

The Predicaments and Coping Strategies of Social Work Professional Internships

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Abstract: Practicality is the core attribute of social work. Against the backdrop of the upgrading of social demands and the rapid development of technology, social work internship practice faces multiple challenges. This article focuses on three subjects: schools, institutions, and students, and systematically analyzes the three dilemmas of imbalance between theory and practice, imbalance of professional functions, and imbalance of the transformation of knowledge and action in social work internships in real situations. Based on the analysis of these predicaments, the article proposes three coping strategies: schools should build a systematic internship education system to respond to the requirements of the digital age; Institutions reshape professional practice fields to achieve win-win cooperation between schools and enterprises; Students enhance their ability to reflect and integrate, promoting the unity of knowledge and action. By doing so, we can achieve positive interaction among multiple subjects such as schools, institutions, and students, thereby promoting the sustainable development of social work professional practice education. This approach will provide a valuable reference for the cultivation of social work talents and the development of the industry.

1. Posing the question

Social work, as a profession that integrates professional methods such as case work, group work, and community work to achieve the purpose of helping others, plays an important role in maintaining social equity and promoting social justice. In recent years, with the advancement of the modernization of the social governance system and governance capacity, the state has attached great importance to the development of the social work profession and the construction of its talent team. In 2011, 18 departments including the Ministry of Civil Affairs of China jointly issued the "Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of Social Work Professional Talent Teams", which for the first time included social work professionals in the national talent team system, clarified the all-round planning including education and training, job development and incentive mechanisms, and laid the policy foundation for the construction of the social work professional talent team in China^[1]. In the field of education, the relevant undergraduate teaching quality standards and postgraduate training programs put forward clear requirements for the curriculum and training standards of the social work major, with particular emphasis on the training orientation of the practical ability of social work professionals.

Social work emphasizes the analysis and resolution of various problems existing in social development through action methods, with a distinct practical feature^[2]. Whether viewed from the perspective of national policy or educational standards, practice is of irreplaceable importance to the development of social work professionals. Practicality is the most fundamental characteristic of social work. All professional knowledge and skills of social work revolve around the practice of helping others, and any theoretical knowledge of social work needs to return to practice and be ultimately verified in practice. Professional practice, as a core component of social work professional education, plays an irreplaceable role in comprehensively developing students' practical abilities to enhance their practical skills^[3]. It is not only a key link in the transformation of theoretical knowledge into practical operation skills, but also one of the important indicators for measuring the quality of social work professional education, which directly affects the cultivation of social work professionals.

However, with the rapid development of the current social economy and the deepening of social

transformation, the needs of the elderly in terms of life care, spiritual comfort and social integration have become diversified and specialized, and the service needs of special groups such as children in difficult circumstances and people with disabilities have become increasingly complex and personalized. The upgrading of a series of social demands together constitute the current reality and practice field for the development of the social work profession, providing a broad space for the development of social work while also putting forward more urgent requirements for the training system of social work professionals, especially the shaping of practical abilities. In this context, how to build an internship system that deeply integrates theory with practice has become a core issue in the development of the social work profession. Based on this, this paper focuses on the current practical situation of social work practice, systematically sorts out and analyzes the multiple predicaments faced by professional practice, and proposes solutions for optimizing the construction of a social work practice system that integrates theory and practice, with the aim of promoting the high-quality development of the social work major and providing theoretical basis and practical reference for improving the quality of practice teaching.

2. The practical predicaments of social work professional internships

As an important carrier of social work professional practical education, off-campus institution internships occupy a core position in the talent cultivation system of social workers in colleges and universities. They are not only a key link in deepening the application of theory and the transformation of vocational ability, but also a difficult point in practical teaching due to the complexity of multi-subject collaboration^[4]. The social work internship model is essentially a collaborative education system composed of multiple subjects, involving three parties: the school, the internship institution and the student. The school, as the theoretical provider, undertakes the core functions of knowledge imparting, method training and value shaping, and provides professional support for the internship through the construction of the curriculum system and the allocation of teaching staff; As a practical platform, institutions not only provide real service scenarios and practical guidance, but also need to shape students' professional cognition through institutional culture and work norms; Intern students, as active subjects, achieve professional growth through the two-way interaction of theoretical transformation and practical reflection. Therefore, this article mainly discusses the current predicaments of social work practice from the school level, the institution level and the student level.

