



# Training Social Work Students for Community Social Work Practice in Kerala: An Empirical Analysis

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**Abstract:** *Community social work necessitates a practice that transcends sectors and methodologies, focusing on the utilization of culture-specific and locally relevant knowledge and skills. To accomplish this goal, it is crucial to enhance the training for community social work practice, ensuring that social workers possess the competence and insight required to effectively tackle the distinctive challenges and intricacies of the communities they serve. The education for community social work practice in Kerala has received limited research attention. This article discusses a study conducted to empirically analyse the training imparted to social work students in Kerala for community social work practice employing a convergent parallel mixed method design. It delved into the teaching methodology, field work, skill development and assessment strategies adopted in the social work institutions in Kerala by drawing from the experiences and practices of 81 social work educators and nine experts in the field through a cross-sectional survey and interviews respectively. The study outlined the major elements and factors on which the education for community social work in Kerala depend and contributes to the theoretical and empirical knowledge of social work education by developing the model of training social work students to work with communities in Kerala.*

**Key Words:** *Social work practice, community social work, social work education, social work training, Kerala.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Social work as a practice-based profession (IFSW, 2014) requires a combination of theoretical and practical learning. Both types of learning are important for students to become professional social workers (Papouli, 2014). Social work has gone to a community-focused paradigm, bringing with it exciting opportunities for innovative thinking on how social interventions can fulfill a variety of community social change goals (Hard Castle, Powers, & Wenocur, 2011, as cited in Delgado and Humm- Delgado, 2013). Given the current focus on community practice, social work education should explore ways to enhance and elevate the significance of this integral component within the professional curriculum (Thomas, O'Connor & Netting, 2011). Social workers need to make themselves wanted by making a real difference in their community practice in such a way that the service of social workers is recognized as distinctive and vital for communities. Community social work demands practice irrespective of sectors and methods but with culture specific and local knowledge and skills. In order to achieve this, it is imperative to streamline the training for community social work practice to ensure that social workers are equipped with the competence and understanding necessary to address the unique challenges and dynamics of the communities they serve.

In Kerala, a southern state of India, many social workers are involved in community-based projects and programmes both at government and non-governmental sectors. The extent of impact of professional social work education in Kerala on social change is a debated issue as professional social workers have not been able to make their presence felt in solving burning social issues (Paulose, 2003). Prof. K.V. Ramana (as cited in Nadkarni and Desai, 2012) reflected on the need for social work education to go beyond the limited existing framework, and focusing on indigenization of social work education and practice with respect to the local context. Started in 1954, despite the growth of social work education in Kerala, social work knowledge developed and literature produced are meagre, especially in the case of social work education for and practice with communities. Little is known and researched about education for community social work practice in Kerala. Hence, an effort was taken for an empirical analysis of the training of social work students for community social work practice in the context of Kerala by exploring the practical knowledge and experiences of social work educators, through a convergent parallel mixed method study. The study outlined the



major factors on which the education for community social work depend and sketched the extent of prevalence of those factors in Kerala context. The findings from the quantitative and qualitative analysis were integrated to develop a model of training social work students to work with communities in Kerala. The study enriches the theoretical and empirical knowledge of social work education by contributing to the education for community social work practice emphasising local context.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW:**

Training social work students for community social work practice is a multifaceted process that encompasses teaching methodology, field education and supervision, skill development practices, and assessment.

Collaborative classroom efforts not only create opportunities but also foster the emergence of innovative practices to address contemporary challenges within social contexts (Lynch, Lathouras, & Ford, 2021). Field Education is considered as the signature pedagogy of social work education (Council for Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015). Field education is social work's distinctive pedagogical approach to socializing students to the ways in which social workers think, feel, and act with integrity, in the service of others (Shulman, 2005). Learning through field education depends on the opportunities and supervision. Community social work practice involves applying micro, meso and macro practice skills (Brown & Stalker, 2023) and according to global standards for social work education and training (IFSW, 2020), education programmes must prepare students to have sufficient practice skills. Assessment of student learning outcomes provides evidence that students have demonstrated the level of competence necessary to enter professional practice (Council on Social Work Education, 2022).

