

Research on the Reform of the Practice-Oriented Talent Cultivation Model for Social Work Undergraduates from the Perspective of Service-Learning

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of deepening social governance innovation and growing societal demand for professional social service talents, practice-oriented education has become the core link in the cultivation of social work undergraduates. However, constrained by the disconnection between curriculum teaching and practical training, the superficiality of student participation, imperfect training, incentive, and guarantee mechanisms, and fragmented multi-actor collaboration, the professional advantages of social work students are difficult to transform into high-quality services. Based on service-learning theory and drawing on empirical investigations into the volunteer service participation and community practice of social work undergraduates at a normal university in Guangdong Province, this paper analyzes the current status and dilemmas of practice-oriented talent cultivation. It proposes reform strategies in four aspects: curriculum system reconstruction, incentive and guarantee mechanism improvement, collaborative education ecosystem construction, and evaluation and reflection system establishment, so as to provide references for the high-quality development of applied social work talent cultivation in the new era.

Keywords: Social work education; Undergraduate talent cultivation; Service-learning; Practice teaching reform; University-community collaboration

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1. Introduction

With the continuous advancement of social transformation in China, social problems such as population aging, the care of left-behind children, family conflicts, and community governance dilemmas have become increasingly complex, and the demand for professional social service talents continues to grow. Social work takes helping people to help themselves as its professional mission, and the quality of talent cultivation

directly determines the professional level of social services; volunteer service and community practice constitute the two main arenas through which undergraduates transform professional values, knowledge, and skills into practical competence. Since the implementation of the *Work Guidelines for the College Students' Community Practice Program* issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League, a large-scale practice system linking universities and communities has taken shape nationwide ^[1]. However, empirical evidence shows that the practice participation of social work undergraduates generally remains superficial, with prominent problems such as the suspension of professional competence, the disconnection between coursework and practice, and the absence of feedback mechanisms. Based on this, this paper draws on two empirical investigations conducted at L University, a normal university in Guangdong Province—a questionnaire survey of 168 social work undergraduates and a case study of community practice using semi-structured interviews and participant observation—to review the current status and challenges of practice-oriented talent cultivation from the perspective of service-learning theory and to propose targeted reform strategies.

2. The context and value of practice-oriented cultivation for social work undergraduates

From the perspective of national development, the cultivation of high-quality social work talents is a key support for the modernization of social governance. In the context of the coordinated development of community governance, social organizations, and professional social work, grassroots communities urgently need practitioners who master professional methods such as needs assessment, case management, and resource linkage. The community practice of college students has become an important coupling point between ideological and political education and professional education, undertaking the dual functions of value shaping and competence cultivation ^[1]. Whether universities can cultivate graduates with solid practical competence directly affects the supply quality of grassroots governance talents, and practice-oriented teaching reform has thus become an unavoidable proposition for social work education.

From the perspective of professional education, social work is a discipline in which theory and practice are deeply intertwined, and practical training is the fundamental way to internalize professional values and externalize professional skills. Compared with ordinary volunteers, social work students possess a distinctive dual identity: they are both ordinary helpers who serve others voluntarily and professionally trained students equipped with systematic helping concepts, knowledge, and methods ^[2]. This identity gives their participation unique advantages, compensating for the deficiencies of general college student volunteering such as insufficient professionalism and uneven service quality. International experience confirms this point: in social work education in Europe and the United States, service-learning has long been embedded in the curriculum system, university-community partnerships are regarded as an effective platform for building local communities of practice and solving local problems, and community-based internships enable students to obtain experiences comparable to traditional service-learning and internship programs ^[3,4].

From the perspective of student development, participation in practice meets the multi-level development needs of undergraduates. Research on volunteer motivation shows that college students' participation is driven by both altruistic and self-oriented motives, covering dimensions such as understanding, career development, value expression, self-enhancement, and social interaction ^[5,6]. Through practice, students can deepen their understanding of professional knowledge and enhance their sense of self-efficacy and professional identity. Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory also provides an explanatory basis: participation

in practice responds to students' higher-level needs for belonging, esteem, and self-actualization, and can transform external mobilization into sustained internal motivation.

3. Current status of practice-oriented cultivation for social work undergraduates

In recent years, universities have generally attached importance to the practical training of social work undergraduates and have made positive progress in participation scale and project diversity. Taking L University as an example, the questionnaire survey of 168 social work undergraduates shows that participation in volunteer service is relatively active: 39.28% of the students have participated more than nine times since enrollment, and sophomores and juniors show the strongest willingness to participate. In terms of channels, 86.9% of the students obtain volunteer service information through the university and 60.1% through social service agencies, and the university remains the dominant channel for organizing practice. In terms of service types, community service (56.5%), assisting the elderly and the disabled (48.8%), and supporting children and vulnerable groups (39.3%) rank highest, which are highly consistent with the key service fields of the profession. In addition, 81% of the activities in which students participated provided material or spiritual rewards, reflecting the initial formation of incentive arrangements.

