue" among the student, faculty and agency supervisors. A mid-semester "trialogue" is also conducted to discuss issues and concerns which may not have been addressed during the first trialogue or which may have arisen in the course of the placement. Among the field settings, the hospitals were most clear about their expectations from the students while the community service agencies tended to be the least clear.

On the agency's openness to the student's initiatives, Figure 8 shows that among the fieldwork settings, the child welfare agencies were the most open, with 12 students answering *strongly agree* and seven giving a response of *agree*. The students' initiatives range from the use of assessment tools, e.g. ecomap, rapid assessment instruments (RAIs), to the introduction of new intervention techniques which the agency may not yet be using.

Field instruction also provides an opportunity for reciprocal learning for the academe and practice settings. Through the students' supervised practice outputs (e.g. documentation, case presentation, group work program, etc.), the agencies are updated with/ informed of other developments, such as the introduction of new perspectives, approaches and strategies that can assist them in their practice situations. This in a way concretizes and confirms the points raised by Schneck (1995) and Bogo and Vayda (1991) as cited in Lager (2004), that field education has the potential of influencing practice and vice versa.

> "It could be argued that one factor leading to the improve-
> ment of social service delivery is the transfer of new knowl-
> edge and service methods to the service providers, and that
> the interface of field teachers with the professional schools of
> social work is one avenue for such a transfer. Practice experi-
> ence informs the development of new knowledge so the ex-
> change must be mutual" (Lager, 2004, p. 5).

Although learning is a primary concern in field placements, the security of the students while on fieldwork is also an important consideration. When asked whether the agency had adequate security measures for the fieldwork students, there were four students, two assigned to a community service agency and two placed in child welfare settings, who disagreed that security measures were adequate.
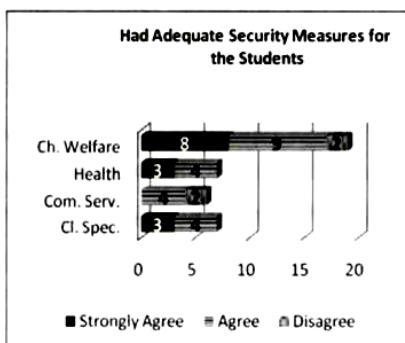

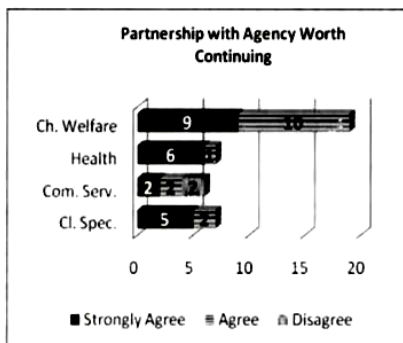**Figure 9: Agency Security Measures for Students**

Figure 10: Consideration of Continuing Partnership

When students were asked if partnership with their respective agencies should be continued, all of them responded favorably for the continuance, except for mixed responses obtained from those placed in community service agencies which were relatively new partner agencies. In general, all of the agencies were rated positively, except for those in the community service field, which consistently had divergent appraisal. The findings affirm the UP-DSW's deliberate effort to carefully select its partner agencies for its Field Instruction Program.

Agency-Faculty Supervisory Partnership in Field Instruction

The quality and quantity of efforts put in by the students into their fieldwork are sustained by the inputs given by both the agency and faculty supervisors. They are also responsible for monitoring students' outputs and

conducting formative and summative performance evaluation. Moreover, the law regulating the practice of social work and the operation of social work agencies (RA 4373) stipulates that students must be supervised by fully trained and qualified social workers. Thus, the availability of a qualified social work supervisor to serve as counterpart to the faculty supervisor is one of the criteria for partner FI agencies.

Figure 11 below shows that all the agencies met the requirement of the social work law of having qualified supervisors. Further, 13 fieldwork students said that the supervision given by the agency supervisor was very adequate while 23 students stated that they were provided with adequate supervision.
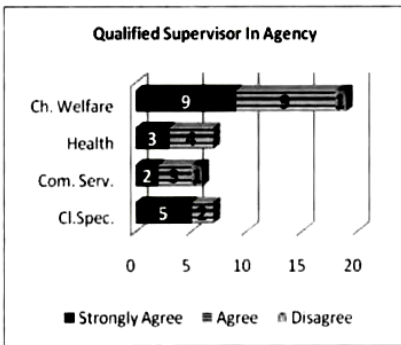