Social work scholars and researchers have been examining various aspects of how social work education prepares professionals for effective community engagement. However, the integration of these elements into community social work training varies depending on the diverse contexts and institutions. Hence the study focuses on these components in the context of Kerala to gain insights into the training for community social work practice, shedding light on the region's distinctive practices and contributing to the broader discourse on community social work training through social work education.

## **3. RESEARCH METHOD:**

The study aimed to understand how social work students in Kerala are trained to work with communities by exploring the teaching methodology, nature of field work and assessment, and skill development practices adopted in the institutions of social work education in Kerala. Community social work is defined in the study as a practice dimension of professional social work with communities as the setting and target for interventions in any field or sector of social work practice, embracing all the aspects of intervening in or with communities inclusive of methods of social work. Social work educators in the study are those educators of professional social work courses/programmes in academic institutions offering Master of Social Work degree in Kerala with a minimum of five years' experience. Academicians who have more than 15 years of experience in social work education were considered as experts in the study for qualitative strand. Education for community social work is defined in the study as the teaching and training given for students of professional social work courses/programmes in order to equip them to work with communities. The study observed the education for community social work practice by taking and analysing a cross section of social work educators in Kerala including 81 social work educators selected through disproportionate stratified random sampling and simultaneously, developed an in-depth understanding of the research problem from the experiences of nine experts in social work education selected using purposive sampling method and thus followed Concurrent Procedures or Convergent Parallel Mixed Methods design. The regional classification of Kerala, the field of the study, on the basis of geographical, historical and cultural similarities, into North Kerala, Central Kerala and South Kerala (<https://kerala.gov.in/districts>) was considered as the three strata in the sampling process. The 81 samples were drawn disproportionately from these strata as 11 from North Kerala, 42 from Central Kerala and 28 from South Kerala.

The quantitative data were collected through a cross sectional survey using interview schedule and qualitative data were generated through in-depth interview using interview guide. Statistical analyses of quantitative data were done using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (IBM SPSS Statistics) version 20. Thematic analysis was the key analytical technique applied in the qualitative strand using the software Atlasti versions 6.1 and 8.

## **4. RESULTS:**

### **4.1. Demographic Details of the Respondents**

The basic demographic details of the respondents such as region, age, gender and education were collected to have a basic profile of the respondents. Social work educators from all the three regions of Kerala; namely North Kerala, Central Kerala and South Kerala were included in the study. More than half (51.9 %) were from Central Kerala, very



few (13.6%) from North Kerala and nearly one-third (34.6%) from South Kerala. Regarding the age of the respondents, less than one-third (30.9 %) were in 25 to 35 years, less than half (40.7%) were in the age group of 35 to 45 years, less than one-fourth (23.5%) were in the age group of 45 to 55 years and a meagre per cent (4.9%) were in the age group of 55 to 65 years. Representation of both male and female social work educators was there in the study. More than half (56.5%) were females and less than half (43.2%) were males.

**Table 4.1** *Demographic Details of the Respondents*

<b>Demographic Details</b>			<b>n(%)</b>
<b>Region</b>			
North Kerala			11 (13.6)
Central Kerala			42 (51.9)
South Kerala			28 (34.6)
<b>Age</b>			
25 - 35 Years			25 (30.9)
35 - 45 Years			33 (40.7)
45 - 55 Years			19 (23.5)
55 - 65 Years			4 (4.9)
<b>Gender</b>			
Male			35 (43.2)
Female			46 (56.5)
<b>Education</b>			
UG in Social Work			4 (3.2)
Masters in Social Work			81 (100)
M.Phil.			
In Social Work			26 (32.1)
In Other Disciplines			3 (3.7)
Not Applicable			52 (64.2)
Ph.D.			
In Social Work			25 (30.9)
In Other Disciplines			6 (7.4)
Not Applicable			50 (61.7)
<b>Experience</b>	<b>As Social Work Educator</b>	<b>As Practitioner in the Field</b>	<b>Working with Communities</b>
0-5 Years	0 (0)	57 (70.4)	62 (76.5)
5-10 Years	52 (64.2)	14 (17.3)	7 (8.6)
10-15 Years	18 (22.2)	7 (8.6)	7 (8.6)
15-20 Years	6 (7.4)	0 (0)	2 (2.5)
20-25 Years	5 (6.2)	1 (1.2)	3 (3.7)
25-30 Years	0 (0)	2 (2.5)	0 (0)
<b>Total</b>			<b>81 (100)</b>

Regarding education, less than one-third (32.1%) have MPhil in Social Work and a meagre per cent (3.7%) have MPhil in other disciplines. Less than one-third of social work educators (30.9%) have PhD in Social Work and a meagre per cent (7.4%) have PhD in other disciplines.

