

**REINVENTING FIELDWORK PLACEMENT IN SOCIAL CARE
EDUCATION IN THE COVID 19 ERA: A NECESSITY TOWARDS
BLENDING THEORY WITH PRACTICE**

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ABSTRACT

Within the space of human existence, Aristotle (384BC-322BC) argued that two types of changes may occur which are essential change and accidental change. While essential change is often anticipated and could be largely managed, accidental change is often unexpected and could be disruptive. The advent of the Covid 19 pandemic which the world began to battle in 2019 represents a form of accidental change that has led to many other changes ranging from education, banking, health care, and social interactions among others. Despite the contactless policy which was informed by the reality of the Covid 19 pandemic, the role of social care practitioners still places on them a physical or contact-oriented responsibility of ensuring the well-being of members of the societies in which they work and practice. On the account of the foregoing challenge in the social care practice, this paper suggests the introduction or reintroduction of fieldwork placement into the curriculum of social care and social work education. This paper also suggests the exposure of social care/work trainees to technological tools through which care giving duties may still be discharged if an absolute contactless policy must be maintained. This paper concludes with suggestions and recommendations for fieldwork practice among social care/work trainees and professionals.

Keywords: Social Care Education, Fieldwork Placement, Technological Aids, Social Care Trainees/Students, Care Professionals.

1. Introduction

The orientation of social work and the social care profession in most practice contexts has been based on interactions between social care professionals and their clients. Most of the curriculum in social care and social work training has been tailored towards this direction in order to ensure the proper delivery of the needs of the profession. At the dawn of the year 2019, the dimension of practice in most professions received a variation from what has been in existence. The intervention of the pandemic of Covid 19 is an accidental change the world is still trying to fully adjust to. Due to the advent of Covid 19, the practice of many professions either fully or partially changed or is changing. For instance, many practices e.g. education, health care, banking, etcetera, have to move from the conventional practices of face-to-face to virtual/online practice. Social Care and Social Work professions are not exempted from the wave of this change. Within the space of human existence, Aristotle argued that two types of changes may occur which are essential change and accidental change. While essential change is often anticipated and could be largely managed, accidental change is often unexpected and could be disruptive. The advent of the Covid 19 pandemic which the world began to battle from 2019 represents a form of accidental change that has led to many other changes ranging from education, banking, health care, and social interactions among others. Despite the contactless policy which was informed by the reality of the Covid 19 pandemic, the role of social care practitioners still places on them a physical or contact-oriented responsibility of ensuring the well-being of the members of the societies in which they work and practice.

In line with the ongoing, it must be emphasized here that, the importance of fieldwork practice or placement in social care and social work training cannot be overemphasized. According to Morris et al (2020), fieldwork placement or practice has been part of social work/care training for many decades. The purpose of making this important practice part of the educational training of social care and social work is based on the orientation of the profession. The purpose of the social care/work profession is to help people to help themselves. This orientational value of the profession makes it essentially necessary to maintain contact with their clients. In the work of Pink et al (2021), many aspects of social care and social work practices are changing significantly due to the advent of the Covid 19 pandemic. According to this scholar, social care/welfare officer working in the area of child protection needed to move from conventional practices to the alternative available as physical contact and home visit poses threat to both the care officers and the people they are trying to protect. According to Pink et al (2021), current policies as regards social work/care professions may not have realized the importance of digital or technological tools in discharging social care responsibilities but this must be inculcated as a

matter of urgency into social care and social welfare practices. Putting to test the usefulness of technological tools in the social care services must begin with the training of social care and social work students (trainees). The use of technological tools must be inculcated into their training for better future practice if the professionals trained in this field are to remain relevant.

On the basis of the foregoing argument, this paper aims to look at the importance of fieldwork practices in the training or education of social care or social work students or trainees. This paper aims to look at the conjecture between social care training, fieldwork practices, and the use of technological tools as a necessity in discharging social care duties in the era of the Covid 19 pandemic. Harnessing the use of technological tools in discharging care duties has become a necessity as the world may have the need to do so as because both expected and accidental changes may become part of the global experiences.

The next phase in this paper shall attempt to make certain clarifications to some key concepts in this paper. To this clarification, we shall now turn.