In terms of practice system construction, the social work program of L University has established a dual-track cultivation model of “theory + practice,” with practice courses accounting for 34% of total credits, and, relying on the university-government-community linkage mechanism, has created distinctive projects such as care for left-behind children, “intangible cultural heritage into the community,” and “smart elderly assistance” digital feedback programs, embodying the collaborative education model of “university-government-community.”

In terms of motivation, the survey shows a compound characteristic of altruism and self-actualization: students not only care about those in need but also expect to deepen their understanding of professional knowledge, broaden career choices, and enhance self-worth through service ^[5]. This structure is highly compatible with the professional values of social work, indicating that social work undergraduates constitute a potential professional volunteer force. Analysis of variance further reveals significant grade differences: freshmen participate least, while the higher participation of sophomores and juniors is related to their relatively abundant spare time, wider access to service resources, and deepening professional identification. Interviews also indicate that students who frequently participate report a stronger sense of professional belonging and clearer career orientation. Beneath the participation figures, however, structural problems such as the low level of service content, the disconnection between practice and professional training, and weak support mechanisms remain prominent.

4. Problems and challenges in the practice-oriented cultivation of social work undergraduates

4.1. Superficial participation and the suspension of professional competence

Although the participation rate of social work undergraduates in volunteer service is relatively high, the level of participation is generally low. The survey at L University shows that a considerable proportion of the services in which students participate are short-term, low-threshold activities such as campus cleaning, book arrangement, and holiday greetings, in which professional knowledge and methods are rarely applied, while deeper interventions such as community needs assessment, case management, and resource linkage are seldom involved. As a result, a phenomenon of “competence suspension” emerges: the professional

knowledge learned in the classroom floats above practice and cannot be grounded in real service scenarios. At the same time, some students regard volunteer service mainly as a means to obtain comprehensive evaluation points, awards, or certificates; this utilitarian tendency weakens the educational function of practice and may lead to declines in professional identity and service quality^[2]. Practice activities are also often not synchronized with the teaching progress of professional courses, so that students either enter the field before mastering relevant methods or have no practice opportunities when they most need to apply what they have learned. Interviews reveal that even students with rich service experience mostly played roles of general labor or activity assistance, while systematic opportunities to practice casework interviews, group guidance, or community organizing were rare, so that the growth of professional competence lagged far behind the accumulation of service hours.

4.2. Monotonous practice content and imperfect training, incentive, and guarantee mechanisms

The practice content currently available to students is relatively single in form, mostly consisting of one-off, ceremonial, and labor-based activities, and lacks systematically designed projects that match training objectives at different stages. The training system is weak: most students enter service positions without systematic pre-service training on service ethics, communication skills, and professional methods, resulting in uneven service quality. The incentive mechanism relies mainly on certificates and comprehensive evaluation points and lacks diversified incentives that respond to students' needs for professional growth, career development, and self-actualization^[5]. The guarantee mechanism is even weaker: students often bear transportation and meal costs themselves when serving off campus, off-campus volunteer hours are sometimes not recognized, and insurance and safety guarantees are insufficient, so most students rationally choose low-cost, low-level services within the campus, which further solidifies the superficiality of practice. At the project level, funding shortages and insufficient integration of external resources make it difficult for some community projects to continue after funding is interrupted.

4.3. Fragmented multi-actor collaboration and the rupture of the translation chain

High-quality practice education requires the coordinated participation of the government, universities, communities, social organizations, and students, yet at present the various actors largely operate independently, resources are scattered, and a stable collaborative network has not yet been formed. From the perspective of actor-network theory, the translation process among actors is obstructed: the identification of community needs tends to be extensive and administratively driven, with many projects relying on administrative instructions rather than professional needs assessment, resulting in insufficient matching between service supply and real needs; the distribution of interests among actors is unbalanced, and the enthusiasm of communities and frontline teachers is difficult to sustain; practice bases generally lack professional supervision systems, so that the transformation chain of “ideological tempering - professional growth - community development” cannot form a closed loop. Within universities, barriers between colleges and insufficient departmental coordination lead to repeated organization and inefficient use of resources, while the lack of long-term cooperation agreements makes university-community collaboration dependent on personal relationships rather than institutional arrangements^[4].

4.4. Absence of evaluation feedback and the rupture of the experience loop

The evaluation of student practice currently emphasizes quantitative indicators such as service hours and

participation frequency, while neglecting qualitative dimensions such as service quality, professional competence growth, and community effectiveness. There is a lack of a closed-loop mechanism of “practice-feedback-reflection-improvement”: community residents’ feedback is rarely collected systematically, students’ experiences are seldom transformed into knowledge through structured reflection, and the problems exposed in practice are rarely fed back into curriculum teaching and project design. Service-learning theory emphasizes that effective reflection is the key link connecting service and learning, and that without reflection, service is merely labor rather than learning ^[7]. In addition, practice guidance is neither included in teaching workload nor linked to professional title evaluation, which suppresses teachers’ enthusiasm for in-depth participation, so that valuable experience cannot be accumulated and the same problems recur year after year. The survey also shows that although 81% of the activities provided rewards, these incentives were rarely linked to service quality, encouraging attendance rather than excellence.