Among the respondents, a significant per cent (64.2%) had experience between five to 10 years, less than one-fourth (22.2%) had 10 to 15 years of experience and meagre percentages had 15 to 20 years (7.4%) and 20 to 25 years (6.2%) of experience in social work education. Significant per cent of social work educators (70.4%) had practice experience less than five years, very few (17.3%) had practice experience between five to 10 years, and meagre percentages had 10 to 15 years (8.6%), 20 to 25 years (1.2%) and 25 to 30 years (2.5%) of practice experiences. More than three-fourth (76.5%) of social work educators had less than five years' experience in working with communities. More than half (55.6%) had five to 10 years' experience and more than one-fourth (25.3%) had 10 to 15 years' experience in working with communities.



## 4.2. Training for Community Social Work Practice

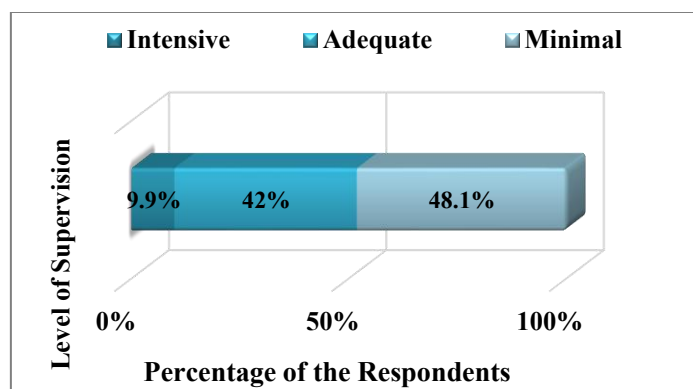
**Method of teaching:** More than three-fourth (80.2%) of the social work educators often adopted lecturing as a method for teaching community-related components and a significant percentage (64.2%) regularly used IEC (Information, Education and Communication) materials for teaching.

**Providing field work opportunities:** More than half of social work educators (51.9%) used to offer community-based field work opportunities for first semester students. Significant percentages of them used to provide opportunities for both institution and community-based field work for third (65.4%) and fourth (63%) semester students, while more than half of them (53.1%) used to consider it for the second semester students.

**Field work supervision:** Students' work with communities during field work has been supervised weekly by the faculties mainly through individual and group conferences. Less than half of social work educators practice adequate (42%) or minimal (48.1%) supervision of students' work with communities, but only meagre percentage (9.9%) of them practice intensive supervision.

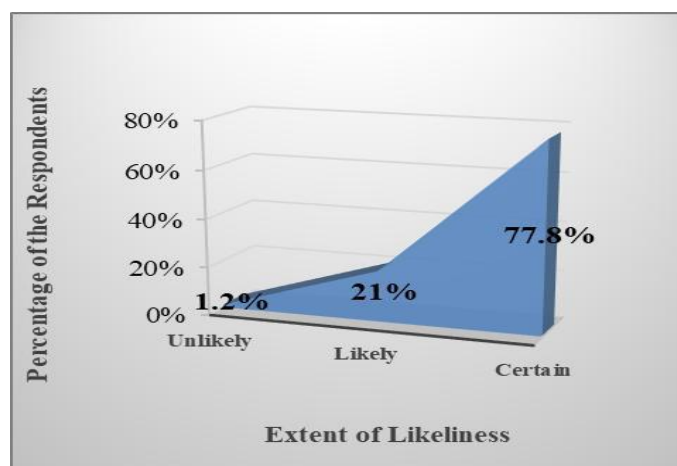
This implies that required level of supervision of students' work with communities in field work so as to equip them to practice community social work is not always happening in social work education. As Subhedar (2001) indicated, without a specific practical syllabi based on theory, students are placed in community settings.