1.1 Operational Definitions

1.1.1 Fieldwork Placement:

This concept may also be interchangeably used as fieldwork practice. It is the process through which trainees or students are allocated to certain work centers where their theoretical knowledge can be put to work. Fieldwork practice is a method of exposure through which theoretical or abstract understanding of a scientific discipline can be checked for validity. Through the process of fieldwork placement, scientific principles taught in classes can receive appreciation or be queried where necessary. Fieldwork practice allows students to go through practical experiences of what they have been taught in the class and make them relevant to their social environment. According to Demehin (2022a), the relevance of any social phenomenon is to the extent they impact and are impacted by their environment of operation. Fieldwork practice is a form of institutional attachment for the purpose of practical training and career experience.

1.1.2 Social Care Education:

Education is a process that entails training and developing people for the purpose of becoming better individuals, and contributing to the good of society. This is done through the passage of information, certification, and assessment. Education is the process of informing the 'uninformed'. What is Social Care Education? It is a specialized education with a focus on training social care professionals who are well-informed and equipped for modern-day social

care practices. Through this specialized form of education, students are educated on what is expected of them as social care practitioners.

1.1.3 Social Care Trainees:

These are individuals who have chosen the social care profession as their future career path, and who are going through specialized training/education with the focus of becoming social care professionals. The form of training/education the social care trainees are exposed to includes coursework, individual and group presentation/assignment, and other types of assessments as may be deemed fit by their institutions of learning. The purpose of the training social care trainees are given, is to make them better social care practitioners. The knowledge they get through social care training/education will distinguish them from other social care practitioners who may not be specially trained for social care practice.

1.1.4 Technological Tools:

In the face of contactless policy and the challenge of Covid 19, the use of technology has become paramount in social care/social work education. For this reason, this paper shall turn to define technological tools and their uses in social work/social care practices. These are tools or instruments that can be electronic, physical as well as media tools, which can aid human beings in performing a task or carrying out a significant activity. There are various types of technological tools. For instance phones, video machines, recorders etcetera are all examples of technological tools. These tools and many others can be used to discharge social care/work duties.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Fieldwork Placement and Report: Importance and Components

In the work of Tippa and Mane (2018), the importance of fieldwork placement cannot be overemphasized. To these scholars, fieldwork placement is an important part of social care/work education, and irrespective of the situation around, this practice should be maintained. The argument on the vitality of fieldwork practice as an important component of social care training has also been demonstrated by Hepworth, Rooney, and Larsen (2002). Going by their views, the practice of placing students on fieldwork allows professionalism among the students as they are able to combine theory with practice. Fieldwork placement can be termed as the simple process of social care socialization, as care providers learn new things as they are placed in practice institutions (Kaseke, 1986). According to Ajibo, Mbah, and Anazonwu (2017), exposing social

care trainees to fieldwork practice will give them double advantages of theories and experiences. Based on this view, it is believed that most theories are built out of practice or practical experiences. Practical experiences can help students to validate theories taught in classes. Apart from helping the students of social care know the practical sides of the theories they have been exposed to, engaging in fieldwork practices also helps social care/work trainees have critical minds, which can help them later as they advance in their studies in order to come up with sound theories that are built out of practical experiences (Ajibo, Mbah, and Anazonwu, 2017). Through practical experiences gotten from the field as social care trainees, students are able to develop the wisdom to excel in the modern practice of social care (Teater, 2010). Training social caregivers without exposing them to the practical sides of social care education will make them vulnerable (Ajibo, Mbah, and Anazonwu, 2017). In practical terms, there have been cases where caregivers who were not properly trained in the care given professions exposed themselves to risks while working. In social care education, students are taught their boundaries of operations and the limits of their operations. This knowledge of boundaries and limits of operation both protect the rights of the care clients and social caregivers/professionals.

Classroom teaching and fieldwork placement are two sides of the same coin (Demehin, 2006). While the classroom teachings give social care students a broader view of the world, fieldwork placement helps them to know what is obtainable in their countries or communities of practice. No teacher can cover all aspects of a knowledge area in a particular profession. This makes fieldwork placement not only a necessity but an important aspect of social care training. By the virtue of the relationships between social care students in fieldwork centers and their supervisors within the institutions of their placements, students will be able to develop a better system of professional practices before their graduation from social care training/programme (Demehin, 2006). According to Ajibo, Mbah, and Anazonwu (2017), in the course of fieldwork placements, students work in various institutions. This will also help them to build a database of experiences. For instance, a student who may later work in a psychiatric center, but who was placed in a hospital setting while studying as a fieldwork student, will do better than a graduate without such fieldwork experience. Looking at the relevance of fieldwork in relation to academic advancement, an important aspect of fieldwork placement is that students learn to develop quality reports at the end of the term of their fieldwork practices. Being exposed to standard guidelines or formats for writing reports will do the students and their institution of learning a lot of good. For instance, through this report writing, many of the students would have known the style of writing academically. This will help them in their final year to come up with a better report standard compare to students that are not exposed to such a system of academic reports. While this system of report writing before the final year will help students on one side, it will

also help lecturers and the institutions of learning as a whole on the other hand. Many lecturers who supervised final year students in their projects/thesis face challenges as many of the students may not understand the process or format to follow in order to produce a good academic project. Early exposure to fieldwork report writing will bring ease to this academic quagmire (Demehin, 2006).