5. Reform strategies for the practice-oriented cultivation of social work undergraduates

5.1. Reconstructing the curriculum system with embedded service-learning

To solve the disconnection between coursework and practice, service-learning should be embedded in the curriculum system as an organic component rather than an extracurricular appendage. Firstly, a progressive practice project system should be designed according to grade characteristics: freshmen focus on cognitive services such as community visits and activity assistance to establish professional perception; sophomores and juniors, synchronized with courses such as casework, group work, and community work, undertake project-based services such as needs assessment, group activity design, and community education; seniors carry out in-depth interventions such as case management and project operation in combination with graduation internships and dissertations ^[8]. Secondly, volunteer service should be formally incorporated into the practicum system of the social work major, with unified recognition of service hours, unified professional supervision, and unified quality standards, so that scattered volunteer activities are upgraded into structured professional training; this ladder-type design echoes the mature practice of American universities that incorporate service-learning into formal curricula through specially designed courses ^[7]. Thirdly, embedded curriculum design should be promoted: professional courses should set up practice modules linked to real community projects so that teaching progress and practice arrangements are synchronized, thereby activating students’ dual identity advantages and shifting practice from superficial participation to professional intervention.

5.2. Improving training, incentive, and guarantee mechanisms

A complete support system is the institutional guarantee for sustained and high-quality participation. In terms of training, a tiered pre-service and in-service training system should be established, covering service ethics, communication skills, safety knowledge, and specialized professional methods, together with a peer mentor mechanism in which experienced senior students guide junior students. In terms of incentives, a diversified structure responding to students’ motivation should be constructed: in addition to certificates and comprehensive evaluation points, participation should be linked to awards and honors, recommendations for postgraduate study, and career development resources, and outstanding practice achievements should be supported to become academic outputs such as research papers and project applications; guided by the strengths perspective, universities should discover and affirm students’ potential in practice so as to enhance self-efficacy and professional identity ^[2]. For teachers, practice guidance should be included in teaching

workload and linked to professional title evaluation and performance assessment. In terms of guarantees, universities should set up special funds for practice projects, provide transportation and insurance support, recognize off-campus volunteer hours, and integrate government purchase-of-service funds, foundation grants, and enterprise sponsorship to form a diversified funding pattern.

5.3. Building a collaborative “government-university-community” education ecosystem

To overcome fragmented collaboration, a stable multi-actor network should be constructed through institutionalized arrangements. Firstly, long-term cooperation mechanisms between universities, local governments, and communities should be established through formal agreements, clarifying the responsibilities, resource inputs, and benefit distribution of each actor and transforming cooperation from relationship-dependent to institution-based; grassroots party building can play a leading role through mechanisms such as student party members’ resident services in communities, transforming political advantages into collaborative advantages of practice education. Secondly, within universities, a multi-department coordination mechanism led by university leadership should be established, integrating the resources of the youth league committee, academic affairs office, student affairs office, and professional colleges, and a cross-college resource pool should be built so that students of different majors form complementary service teams. Thirdly, digital platforms should be used to achieve precise matching between community needs and university resources: communities publish service needs, and universities release practice resources, so that projects are generated from real needs identified through professional assessment, thereby repairing the translation chain among actors ^[9,10].

5.4. Constructing multi-dimensional evaluation and deep reflection systems

A scientific evaluation and reflection system is the key to closing the loop of practice education. Firstly, a dual-track assessment system combining quantitative and qualitative evaluation should be established: quantitative indicators record service hours, frequency, and coverage, while qualitative evaluation focuses on professional competence growth, service quality, and community effectiveness, with community residents, agency supervisors, professional teachers, and student peers jointly participating. Secondly, a “three-stage reflection” model should be constructed throughout the practice process: before practice, students clarify service objectives and knowledge preparation through project design; during practice, they record observations and puzzles through service logs and group supervision; after practice, they systematically summarize experiences through reflection reports, case presentations, and thematic seminars, transforming experience into knowledge ^[7]. Thirdly, a feedback closed loop should be institutionalized: evaluation results and reflection outcomes should be regularly fed back into curriculum teaching, project design, and cooperation arrangements, so that problems exposed in practice drive the continuous optimization of the cultivation system.

6. Conclusion

The practice-oriented cultivation of social work undergraduates is not a simple accumulation of service activities but a systematic education project integrating curriculum, mechanism, collaboration, and evaluation. Social work education should take service-learning as the guiding concept, the reconstruction of the curriculum system as the foundation, the improvement of training, incentive, and guarantee mechanisms as the support, the collaborative “government-university-community” ecosystem as the platform, and multi-dimensional evaluation and deep reflection as the closed loop, so as to promote the transformation of student practice from superficial participation

to professional intervention. Only in this way can the dual identity advantages of students be brought into play, can the transformation chain of professional education, student growth, and community development be smoothly connected, and can universities cultivate applied social work talents who both understand theory and are capable of practice. Future research can further track the longitudinal effects of curriculum-embedded service-learning and explore differentiated reform paths for universities of different types.

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