**Figure 4.1** Level of Supervision of Students' Work with Communities



**Skill assessment:** Field work activities have been used as a criterion for assessing students' community work skills to a great extent by majority (82.7%) of social work educators while skill assessment tests/activities have been used by more than half (59.3%) of them. Likelihood of assessing community work skills of students was certain for more than three-fourth (77.8 %) of social work educators. The assessment of community work of social work students is carried out through evaluation of students' activity reports, mid-term reviews through field visits, evaluation by field work agencies, common evaluation by faculties etc.

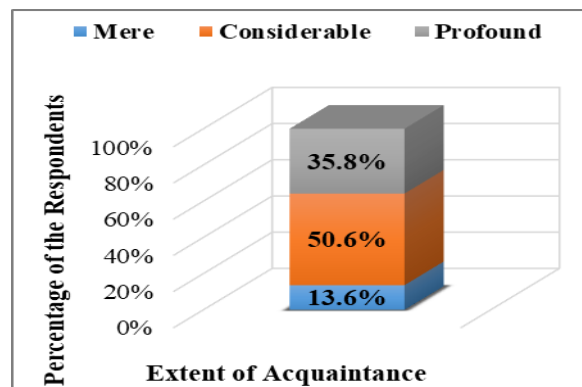
**Figure 4.2** Likelihood of Assessing Community Work Skills of Students





**Providing acquaintance with community activities:** More than half (50.6%) of social work educators used to provide considerable acquaintance, more than one-third (35.8%) used to provide profound acquaintance and very few (13.6%) of them used to provide mere acquaintance with activities in communities for their students. A significant percentage (70.4%) of social work educators used to acquaint students regularly with lectures or awareness classes in communities; more than half of them regularly acquainted students with extension activities (55.6%) and occasionally with projects of government or NGOs (51.9%).

**Figure 4.3** *Acquaintance of Students with Activities in Communities*



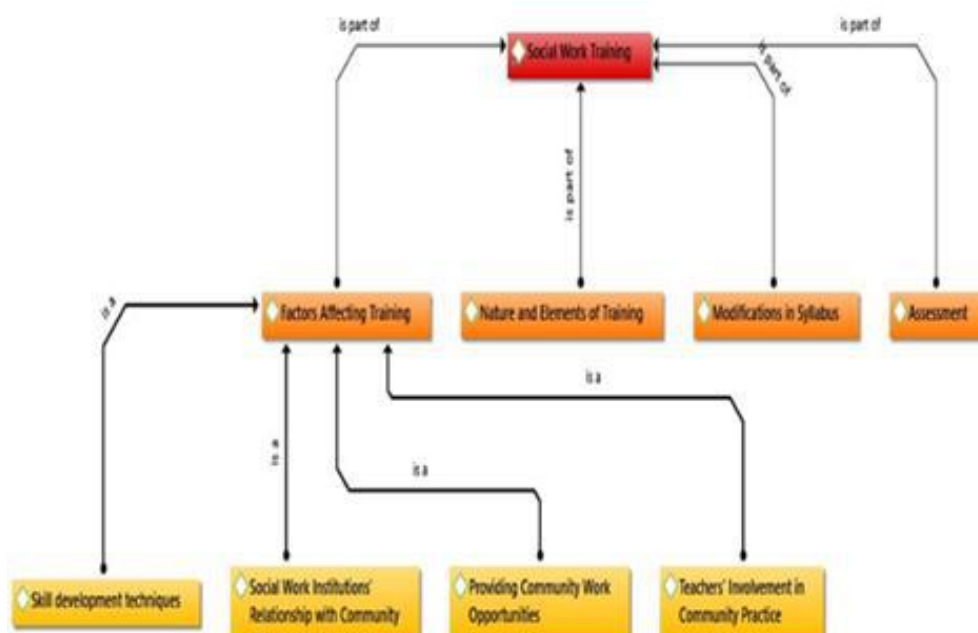
These indicate that social work students are acquainted with different types of activities in communities with slight variations in frequency and extent, most probably to a considerable or profound extent of acquaintance.

#### 4.3. Different aspects and factors of Training

Nature and elements of training, factors affecting training, assessment and modifications in syllabus, skill development techniques, social work institutions' relationship with community, providing community work opportunities and teachers' involvement in community practice together explained the theme 'social work training'.

There are many factors which affect the community orientation in social work training. These include teaching, teachers, academic institution, students, field work agency, agency supervisor, professional body, work load of teachers, alumni of social work institutions etc. It can be understood that community orientation of the curriculum and community-oriented practical components contribute to the training to practice community social work.