For students going for fieldwork placements, certain principles serve as guides to their actions and operations while on the field. These principles are also expected to be logically visible in their reports after their terms as fieldwork students in the care homes or institutions. Ajibo, Mbah, and Anazonwu (2017) make these principles visible in their joint work. According to these scholars, fieldwork practice/report must be guided by the following principles:

- **Purpose of fieldwork placement:** The report of the fieldwork must make visible the reason for the placement. Why was the student sent to the care institution? The mission and the intention of the student in the placement center must be stated in the report. For instance, if a student is sent to an agency, his/her report must show the specialization of the agency, and what his/her role was while in the placement.
- **Observation:** The student must be able to report his/her observations without exposing the identity of any subject as this may cause a data breach. A systematic report of fieldwork encounters is an important part of a fieldwork report.
- **Content:** Events or occurrences between a fieldwork student and his client constitute part of the content. In practice, there is usually a record for cases or happenings in the course of duty. This is to protect both the agency, the care professionals, and the clients. You may also develop a report sheet where both the client and the care professional report and sign in agreement on their activities and experiences with each other daily.
- **Impression:** This is the expressive view of students or social care professionals. Through this expression principle, the students in fieldwork placement have the liberty or freedom to state their feelings and general expectations with regard to social care practices in a particular institution or the overall intervention process of a specific social care practice (Ajibo, Mbah, and Anazonwu, 2017).
- **Worker's Role/Advancement:** At this point, the social care student in his/her report is to bring into cognizance skills, methods or techniques learned in the course of fieldwork placement. They are also to report styles adopted in order to deal with any case given in the course of their fieldwork placements.

- **The Next Plan of Action:** Based on what they have learned and experienced, the students are to state in their reports how they intend to use this knowledge and experience to bring better practices into social care professions.

For the purpose of clarity, the format for the development of a proper fieldwork report should have the following components:

- Abstract
- Introduction
- Historical Review of the place of practice
- Scope of duty (student's responsibilities in the institution/home)
- Literature Review
- Methods of Study
- Discussions of findings
- Recommendation and Conclusion

2.2. Fieldwork Placement, Social Care Education, and Technological Tools:

The Interconnectivity of the Trio in Successfully Building Respected Future Care Professionals

Analyzing the connectivity among the trio of fieldwork placement, social education, and technological tools for the purpose of ensuring a reliable modern social care practice, Hamblin (2020) opined that until recently, the importance of technological tools was not emphasized in the social care profession. This really pushes back the use of technological tools in resolving social care problems. Within the last decade, the use of technologies started gaining entrance into the social care and social work profession (LGA, 2016, and Mishnal et al, 2012). According to Pascoe (2021), the introduction of the use of information technology tools has a lot of benefits to the social care profession. But despite the benefits, policies must be put in place to ensure the safety of both the social care users and social care professionals. While the use of technological tools must be encouraged in social care training/practice, the guiding principles of social care and social work practices must be taken into consideration. For instance, the issue of privacy, informed consent, confidentiality etcetera must be recognized. Pascoe (2021) appreciates the introduction of technological tools into the social care training as this will make the profession continue to be relevant. But despite this view, there must be a guiding policy as regards the use of technologies in discharging social care duties in order not to have the challenge of a data breach (Pascoe, 2021). The use of technological tools has made a tremendous impact in the

social care practice (LGA, 2016). Through technological tools, many aged people, families, and communities have continued to connect to their loved ones thereby removing or dealing with the challenge of isolation and distance barriers (Hamblin, 2020; LGA, 2016, and Pascoe, 2021). The diagram below further testifies the importance of fieldwork for better professional practice. While the classroom gives knowledge, fieldwork gives skills.