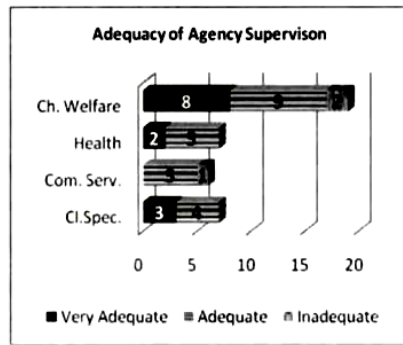**Figure 11: Qualified Supervisors in Agencies**

Figure 12: Adequacy of Agency Supervision

It should be noted that majority of the FI partner agencies have been in operation for quite a number of years and were recognized field placement settings of different schools of social work. As such, training is a built-in function and program component. Since most of them are primary social work settings, their staff is composed predominantly of licensed social workers. Even in a secondary setting like the hospital, the medical social service unit is primarily managed by qualified social workers who have specialized training in this field of practice.

On supervisory techniques, the students stated that the most common and frequently utilized techniques of the agency supervisors were: ocular visits, assessment meetings, one-on-one supervision and group conferences. The strong points of the agency supervisors as perceived by the students were the following:

- knowledge about the agency policies, programs, and services, pertinent social problems and issues, as well as the nature and dynamics of their respective programs, e.g. child welfare, migration, mental health, etc., and familiarity with some theories applicable to their specific target service consumers;
- experience and skills in using assessment and intervention techniques and strategies appropriate to their target service consumers;
- availability for supervision, conferences, case discussions, unscheduled consultations and meetings;
- willingness to share their own experience by promptly providing inputs, directions, guidance, and suggestions when students seek help in managing their workload and at the same time allowing the students to develop their own style; and,
- professional qualities and characteristics, namely: good interpersonal relationships, communication skills and attitudes; being enabling, supportive, understanding, open, and approachable.

These data support the study conducted by Hopkins et al (2005), Fortune and Abramson (1993), as cited by Knight (2001), that student satisfaction with their field supervision is associated with field instructors who are encouraging, who allow active participation of students in the learning process, and who provide educational responses to their students.

On the other hand, students perceived the following as areas of improvement for some agency supervisors:

- time management in setting aside regular time for supervision as they prioritize their work with service consumers and other administrative duties;
- physical presence in terms of on-site visits and attendance in some activities of the students to facilitate their integration in their assigned fieldwork site; and,
- confidence in letting students get involved in organizational processes such as allowing them to take part in administrative meetings and other staff activities.

On faculty supervision in FI, the results of students' appraisal are shown below:
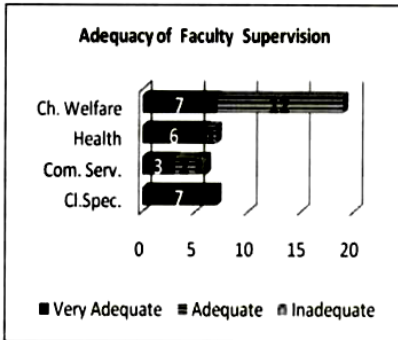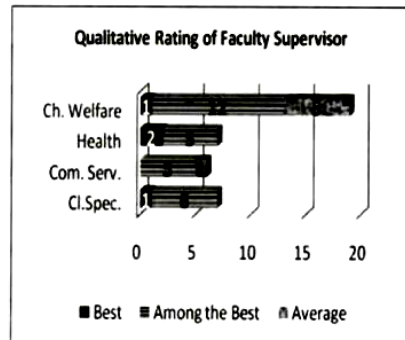
Figure 13: Adequacy of Faculty Supervision

Figure 14: Rating of Faculty Supervisor

It can be seen that 23 of the students think they received *very adequate* supervision from the faculty. These 23 students were supervised by six full-time faculty members who have more than five years of teaching/practice experience. On the other hand, one student who was supervised by a part-time lecturer rated supervision as *inadequate*. In terms of field settings, faculty members assigned in the client specific and child welfare settings were rated more favorably.

All the fieldwork students were asked to check all the supervisory techniques that were applicable to them. Their multiple responses are shown in Table 2.

