



## Analysis and Prospects on Current Situation of China MSW Education

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### Abstract

In recent years, along with China's rapid economic development, social contradictions and problems related to social security, education, personal relationships and other aspects become more prominent. Professional social services including difficulty relief, conflict mediation, psychological counseling, behavioral therapy, social function repair, etc., have been actively concerned and highlighted by the Chinese government. To accelerate social construction which focuses on safeguarding and improving people's livelihood, the government proposed to strengthen the social work professionals construction. According to China's current actual situation, professional social workers mainly source from colleges and universities which provide professional education, especially those with master of social work points. It can be seen that development of MSW education is directly related to the quality of social work professionals, thus affecting social construction in China. Although WSW has successively been established in many colleges and universities, but due to various factors under strong support from the government, the training effects were unsatisfactory due to many reasons. Therefore, the authors of this paper reflect the current situation of MSW education in China, and on this basis, explore its future development path.

**Key words:** Essence of MSW education; Current educational status; Practice teaching

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### INTRODUCTION

In the field of international social sciences, social work has become an independent discipline and specialized subject. It has the same discipline status with psychology, sociology, economics and other disciplines, and a relatively mature and complete social work education system has been formed. In U.S., Britain, Japan and other developed countries as well as India, Brazil and other developing countries, not only are a large number of undergraduate majoring social work recruited, but also practice-oriented high-level social work talents are developed by setting up courses in Master of Social Work. In recent years, a series of policy documents from domestic authorities have proposed to vigorously develop social work professionals. On November 8, 2011, 18 departments and organizations including Central Organization Department, Central Political and Law Commission and Ministry of Civil Affairs jointly issued "Proposal on strengthening social working professionals construction", which clearly emphasized to "support infrastructure of bachelors, masters and doctoral degree authorized points for social work" (People's Daily, 2011). This is both an opportunity and a challenge for construction improvement of social work professional disciplines system.

In order to implement the strategic plan of the CPC Central Committee and meet the need of harmonious society construction towards high-level social work professionals, and by drawing on the international common practices for professional degree setting, China has also set up the master's degree in social work. The

Master of Social Work can also be abbreviated as MSW. MSW training objectives are: to bring up the application-oriented senior talents who have “people-oriented, self-reliance, fair and just” professional values, master theories and methods related to social work, are familiar with China’s social policies, have a strong ability in social service planning, implementation, supervision, evaluation and research, and are competent for social services and social management for different groups and in different areas (China Academic Degrees and Graduate Education Information Network, 2009). However, starting from the current MSW development status in China, due to insufficient understanding on its importance and nature, there are still weak points for MSW during in educational practice, such as vague definition, not clear features, etc. This restricts development of MSW education to some great extent, directly affecting social work to solve social problems and meeting the needs of society and promoting social development, etc.

## 1. INTERPRETATION OF MSW EDUCATION NATURE

What is the nature of MSW education? This must be considered and answered during the development of MSW education, or else its development will be blind without scientific development at all. So, what is the nature of MSW education? The following two aspects are mainly focused for discussion.

### 1.1 From Perspective of Characteristics of Professional Degree Postgraduate Education

Professional degree postgraduate education is the need both for self-development and self-improvement of postgraduate education and for adaptation to social development and meeting the social needs. Currently, based on the global situation, professional degree postgraduate education is practice-oriented with the focus on researches on technology and applied scientific. It is designed to enhance the postgraduates’ abilities to explore the practice and study and solve practical problems, in order to cultivate high-level application-oriented talents who meet the social needs (Shi Ying, Liu Jinglin, Che Haibo, 2011). From the perspective of professional degree training objectives, professional degree is practice-oriented with emphasis on practice and application. It is designed to culture high-level talents who have received formal and high-level training in terms of profession and specialized technology. Degree-granting standards should reflect the features of the specialized subject and the demand for high-level talents’ specialized technical and academic abilities. Its outstanding feature is to closely relate academic feature to occupational feature. The talents who obtain professional degree is not primarily engaged in academic research, but in jobs with clear career background. Thus,

the applied research capacity-building is the key to professional degree education.

### 1.2 From MSW and “Sociology Social Work Direction” Differences of View

MSW is a professional degree. “Sociology of Social Work Direction” belongs to the academic degree and the professional degree is a degree different from the type of academic degree. The academic degree mainly highlights and mastering of knowledge and theoretical level of the recipients in the corresponding disciplines, whereas professional degree lays more emphasis on professional competence and literacy required for specific profession of its recipients. Such persons have the basic conditions for practice and are able to apply a certain of theoretical knowledge and technology to effectively engage in professional work. Education for academic degree postgraduates focuses on theoretical study and research to meet the general needs of human development and social needs of basic research personnel; Education for professional degree postgraduates focuses on meeting the professionals need for specific social jobs. This indicates that the professional degree postgraduate education has obvious applications orientation, which focuses on strengthening postgraduates’ ability to solve practical problems.