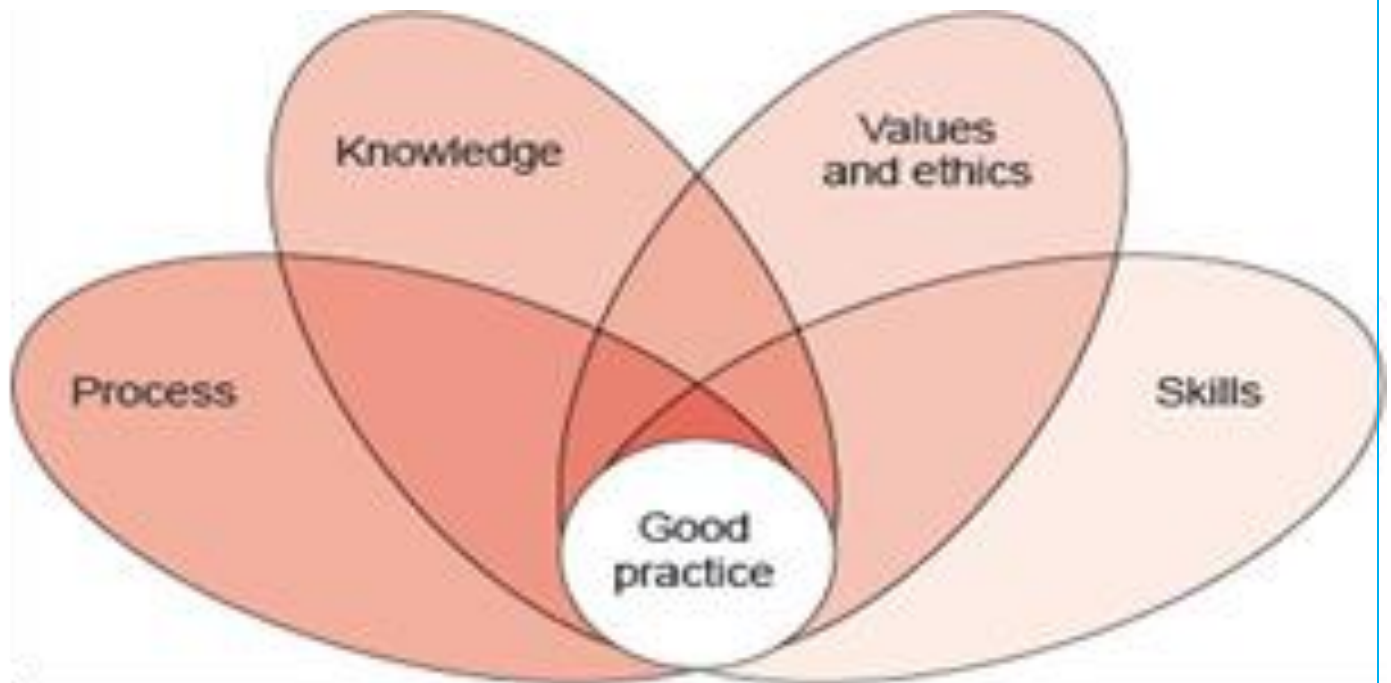


Figure 1:1

Source: open.edu

Though technology offers many benefits to the social work profession, its use must be guided to avoid abuse (Hamblin, 2020). In order for the profession of social care not to become elite class sided, different groups within the society must also be recognized in their needs as well as their limitations. While many of the literature reviewed in this study and the existing literature in this area focus on the benefits of technology and how its use can help the social care profession, this literature fails to take into account different groups in the society, and how they may be limited in access to technological use.

Though as a result of the intervention of Covid 19, many professions need to inculcate the use of technologies into the practice. This must be done with utmost consideration to different groups

within the society. Many elderly people both within and outside Europe, many of them may not be advanced in the use of technological tools. For this reason, the introduction of technology must be done with the view of all classes within the society. This will make its use to be beneficial to everyone who is in need of social care and social work services. The loophole in the existing knowledge calls for the development of this paper. It must be said here that, a complete review of literature in social sciences write-up such as this, needs to put into consideration both empirical review and theoretical review. This argument leads us to the next stage of this paper: a theoretical review.

2.3. Theoretical Underpinning

Theories are scientific tools through which scientists explain and make meanings of the social world. Looking at the issue of the synthesis between social work placement, social work education, and technological relevance, this paper shall attempt to bring together theoretical views for the purpose of robust explanation.