**Figure 4.4** *Different Aspects of Social Work Training*







A code co-occurrence analysis was done to reveal the associations between the codes under the category social work training. The co-occurrence count indicates the number of associations and the coefficient indicates the intensity of associations. Nature and elements of social work training showed co-occurrence with skill development techniques indicating that community-related components in social work training process help developing community work skills among social work students.

#### 4. 4. Relationship between different components and aspects of training

Supervision of students' work with communities during field work, assessment of community work skills of students, acquainting students with activities in communities were considered as the major variables in the training given to social work students to work with communities and calculated by taking the sum of their sub variables. Supervision of students' work with communities during field work by the respondents has no significant correlation with assessment of community work skills of students and acquainting students with activities in communities. But, acquainting students with activities in communities has a significant moderate positive correlation with assessment of community work skills of students at  $r = .307$ ,  $p < .01$ . Hence, it can be concluded that those social work educators who acquaint students more with activities in communities more likely assess community work skills of their students.

**Table 4. 2** *Correlation between Different Components of Training Given for Social Work Students to Work with Communities*

		Supervision of Students' Work with Communities during Field Work	Assessment of Community Work Skills of Students	Acquaintin g Students with Activities in Communiti es
Supervision of Students' Work with Communities during Field Work	Pearson Correlation	1	.086	.170
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.447	.130
	N	81	81	81
Assessment of Community Work Skills of Students	Pearson Correlation	.086	1	.307**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.447		.005
	N	81	81	81
Acquainting Students with Activities in Communities	Pearson Correlation	.170	.307**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.130	.005	
	N	81	81	81

\*\*. Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

The number of courses focused on working with communities handled by the respondents showed no significant correlation with assessment of community work skills of students and acquainting students with activities in communities but showed a significant moderate negative correlation with supervision of students' work with communities during field work at  $r = -.307$ ,  $p < .01$ . This indicate that when social work educators handle more number of courses focused on working with communities, less supervision of students' work with communities during field work is occurring.

Similarly, the number of field work days showed no significant correlation with the components of training given for social work students to work with communities except the significant weak negative correlation of the number of field work days in third and fourth semesters with supervision of students' work with communities during field work at  $p < .05$ . The data regarding field work days in different semesters specify that the number of field work days in third and fourth semesters is higher than the number of field work days in first and second semesters. Hence, it can be understood



that as the number of fieldwork days increases, supervision of students' work with communities during field work decreases.

**Table 4.3** Correlation between Different Aspects and Components of Training Given for Social Work Students to Work with Communities

		Supervision of Students' Work with Communities during Field Work	Assessment of Community Work Skills of Students	Acquainting Students with Activities in Communities
Number of Courses Focused on Working with Community Hurdled by the Respondents	Pearson Correlation	-.307**	-.042	-.111
	Sig (2-tailed)	.005	.712	.322
	N	81	81	81
Number of Field Work Days in Semester I	Pearson Correlation	.079	.112	.179
	Sig (2-tailed)	.482	.321	.110
	N	81	81	81
Number of Field Work Days in Semester II	Pearson Correlation	-.144	.142	.178
	Sig (2-tailed)	.199	.207	.111
	N	81	81	81
Number of Field Work Days in Semester III	Pearson Correlation	-.232*	.207	.205
	Sig (2-tailed)	.037	.068	.066
	N	81	81	81
Number of Field Work Days in Semester IV	Pearson Correlation	-.248*	-.067	.200
	Sig (2-tailed)	.029	.553	.074
	N	81	81	81
Number of Students per Field in Semester I	Pearson Correlation	-.046	.101	.181
	Sig (2-tailed)	.688	.370	.105
	N	81	81	81
Number of Students per Field in Semester II	Pearson Correlation	-.182	.100	.227*
	Sig (2-tailed)	.104	.377	.042
	N	81	81	81
Number of Students per Field in Semester III	Pearson Correlation	-.001	.144	.291**
	Sig (2-tailed)	.994	.200	.008
	N	81	81	81
Number of Students per Field in Semester IV	Pearson Correlation	-.065	.125	.273*
	Sig (2-tailed)	.565	.265	.014
	N	81	81	81
Issues in Field Training for Community Social Work	Pearson Correlation	-.060	-.283*	-.303**
	Sig (2-tailed)	.660	.010	.006
	N	81	81	81

\*. Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

\*\*. Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).