2.1 School level: Imbalance between theory and practice

Since the restoration and reconstruction of the social work profession in Chinese mainland, it has demonstrated a development characteristic of "education taking the lead"^[5]. This development model has led social work education to focus more on theoretical instruction in terms of curriculum design, teaching content and teaching methods, with relatively insufficient emphasis on practical teaching, resulting in the separation of social work theory and practice. Specifically, it is manifested as insufficient scientific and standardized social work practice, which in turn leads to insufficient generalization and refinement of its theoretical level. The dialogue and interaction between different practices are difficult to advance under a common premise, which also makes it difficult to generate theories from practice^[6]. At the same time, the cramming teaching method, which is based on knowledge indoctrination, neglects the importance of practical education and fails to stimulate students' enthusiasm and initiative^[7]. This structural imbalance results in social work students, although they have mastered some professional theoretical knowledge, lacking rich practical experience, leaving them at a loss when it comes to solving problems for the service recipients.

In addition, most colleges and universities also encounter numerous problems in practical teaching. At present, there is a lack of resources for practical teaching^[8], and schools are short of funds for the construction of practical teaching bases and the purchase of practical teaching equipment, making it difficult to provide a high-quality practical teaching environment. The limited funds also prevent many schools from providing students with adequate internship subsidies, which dampens students' enthusiasm for participating in internships. There is no stable cooperation

mechanism between schools and off-campus internship institutions, which is mostly short-term or temporary cooperation. This not only affects the quality of internships, but also hinders the establishment of long-term stable cooperative relationships.

2.2 At the institutional level: Imbalance of professional functions

Social work professional practice education in most colleges and universities is centered around institutional internships, and the effectiveness of social work internship institutions directly affects the development of students' practical abilities and the construction of their professional identity. But the current "failure of internship institutions" is a prominent predicament faced by social work internship education^[9].

The levels of specialization of off-campus internship institutions vary greatly, with most showing obvious insufficiency in specialization^[10]. One of the reasons is that the resource endowment of the internship institutions restricts the quality of the internship. Social work service institutions need to provide students with practical scenarios and supervisory support that meet professional standards. However, most of these institutions have limited material infrastructure and professional information resources, and lack professional social workers and supervisory forces. As a result, they cannot provide students with sufficient and effective guidance, making it difficult to meet the high requirements of social work internship education for in-depth practice and professional guidance. Secondly, institutions have failed to establish a standardized internship management mechanism. The absence of a standardized system may lead to more arbitrary internship management in institutions, which not only affects students' internship outcomes but also restricts their own professional development. Thirdly, the content of institutional internships is disconnected from the professional training objectives. On the one hand, institutions lack the ability to scientifically and professionally design internship programs with limited resources, making it difficult for them to provide professional practice scenarios for intern students. On the other hand, the role of interns is ambiguous and they are often regarded as free auxiliary human resources rather than professional training objects, resulting in students being more engaged in administrative affairs and simple volunteer services within the institution, with the internship content being monotonous and fragmented. Some internship institutions have a lack of understanding or service awareness of social work and are reluctant to accept students majoring in social work for internships, often seeing them as a burden^[11]. This situation not only restricts the development of students' professional abilities, but also reflects the dual limitations of the institutions in the cognition of professional education functions and the construction of practical systems, ultimately hindering the improvement of their professional development level.

2.3 At the student level: Imbalance in the transformation of knowledge and action

In the practical education of social work, students are the active subjects of the internship. Currently, they generally face the predicament of "transformation of knowledge and action". During the process of receiving social work education, although students have mastered systematic theoretical knowledge, it is difficult for them to effectively transform it into practical service capabilities in the internship practice.