2.3.1. Marxist Perspective

The view of Karl Marx and many of his followers is that many professions and institutions are created in society for the purpose of suppressing and oppressing the (the poor) masses. To Marx, education has been created to benefit the rich. Through education, the masses are schooled and professionally developed to work for the Bourgeoisies. The Social Care profession is to further help the poor masses to deal with the effect of the illnesses and pains society has put on them. Using the postulates of Karl Marx, Covid 19 may have been stylishly introduced by the power class in order to reduce the population of the poor for them to continue to have more resources available to them since the power class is in charge of resources allocation. The introduction of the technological tool is also biased according to Marxist's view since there are people who may not have the technical know-how of these technological tools or have the financial means to get them. The way out according to Karl Marx is worker's revolution which will lead the society into an egalitarian form of society tagged as a communist society. Karl Marx believes in a system that supports and takes care of the need of all as the best system. To the Marxist, the best way to evaluate the social care profession is through the lens of the masses. Once it is not accessible or available to all irrespective of their classes, it is not accepted as a social care (society care) profession. In other words, any good profession must not be class-biased. It must be functional for all. This view will lead us to the discussion of the functional view.

2.3.2. Functionalist Perspective

Social Care, Social Work, and Sociology among other Social Sciences are created to solve social problems and ensure the function-ability of the society. It is no more news that Covid 19 has brought about many changes between 2019 and now. Despite these changes, individuals and professionals must find coping mechanisms through which they will continue to function and be relevant in the social system. Social Care is a field of practice that must continue to make contact with clients and communities as the need may be. The introduction/reintroduction of fieldwork practice that is technologically informed, is to ensure a continuous relevance of the profession. Once a profession or field of discipline is considered irrelevant in a social system, the profession will die off. This is the case of professional typists who could only operate typewriting machines. The advent of computers saw them out of the job market and many of these people died out of boredom and poverty and many of these people died out of boredom and poverty.

While Karl Marx's view has emphasized more on the negative parts of the field of social care, education, and the use of technological view, the functionalist perspective is emphasizing the function-ability of the field of Social Care/Work profession. The introduction/reintroduction of fieldwork practice and technological tools in the practice of Social Care/Work is to continue to ensure the relevance of the profession. The functionalists believe that Social Care/Work can be beneficial to all. This will happen if different aspects of the social system continue to function as they should. For instance, Social Care/Work profession can be beneficial to all irrespective of the tools needed to work with. The social system through the government should ensure the availability of the tools to those who may need it irrespective of their class. Not making it available is not the failure of the Social Care profession but the ill-function of an aspect (the government) of the society. Those that may need these technological tools for the purpose of benefiting from the Social Care profession must be ready to learn their uses and also, the producers of the tools must make their operation very easy for the simple. Based on the ongoing, every part of the social system must be functional to benefit all.

2.3.4. Conceptual Framework

This is a form of diagram expression of ideas within a scientific work. The diagram below brings into view some of the ideas already expressed in this paper and these ideas are connected.