The number of students per field was not significantly correlated with supervision of students' work with communities during field work and assessment of community work skills of students. However, the number of students per field in second, third and fourth semesters were significantly positively weakly correlated with acquainting students with activities in communities at  $r = .227, p < .05$ ;  $r = .291, p < .01$  and  $r = .273, p < .05$  respectively. As per the data regarding the number of students per field in different semesters, the variations are higher in third semester than in second and fourth semesters. From these, it can be concluded that when the variation in number of students per field is higher, its correlation with acquainting students with activities in communities is more significant. That means, when the variation in the number of students per field is higher, the chances for acquainting them with activities in communities is also higher.

## **5. DISCUSSION:**

In social work training in Kerala, the curriculum has community orientation starting from the higher secondary level itself and practical component is a mandatory element along with the theory courses. At the higher secondary level, social work training includes basic ideas of social work methods and community development as theory courses and field trip, case study, mini research and action project as practical components. At the undergraduate level, mainly there is field work/placement and depending on the institution, community camps and skill development courses are provided. At the post graduate level, community placement as part of field work, rural/community camp, community visits and study tour are there along with different community related courses. Field work provides much opportunities for the students to work with different types of communities. Training for community social work practice has ample scope in Kerala. Basically, social work training has community orientation than any other academic discipline. Field work in social work education provides much opportunities for the students to work with different types of communities. There are many factors which affect the community orientation in social work training: teaching, teachers, academic institution, students, field work agency, agency supervisor, professional body, work load of teachers, alumni of social work institutions etc. Those institutions which excel in social work training provide the students with variety of opportunities to learn and experience community social work, adopt different techniques to develop community work skills of the students, assess such skills through different tools, revise and update curriculum as per the changing development and social scenario emphasizing community work in social work education. Thus develop a good attitude, confidence and commitment in students towards community social work.

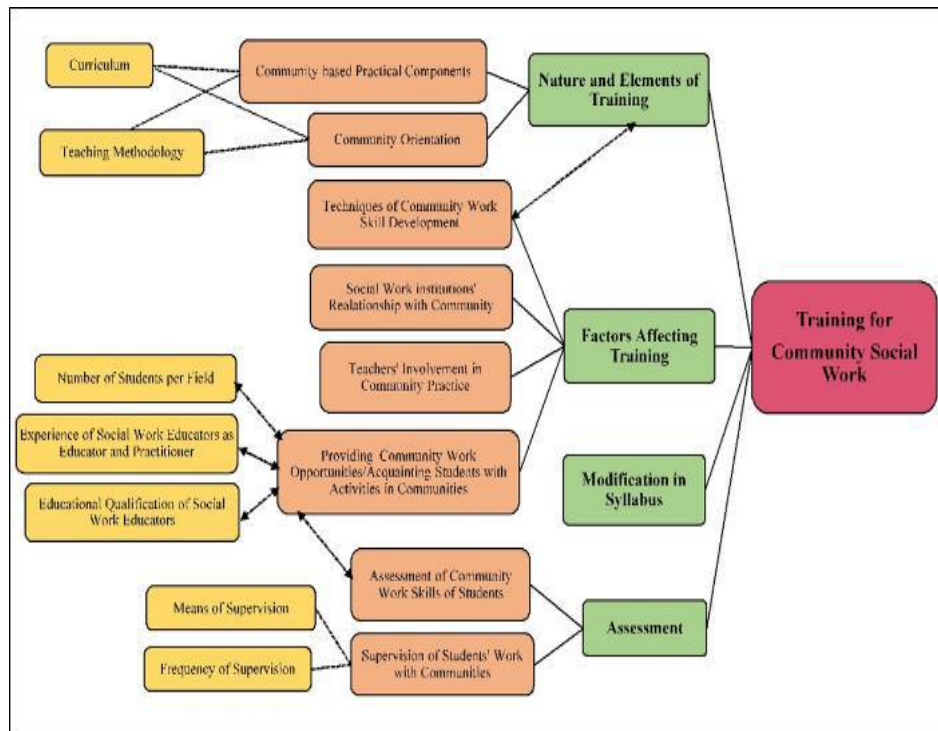
Social work training to work with communities can be explained through factors affecting training which again described through skill development techniques, social work institutions' relationship with community, providing community work opportunities and teachers' involvement in community practice; nature and elements of training; assessment; and modifications in training. Among the different components of social work training to work with communities, assessment of community work skills of students is influenced by acquainting students with activities in communities and issues in field training for community social work. Acquainting students with activities in communities is related with the educational qualification and experience of social work educators, and the number of students per field in field work; and affected by issues in field training for community social work. Supervision of students' work with communities during field work relates with number of courses focussed on community handled by social work educators and the number of field work days. Community orientation of social work curriculum and community-oriented practical components in the syllabus contribute to community social work training. Community skill development techniques adopted, social work institutions' relationship with community, community work opportunities provided, community orientation of field work agencies and field or agency supervisors, teaching methodology adopted for community-focussed courses and teachers' involvement in community practice are the major factors which influence training for community social work. Social work educators enable social work students to work with communities by teaching community-related courses in the curriculum, mainly through lecturing and using IEC materials; and acquainting students regularly with lectures or awareness classes in communities and extension activities. They provide community-based field work opportunities in all the semesters, supervise students' work with communities during field work weekly mainly through individual and group conferences and majority of them assess students' community work skills to a great extent through field work activities.