In summary, cultivation of applied research capacity is the feature for social work professional degree postgraduate education to distinguish from academic degree postgraduate education, and determine nature and development of the social work degree postgraduate education. Thus, the nature of MSW education is to cultivate the postgraduates’ ability to apply the research ability.

## 2. CURRENT TEACHING SITUATION AND REFLECTION OF MSW

There are 33 postgraduate units in China which firstly implement MSW experimental work, of which the ministry institutions total 18 and local colleges and universities total 15. Recruitment of MSW students started from 2010, which has been included in the unified national postgraduate enrollment plan management. In 2011, there are a total of 56 MSW colleges and universities which recruit students, up by 23 year on year. MSW admission ratio is generally between 1:1.2, with enrollment also increased significantly (CASS Graduate School, 2010). Colleges and universities postgraduate enrollment for 2013 has ended, and MSW still shows enrollment expansion trends. Faced with such a group of students who are “keen” on MSW and a sustained enrollment expansion trend, MSW construction and development is worthy of our attention and thinking. However, since the MSW in China is in the nascent stage and lacks abundant experience for drawing upon, the overall construction of the MSW is in exploring state,

under which some problems are inevitable. Currently, the following several aspects can roughly be summarized after analyzing the MSW training program and the existing teaching situation:

### **2.1 MSW Teaching Did Not Highlight the Characteristics of Postgraduates With Professional Degree**

As for the current MSW training program, although all colleges and universities will target at fostering of the application-oriented talents, which is undoubtedly recognized, only a clear training objectives positioning can lay foundation for the scientific development of MSW education. However, some colleges and universities failed to have the training objectives in place during the implementation process. To solve this problem, MSW education curriculum setting and classroom teaching are mainly discussed.

a. Curriculum setting Curriculum setting is a core part of MSW cultivation, which, to a certain extent, affects the quality of MSW cultivation and affects whether the talents cultivated are able to adapt to the needs of society. MSW curriculum setting has an important role on reflecting “practicality” of the professional degree. However, from the current actual situation of colleges and universities, MSW curriculum setting and is not very different from Academic Degree (Social Work Sociology direction) postgraduate curriculum setting. Target of MSW curriculum setting is not strong, with not clear courses targeting. Features of professional degree such as profession, practicality, etc., fail to be exhibited. MSW curriculum setting is not well separated from academic degree postgraduate curriculum setting and many programs are attended by postgraduates from two kinds of academic degrees. In addition, the most prominent feature for a professional degree is strong practicality. However, MSW teaching contents are more theoretical and insufficient in terms of connection with practice, which fail to highlight the strong practicality of professional degree postgraduate education.

b. Classroom teaching. Classroom teaching is an important part of MSW postgraduate training, which will directly affect the theoretical knowledge level of social work postgraduates. MSW classroom teaching requires teachers to apply multimedia teaching, group discussions, field research, laboratory teaching, etc., strengthens the study of basic theoretical knowledge, and lays emphasis on case teaching and fostering postgraduates’ ability to analyze and solve problems with social work knowledge. However, the current MSW teaching copies the academic degree postgraduate teaching mode. A considerable part of the teachers fail to connect theoretical knowledge with social work practice during teaching and lack the use of case teaching based on the actual situation. This, to certain extent, shows that strong practical feature of MSW teaching is not well highlighted.

### **2.2 MSW Teaching Ignores Occupational and Academic Unity**

From the perspective of training objectives, MSW education mission is to meet the need of social welfare services departments and agencies and foster high-level application-oriented talents who have strong professional competence and professionalism, are able to creatively engage in social work practice. This requires that their education should focus on the career development, with professional competence and comprehensive quality as the core, to reflect the MSW occupational education. Meanwhile, the fostering of application-oriented talents necessarily requires adoption of senior professional theoretical knowledge. Only full grasping of solid theoretical knowledge and skills for social works and the history and cutting-edge trends of this discipline can be deeply understood, can the knowledge be applied to better solve practical problems. This indicates that, MSW education should unify professional and academic features when fostering talents. However, from current MSW fostering situation, on the one hand, many teachers explain social work theoretical knowledge and professional skills training by generalization. They are rarely able to combine the actual job requirements and actual cases of social work for targeted teaching (Zhang, 2005); On the other hand, postgraduates do not understand their own needs. A considerable part of post graduates have unclear career intentions and felt at a loss when asked what field is to be forayed into after graduation. Therefore, during the usual learning process, such students often feel confused and even doubt the usefulness of learning social work knowledge, reducing the recognition of their own profession. The above all suggest that the current MSW teaching neglects the occupational and academic unity.