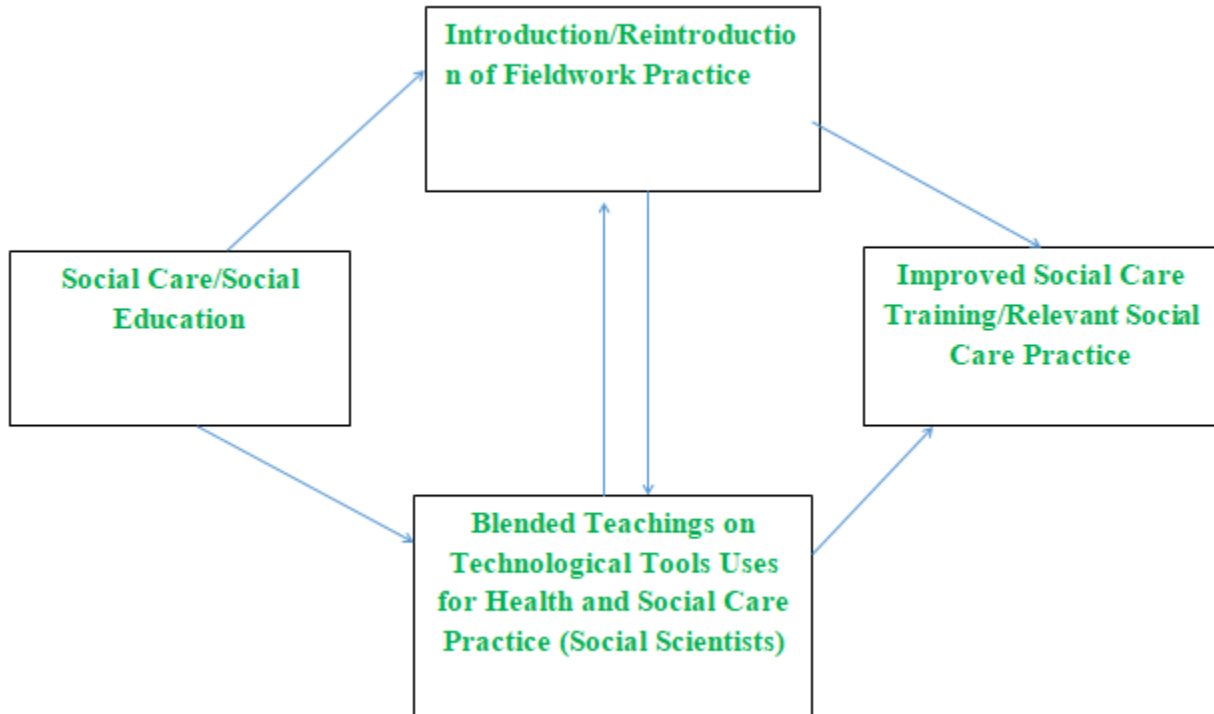


Figure: 1.2

Source: Author

Looking critically into the analysis of this diagram, the ideas here are quite instructional. The view in the diagram proves the fact that Social Care Education cannot perform ultimately its core without the inculcation of fieldwork placement as part of the training. This view also tried to connect together the idea of fieldwork placement and the introduction of technological training into Social Care Education; making a case that these duos are necessary to produce quality Social Care Practitioners in this era of Covid 19 and contactless policy.

3. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative instrument of an in-depth interview guide to unravel the necessary qualitative data needed for this study. This study also corroborates the qualitative data with secondary (quantitative) data from scientific materials. This researcher conducted 3 in-depth interviews using a student, an academic team leader, and a human resources officer. This study adopted the triangulation method which allows the use of multiple methods. The study made use

of ethnographic content analysis, quantitative analysis, and systematic review to attend to the objectives of the study.

The findings of the paper are generated through qualitative interviews with three respondents and secondary quantitative data adapted from existing works. The responses from the in-depth interviews were supported by scientific reviews and secondary quantitative data.

The quantitative data used for this study was not primarily collected but was adopted from an existing study (Smith et al 2018) which may display a level of limitation.

4. Qualitative Data Presentation, Findings, and Discussion

In this segment of the paper, the focus shall be on the findings or empirical discoveries as related to the ongoing discussion. The discussion here shall be based on the interconnectivity between education, fieldwork practice, and technological tools as an instrument for modern professional practice.

4.1. Fieldwork Practice as an Important Part of Educational Training

The findings here and discussions are based on the importance of fieldwork. According to a Human Resources Officer who was interviewed in the course of this study:

There are many potential benefits of completing a placement as part of a programme which include; adding value to the individual's CV which may make gaining employment easier upon successful completion of studying as the individual has relevant work experience. Completing a placement also allows the individual to apply what they have learned during an academic setting in the workplace. It also allows skills to develop in areas such as time management, team working, and communication skills as will be working with people from a variety of backgrounds and cultures especially if the placement is undertaken in a different country/area to which the student is studying. I think fieldwork placements bring many positives to the individuals that undertake them such as helping the student determine what their career goals are and giving them an insight into the way organizations operate and the challenges they face. Another major benefit of a fieldwork placement is that it allows students to build their network of

connections which will benefit them by allowing them to learn from others.

Going by the response of an Academic Team Leader (Lecturer), she also justified the importance of fieldwork placement.

After my graduation, there were opportunities I would have applied for but I felt I was not up to the task. My feeling was based on the fact that I have never been exposed to the practical side of my training. This made me feel inadequate.

In line with the above findings, Inceoglu et al (2019) argue that fieldwork placement is a transition between tertiary education and career paths. According to Praskova et al (2015), pre-planned placements which are structured as part of an educational training ensure individuals access to a wider education experience as well opportunities for career exploration (Praskova, Creed, & Hood, 2015).

To a student who was interviewed and who also gave her responses:

If my course embraces fieldwork as part of the training the course, I will really like it. I believe it will help me to be a better practitioner. Many of us in the class don't really understand how to put into practice what we are learning. All we have for now is just the head knowledge. Beyond knowledge, we need skills to succeed out there.