## **The Model of Training Social Work Students for Community Social Work Practice in Kerala**

The findings from qualitative and quantitative analysis were integrated to develop a model of training for community social work. The model depicts different aspects of training for community social work practice and the major factors on which these aspects are depended.



**Figure 5.1** *The Model of Training for Community Social Work Practice in Kerala*



### Practical Implications

The practical implications of the findings of the study are:

- The classroom-based teaching-learning process need to be transformed. Social work educators should transition to the role of facilitators who take social work students to villages or communities where they are provided with community work opportunities and field based or action-based assignments to prepare themselves.
- Social work institutions can take up community-based projects of social welfare department to which the social work students can be acquainted to understand down to earth reality and to get exposure to different field situations. Ensuring follow-up is essential for sustainable outcomes and maintaining continuous community relationship.
- Field work has to be utilized to learn from communities. Target-oriented community field work opportunities are to be given for social work students under proper guidance and monitoring of teachers and agency/field supervisors on a weekly basis. Field work supervision needs to be streamlined by integrating technology to have a digital platform like video conferencing including teachers, agency supervisors and students to combat the time and distance issues in fieldwork supervision.
- Social work educators, practitioners and students are to be trained and equipped to take efforts to speak and write in social work language as an academic discipline; specially to convert their practice with communities as academic literatures, to bring theories into local contexts of practice and to document best practices to incorporate into social work education.
- The curriculum needs timely revision to accommodate changing social scenarios and community contexts. Community-related practical components are to be specifically outlined to improve the quality of training given to equip students for community social work practice. More focus needs be given to community study tools, community work skill trainings and practical community-based research experiences along with deep theoretical knowledge regarding communities and community practice.
- A professional body has to monitor social work education to ensure that it is happening through qualified and skilled educators with a minimum practice experience in the field.

### 6. CONCLUSION:

The study explored social work training provided to work with communities to understand how education for community social work is happening in the South Indian state of Kerala. The findings revealed that community social work training depends on the community orientation of social work curriculum, educators, institutions, teaching



methodology, field work agencies, agency supervisors and the students; community oriented practical components in the syllabus and community work opportunities provided; supervision of these practical elements and assessment of community work skills development; and involvement social work institutions and social work educators in community practice. Combining the findings from qualitative and quantitative strands of the study, a model of training social work students for community social work practice was developed enhancing the body of knowledge in the field of social work education. The study did not include the students' perspective of training for community social work practice as social work students were not involved as the participants in the study. The study faced the dearth of indigenous literatures related to community social work, hence recommend for training social work educators, practitioners and students to transform their practice with communities as academic literatures, to bring theories into local contexts of practice and to document best practices to incorporate into social work education. Training for community social work provided by different social work educational institutions can be studied in depth to refine the developed model of education for community social work practice in Kerala and can be replicated in the other states of India to have a comprehensive indigenous model of training for community social work practice through social work education in India

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