### **2.3 MSW Teaching Pays Inadequate Attention to Practice Teaching**

MSW is a type of practice-oriented education, and practice teaching is the key part in its postgraduate education and also the basic way of equipping postgraduate students with practical abilities (Gu & Luo, 2009). Although all colleges and universities stress in formulating their MSW educational objectives and methods that the proportion of professional-practice teaching to the entire teaching program is to be increased, and emphasis will be laid on the cultivation of students’ practical abilities, these plans are not fully carried out in practice. In general, the reasons can be summed up as follows.

a. The development and management of professional-practice bases has limitations. Bases for professional practice are a major carrier of practice teaching. The better they are, the more successful cultivation of MSW postgraduates’ practical abilities will be. In recent years, colleges and universities flocked to develop a variety of practice bases, claiming that in this way, they could

improve students' practical abilities. Some of them, indeed, achieved much, but many did not. They failed to develop the bases in accordance with professional features of MSW plus social demand and students' actual condition. As a result, their so-called professional-practice bases were nothing but "a mere skeleton", where postgraduates either idled about all day long or served as unpaid workers, doing something totally irrelevant to their majors for free. Therefore, instead of developing practical abilities, postgraduate students wasted a lot of time here.

b. Postgraduate students lack instructions from teachers in practice. At present, most MSW students are left under the guidance of tutors for academic postgraduates. A majority of them specialize in sociology, psychology and the like. They are familiar with various books on social work and have a rough idea of related knowledge, but they are short of practical experiences. As a result, what they teach their students is not skills nor ways to solve practical problems but theoretical knowledge. Worse still, they tend to imitate the tutoring mode for academic postgraduates and those who instruct both MSW and academic postgraduates are inclined to pay more attention to the latter. In a word, a relatively large number of teachers are either too poorly equipped with background knowledge to teach MSW students or unable to work according to the features of MSW.

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### 3. THE PATH OF THE FUTURE MSW EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT

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#### 3.1 To Clear Up Training Objectives and Optimize Curriculum Setting and Classroom Teaching

MSW is not an academic degree supplement, but an independent degree system. Its training objectives are quite different from those of academic degrees. In the MSW education practice, its training objectives should target at high-level application-oriented talents, which determines its training way different from that of academic degree inevitable. Course study is an important part of MSW postgraduate education. Based on clear training objectives, how to scientifically set the curriculum and what teaching methods shall be applied are important focuses of MSW education.

As for curriculum setting, there are two urgent problems pending for settlement: First, we must combine professional features of MSW with talents training requirements and increase the proportion of professional practice courses. Professional practice curriculum emphasizes the ability of the postgraduates to solve practical problems, rather than just stay in the theoretical study. The schools should fully utilize practice platforms, such as social work laboratories, supported by construction and implementation of professional practice courses. Second, the curriculum setting should

focus on practice and closely center on the postgraduates' career development needs. In addition, improvement of professional competence and comprehensive quality shall be taken as the core, prompting students to be high-level application-oriented talents which can undertake the practical work. In addition, for teaching purposes, MSW classroom teaching cannot blindly copy the mode of academic degrees, but should actively explore appropriate teaching methods according to professional characteristics. The classroom teaching shall also be conducted according to the student's actual situation and future career needs. As for MSW classroom teaching, more practical factors should be integrated, and teaching methods including simulation training and case studies shall be often used, to mobilize the enthusiasm and initiative of students to the largest extent and stimulate their enthusiasm to participate in teaching.

#### 3.2 Value Practice Teaching and Enforce the Construction and Management of Professional Practice Base

The practice teaching is a key link in the cultivation of MSW graduates, while the professional practice base is an important carrier to achieve the practice teaching, therefore, the construction of practice base exerts an direct impact on the cultivation effect of the professional practice skills of MSW graduates. Meanwhile, the corresponding process management will provide the implementation of practice link with strong quality assurance (Lu Fangxia, 2012). For this reason, how to construct the practice base and effectively manage the professional practice of students is the problem we have to solve.

First of all, the construction of practice base must highlight the "expertise". Expertise is an important guarantee to upgrade core competencies and core competitiveness of social work. The professional skills of students serve as the magic weapon to distinguish from other majors and the root to survive from the highly competitive society. To the end, the construction of practice base shall not only deal with the practice issues of students, complete the teaching requirements of specified practice period, but also focus on the development of students' professional skills. Secondly, during the construction of practice base, strengthen the quality training of teachers and give full play to the professional guidance of teachers in the students' internship and practical process. It requires these teachers engage in MSW education to have a higher level of professional theory, stronger professional practice skills and also pay close attention to the development of social work. In addition, combine the research projects of teachers with the practice activities of students to guide the reflection of students during practice, thus assuring the quality of professional practice. At last, develop the *Professional Practice Manual* to enhance the practice process management of students. Specifically, it includes

three stages roughly: first, on the premise of combining the social requirements with actual conditions of students, define the professional practice units and develop detailed practice plans together with students; second, under the guidance of mentors and professional teachers, prepare well for the work at the practice base in advance to shorten the adaptation period; third, strengthen the contacts with the practice base by the school and mentors to develop and acquaint the practice program on the basis of full communication for the benefit of arrangement and management of students at the practice base.

MSW education is a long-term and arduous task that requires positive attention and support of the whole community. The deep reflection of its current development is the first step of a good start.

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