This dilemma of "transformation of knowledge and action" is caused by both internal and external factors. It stems from the constraints of the external environment and is closely related to the psychological cognition and ability development of individual students during the internship process. From the perspective of psychological cognition, intern students have insufficient professional identity. Social work internships create a paradox of social work identity among students, that is, a stronger professional identity at the knowledge level, but choosing to leave the field of social work and deviate from the direction of social work in career decisions^[12]. During the internship, students' professionalism and independence are suppressed, and the gap between career expectations and real service scenarios can cause psychological conflicts and frustration, shaking students' confidence in the profession and affecting their possibility of seeing social work as a long-term career choice. From the perspective of ability development, professional internships focus on exploring and cultivating the practical effectiveness of interns, ignoring the growth of

interns' reflective abilities in practical experience^[3]. Students' ability to reflect and integrate is insufficient during the social work internship practice. Intern students lack the ability to think deeply and analyze the problems they encounter, fail to effectively integrate practical experience with theoretical knowledge, and it is difficult for the accumulated experience to be elevated to professional ability, which affects their role transformation from "learner" to "professional social worker" and makes it difficult for them to truly achieve professional growth. The imbalance between knowledge and action not only affects students' career choices and development, but also has a profound impact on the training of social work professionals and the development of the industry, restricting the professionalization and vocationalization process of social work.

3. Multi-subject construction of social work professional internship system

Based on the analysis of the above predicament, this article will propose countermeasures from the three levels of schools, institutions and students to optimize the practical path of social work professional internships.

3.1 At the school level: Build a systematic internship education system in response to the requirements of the digital age

Schools need to strengthen the top-level design of internship teaching under policy guidance, and build a standardized, systematic, rationalized and operational internship education system, which should include the entire process management content such as internship purpose, arrangement, supervision requirements, and evaluation indicators^[11], providing action guidelines and important basis for social work internship practice and professional teaching evaluation. Through systematic internship arrangements, students can deepen their understanding of theoretical knowledge in practical scenarios, gradually master practical operation skills to enhance their comprehensive service capabilities, and thus serve the needs of community and social development more effectively. In addition, schools should broaden the channels for practical teaching. Schools should make full use of social resources, evaluate the quality of internship institutions through assessment, establish cooperative relationships with relatively specialized social work institutions^[13], and on this basis, focus on the long-term construction of teaching practice bases, promote the institutionalized and standardized operation of internship bases, and form a stable and sustainable network of support for practical teaching. Finally, the curriculum system of the school should bridge the demands of The Times. With the development of practice, teaching needs to be updated to meet the needs of reality^[14]. The development of information technology has led to the gradual application of intelligent tools and technologies in various fields, and social work education also needs to respond to the demand for versatile social work talents in the digital age. In terms of the curriculum design of social work education, it is necessary not only to increase the proportion of practical professional education, but also to promote the upgrading of the content of social work courses, incorporate digital social work into the curriculum system, and achieve digital and intelligent empowerment of social work internship education.

3.2 At the institutional level: Reshape the field of professional practice to achieve win-win cooperation between schools and enterprises

In response to the prominent issue of "failure of internship institutions", this article proposes countermeasures and suggestions from three aspects: institutional construction, resource integration, and content optimization, in order to reshape the professional functions of social work internship institutions, enhance their practical educational efficiency, and promote the level of professional development. The first priority for institutions is to establish a standardized internship management system and strengthen institutional guarantees. Internship institutions should establish and improve internship management systems, including intern role positioning, service process norms, supervision arrangements, safety risk prevention and control, etc., to form an operational and evaluable internship operation mechanism to ensure that students can receive high-quality professional training in a standardized and orderly environment. Secondly, the institution should

optimize the allocation of resources and enhance its professional service capabilities. Social work institutions actively seek support from the government and society. On the one hand, institutions can apply for financial subsidies or special grants through policy channels such as government-purchased services and social organization support projects to improve office space, service facilities and technical equipment and enhance basic service carrying capacity; On the other hand, institutions should proactively connect with university resources, invite university teachers to participate in practical guidance and action research, and use the intellectual resources of universities to enhance their own professional level and sustainable development capacity. At the same time, the institution should also strengthen its talent team building. Through on-the-job training, supervision training and other means, it should cultivate a backbone team with professional qualities and practical abilities, enhance the professional guidance and support capabilities for interns, and provide a solid guarantee for high-quality internship education. In addition, the institution should optimize the design of internship content and strengthen the orientation towards professional practice. Internship institutions should scientifically design internship programs based on the core competence requirements for social work talent cultivation, clearly define the identity of interns as "social workers", avoid simply seeing them as assistants or volunteers, and enable students to fully participate in professional practice links such as individual cases, groups, and community services, and truly incorporate them into the professional growth path.