Supervisory Techniques	Responses	
	f	Percent
✓ 1 on 1 supervisory conference./ consultations	37	94.87
✓ Discussion of student recordings	33	84.61
✓ Assessment meetings	32	82.05
✓ Planned orientation	30	76.92
✓ Group conferences	29	74.35
✓ Lectures	16	41.02
✓ Ocular visits	14	35.89
✓ Special reading meetings	11	28.20
✓ Attendance in agency administration meetings	11	28.20
✓ Role play/modeling	10	25.64
✓ Referrals/linkages	9	23.07
✓ Attendance in other professional organization conferences	7	17.90
Total number of Respondents = 39	239	

Table 2. Supervisory Techniques Used by Faculty Supervisor

From the responses, the most commonly used supervisory techniques were as follows: group conferences, planned orientation, assessment meetings, discussion of student recordings, one-on-one supervisory conferences/ consultations. These correspond to the techniques identified by the students who gave their faculty supervisors *very adequate* ratings.

It can be noted further that techniques utilized by faculty supervisors varied. This is important as fieldwork students have different learning needs and capacities. For instance, group conferences, according to Tsui (2005) are valued for their capacity to provide all the fieldwork students opportunities to learn from others through the sharing of knowledge, hearing different perspectives, and discussing issues both common and unique to each of the fieldwork students. On the other hand, the one-on-one supervisory technique employed by both faculty and agency supervisors is usually complemented by the discussion of student recordings or accounts of their daily activities, including the thoughts, feelings, insights and realizations of the students. In the weekly supervision, the faculty supervisor and students were able to discuss and review process recordings, case histories, case management

plans, and the other issues, including possible solutions to the problems raised by the students. In situations like these, the three functions of supervision were evidently applied.

Strong points of faculty supervisors that had been identified by the students were quite similar to those of the agency supervisors'. However, majority of the responses recognized the ability of the faculty supervisors to relate theory to practice and concretely and deliberately apply their knowledge base to practice situations. Likewise, the supervision experienced by students was described as very informative, constructive, and critical.

Given the findings on the characteristics of agency-faculty supervision, it appears that the two key partners in student fieldwork education complemented each other. On the whole, both the agency and faculty supervisors were rated by the students favorably in terms of their supervisory inputs. As the students noted, agency supervisors focused on actual case management and integration of students into structured social work practice settings while the faculty supervisors substantiated the practice experience by relating them to the knowledge base of social work.

Conclusion and Implications

Based on the review of students' evaluation, the agency-based FI courses for the past three years seem to have positive results, specifically in terms of the overall performance of the fieldwork students, their evaluation of the field placement agencies, and the quality of supervision provided both by the agency and faculty supervisors.

Students appear to exert more efforts and perform well when their interests and preferences are considered in the process of matching them with available agencies. Social welfare agencies as field instruction sites appear to be regarded favorably when they provide various learning opportunities, as well as technical and logistical support, for the students.

Further, the data indicate that supervision plays a key role in the performance of students. Trialogues involving the students, agency supervisors and faculty supervisors at the start of the placement contribute to the setting of expectations; regular supervisory sessions provide venues for enhancing learning and linking theories with practice realities.

Some implications of the findings are the following:

- The practice of matching students' interests and preferences in working with particular client groups needs to be sustained since this appears to be a factor influencing positive fieldwork experiences among the students. In turn, positive fieldwork experiences may also contribute to the students' perception as being fit for the social work profession.

- Assigning students for their first fieldwork in a structured setting, even in a secondary one like the hospital, can also be given prime consideration. Although small in number, the community service agencies appear to be the less effective for the first FI course, perhaps because social work practice within a community setting requires a wider set of expectations and outputs which may be too complex and overwhelming for a beginning fieldwork student.

- The complementation of agency and faculty supervision is also a crucial factor. To ensure adequate supervision, particularly for field students placed with new agency partners, the assignment of full time and experienced faculty members who can enhance the supervision provided by the agencies may need to be considered. Further, the Department of Social Work may need to conduct more consultative workshops/training activities so that agency supervisors can assume more active roles in the supervision of social work students. One activity might be an orientation where agency supervisors could have a common perspective and understanding about fieldwork supervision.

- A common recommendation given by the fieldwork students is that their first FI course should not be offered concurrently with other social work subjects so that they could focus on their fieldwork. This can be

appropriately looked into when the UP-DSW conducts a curriculum review.

On the whole, however, the field instruction program of the UP-DSW can be considered to have positive results from the point of view of one of the major stakeholders of social work education - the students. The challenge is to continue honing the knowledge and skills of future social workers who espouse the values and principles of the profession in their practice.

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