In line with this view, a Human Resources Officer responded as follows:

I believe that there is an employment advantage to those who have fieldwork experience as they will have gained practical skills from their placement which they can apply to their new employment which means their performance is likely to be stronger and they are likely to adapt and produce work of a higher standard from earlier on in their employment.

In the work of Tippa and Mane (2018), equally important is the need to apply the theoretical content covered in the classroom to real-life situations as part of a student's preparation to become a professional social care practitioner. Without the value that fieldwork placement offers, the learning of the social care and social work profession is incomplete. According to Smith et al (2018) in their study conducted between 2011 and 2015, more than 90% of graduates

who gained employment just after their programs were graduates with previous fieldwork placement experiences as students. For more statistical visibility, see the figures below as developed.

Table 1.1 Fieldwork Placement of universities graduates and current Employment Status

| Responses | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|------------------|-------------------|
| I participated in fieldwork placement as a student and I am currently employed | 57 | 92.0 |
| I participated in fieldwork placement as a student and I am currently unemployed | 2 | 3.2 |
| I participated in fieldwork placement as a student and I am currently in full-time education for a graduate study | 3 | 4.8 |
| Total | 62 | 100 |

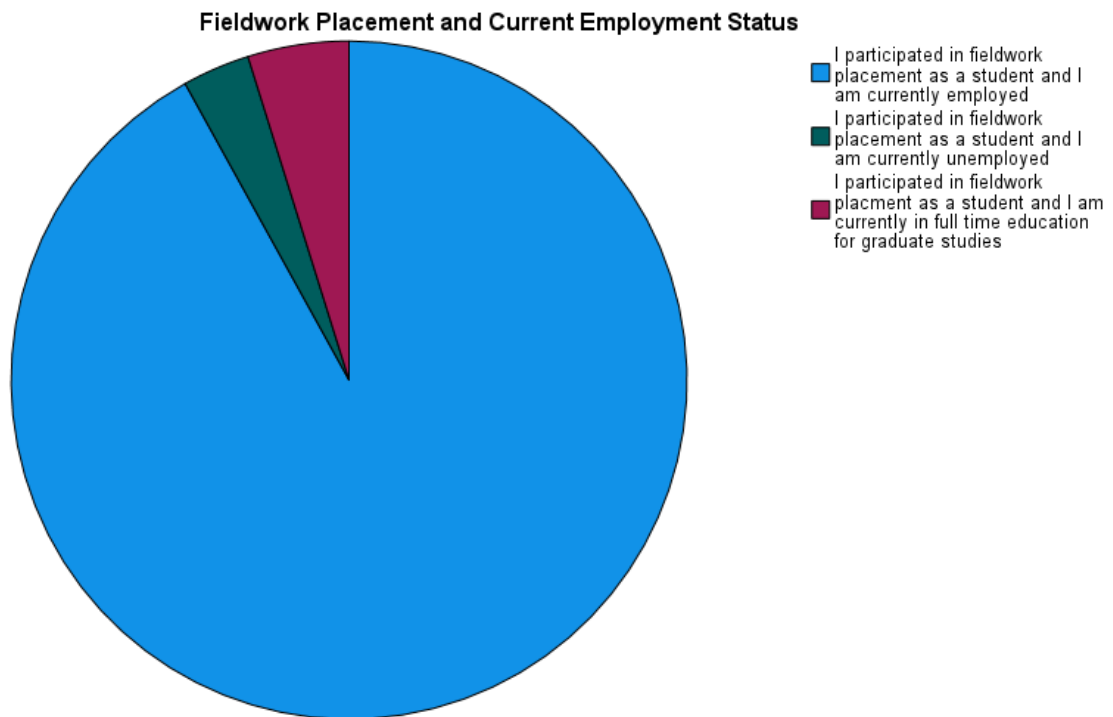


Figure: 1.3.

Source: Author, 2022 (Data adapted from Smith et al 2018 while chart was developed with the use of SPSS software by the researcher).