It is important to move beyond the unidirectional dependence model between schools and institutions and to build a cooperative mechanism centered on the concept of "collaborative education". On the one hand, schools should take the initiative to get involved in the development planning and capacity building of the internship institutions. Professional teachers, based on their own experience and research fields, should actively participate in the service practices of the institutions. Through joint action research with front-line social workers, organizing practical training and building experience exchange platforms, they can help the institutions improve their professional service capabilities. On the other hand, social work institutions should also actively integrate into the talent cultivation system of colleges and universities. They should not only undertake the basic responsibility of providing internship positions, but also deeply participate in the entire process of curriculum design, teaching evaluation, and internship guidance, ultimately achieving a mutual improvement and continuous win-win of the quality of talent cultivation in colleges and universities and the professional service level of institutions.

3.3 At the student level: Enhance the ability to reflect and integrate, and promote the unity of knowledge and action

The transformation of social work education from "learning to doing" is related to whether a person can truly become a qualified professional in social work. Students need to make a practical shift from passive acceptance to active learning, and be encouraged to actively participate in professional internships and actively enter social work professional institutions to carry out systematic professional services. This process not only helps students master and flexibly apply professional methods and skills such as case work, group work and community work, It can also deepen their understanding and internalization of the values of social work through continuous service experience, thereby achieving the construction and consolidation of professional identity. At the same time, in professional practice, students should also learn to systematically summarize and critically reflect on practical experience. Summarization and reflection, as an important part of social work professional competence, is a key link in achieving the unity of knowledge and action and promoting professional growth. During the internship, students should conduct in-depth multi-dimensional reflections on the intervention process, the application of methods, and the effectiveness of services based on the evaluation feedback mechanism and supervisory suggestions. By writing case reports, conducting group discussions or organizing reflective presentations, students can share their service experiences with teachers, institutional supervisors and peers, broaden their professional horizons and deepen their understanding of the value and methods of

social work through communication and interaction. It should be noted that the emergence of artificial intelligence may, to some extent, lead to a weakening of students' professional reflection. For example, if students rely too much on AI writing tools and automatically generated content when writing case reports and service plans, it will lead to a lack of in-depth thinking about the service process and a decline in their written expression ability, seriously affecting their professional learning.

Students' reflection on social work professional practice includes not only effective analysis of responses to the needs of service recipients, but also self-examination of various aspects such as their own professional behavior and ethical judgment. This process not only enhances intern students' understanding of the social work profession, but also helps to develop a professional attitude of independent thinking and continuous improvement, thereby achieving a substantive transformation from experience accumulation to professional ability and laying a solid foundation for future career development.

To sum up, in the face of a series of problems in social work internships, schools, institutions and students should all make changes. The above measures will not only help improve students' professional qualities and practical abilities, but also promote the professionalization and standardization of social work service institutions themselves, ultimately achieving a win-win improvement in the quality of talent cultivation in colleges and universities and the service capabilities of institutions.

4. Conclusion

As a practical-oriented discipline, the quality of practical teaching in social work is directly related to the effectiveness of professional education and the level of discipline construction. This article analyzes the practical predicaments of the three main subjects, namely schools, institutions and students, in social work practice and puts forward countermeasures. The construction of an internship and practice system for social work requires the joint efforts of schools, institutions and students. Only with careful planning by schools, full cooperation by institutions and active progress by students can an internship and practice system for social work professionals that meets the needs of social development be established, and continuous impetus be injected into the development of social work. It will contribute more solid strength to the harmony and progress of society.

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