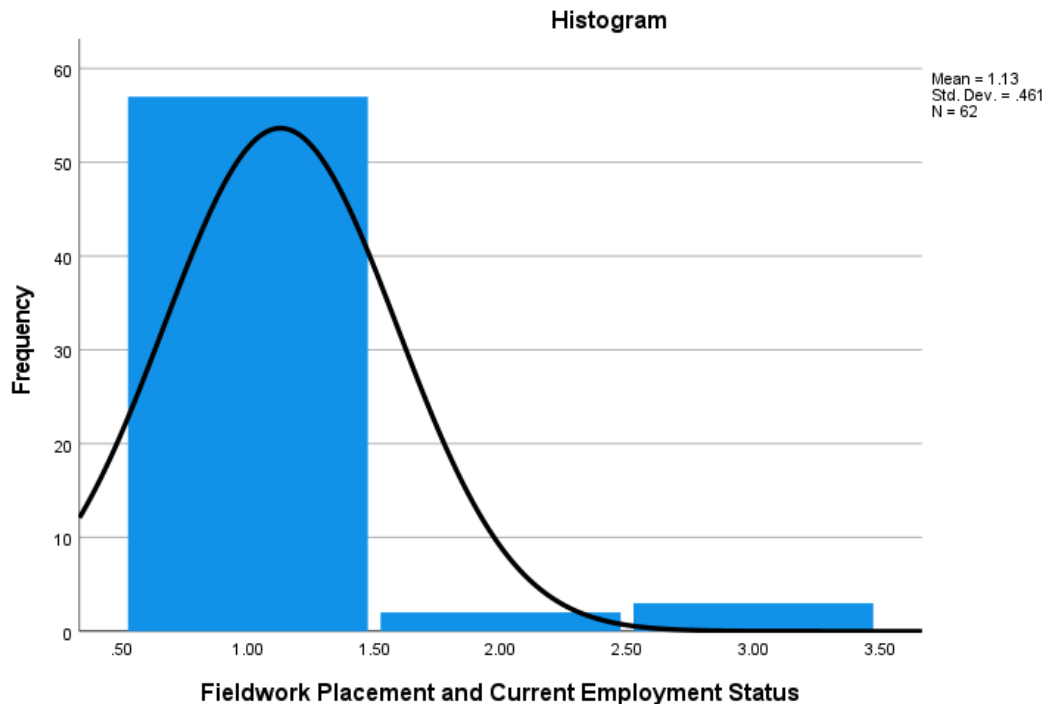


Figure. 1.4.

Source: Author, 2022 (Data adapted from Smith et al 2018 while chart was developed with the use of SPSS software by the researcher).

4.2. The Usefulness of Technological Tools in Modern Professional Practice

As it has been observed in the obstruction created by the advent of Covid 19, no profession can survive without the input of technological tools. In the work of Pascoe (2021), the use of technology has brought many flexibilities to modern-day professional practice. This has made its use to be significant. According to two of the respondents for this study:

Respondent 1: *We live in an age where life runs on technology. Many of the things we use today, we can get to our houses without having physical contact with anybody. All you need to do to get what you want is go online and order them.*

Respondent 2: *Any profession that is not thinking of inculcating technological tools into its practice will not last long. The world is*

advancing therefore, the Social Care profession and training need to advance. This is a digital age.

These responses further expanded the need for Social Care education to absorb technological training into the curriculum as a way of keeping up with the social change of this time. From the work of Pink et al (2021), the usefulness of digital and technological use became paramount in the social care field during the pandemic. While these scholars referenced the importance of technological tools in the modern social care profession, it was also believed that policy must be put in place to curb abuse.

5. Recommendations and Conclusion

This paper has alluded to many facts that justify the importance of fieldwork practice. Premises both from survey data and literature on the importance of both fieldwork practice, and technological tools in achieving better social care practice were also analyzed.

- Based on the findings, this paper recommends a proper introduction of fieldwork placement into Social Work/Care Education in particular, and the field of Social Sciences in general to make graduates in the fields better prepared for their future tasks.
- Based on the current observation in view of the Covid 19 pandemic and its accidental changes, no profession can actually survive the test of time without the inculcation of technological uses into its practice. On this note, this paper recommends as part of Social Care Training, a module on technological uses for Social Scientists. This is to expose Social Care/Social Sciences practitioners to tools that can be used if an absolute contactless policy must be maintained.
- As said by an unknown authority “if the purpose of a thing is not known, abuse is inevitable”. In view of this, this paper suggests that a policy should be formulated and implemented which will guide the use of technological tools in the Social Care profession. This is to further protect the social care clients, social care practitioners, and the integrity of the Social Care profession.

In conclusion, it is the belief of this paper that, Social Care Education and Social Sciences, in general, can continue to be relevant. But it must be said that no profession can be relevant beyond the level of social problem it is able to solve. To continue to be relevant in the social needs, Social Care Education needs an urgent inculcation of technological tools into its training and practice.

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