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The Positive Influence of Professional Practice on the Professional Identity of Social Work Major Students

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ABSTRACT

Based on the in-depth interviews with ten social work major students in Inner Mongolia university, a qualitative research was conducted on the positive impacts of professional internship on their professional identity. The research results show that professional practice can significantly affect the professional identity of social worker major students, and its impact is as follows: First, helping students strengthen self-knowledge and professional identity; Second, useful for students to integrate theoretical knowledge and practical skills and enhance their sense of achievement and career cognition. In addition, internship supervision helps students to improve professional skills and service capability.

Keywords:

Professional Practice, Professional Identity, Social Work Students, Positive, Impact.

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1. Introduction

Social work, as a major with strong applicability in social science, its professional education attaches great importance to the training of practical ability of social work major students. According to the "Opinions on Strengthening the Development of Social Work Professional Positions and the Encouragement and Guarantee of Talents" issued by 12 departments including the Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China, social workers should have the following abilities: Ability of integrating the social work ethics system; Ability to build relationships, analyze and solve problems with different cases; Ability to design and run basic service solutions; Ability to organize, manage and operate, and so on.^[1] As far as a social work major is concerned, to master these skills mentioned above, classroom knowledge learning is far from enough, students need lots of practice to learn knowledge and develop their skills. Therefore, the emphasis on practice has been an important method in social work education.

According to existing documents, professional practice is of great significance in the tutoring of social work majors. It is not only helpful for students to integrate their theoretical knowledge with practical skills and values, but also helps to establish their professional identity.^[2] Some studies have also confirmed that professional practice is an important factor in the establishment of students' professional identity.

According to result of an questionnaire survey of the social work major in WuHan, conducted by Li Pengjie on the subject of how social work internship directly affected the professional identity of them and^[3] a survey of social work students in their senior year in Taiwan conducted by Tang Yating, found that after professional internship, students' self-cognition and professional identity were greatly enhanced. Those research also found that the preparatory work before the internship of the supervisors, educational background and teaching experience of them, the ways of supervision and

the number of supervision times were significantly affect how well their students' professional identity is established.^[4] Based on the qualitative analysis of 30 reports on internship of social workers conducted by Yu Bing et al. that professional internship have positive impact on students' professional growth, career cognition, personality development and students' professional identity. ^[5] However, how does a professional internship enhance the professional identity of social work students? There are few research documents on this topic in mainland China, especially on the qualitative research from the perspective of social work major students. Considering the overall low professional identity of social work major students in mainland China, it is of great significance for them to understand the role of professional internship and improve their professional identity as social workers.

2. Research Methods

2.1 Research Methods

The main purpose of qualitative research is to "intepretate" or "comprehend" the personal experience and its meaning to the subject.^[6] In this study, qualitative research method is adopted to interpret the experience of the subject from the perspective of themselves, rather than from the perspective of the researcher's.^[7] Therefore, this study attempts to use the in-depth interview method to focus on the enhancement of their professional identity of the research objects after the internship experience . Through the observation of the interview and the content analysis of the interview draft, this study summarizes the role mechanism of internship in improving the interns' professional identity. Since the enhancement of professional identity is a gradual process and involves personal attitude change, it is not possible to collect interviewees' subjective attitude changes by quantitative methods. So the method of In-depth interviews is adopted to collect detailed, rich thoughts and opinions of the interviewee.^[8] Therefore, this is a method with certain validity in this study.

2.2 Selection of Research Objects

As the best university in Inner Mongolia, to set up social work major in the year of 2003, the university attaches great importance to the practice of social science and sends all undergraduates to Guangdong province for professional practice during the summer holidays of their sophomore and junior years from 2016. In this study, 10 social work major students who participated in the summer internship in 2016, 2017 and 2018 were selected as in-depth interviewees.

The research process was conducted with an open outline focusing on the enhancement of the students' professional identity after the internship experience, and the interview was recorded in the whole process. After the interview, the author also did the interview draft in time and made text analysis of the draft. Prior to the interview, the opinions of the interviewees were consulted and in order to protect their privacy the material obtained were processed anonymously.

3. Research Findings

The teaching method of social work major students in Inner Mongolia university is still in its exploration stage, establishment of a set of standardized and mature internship system is in pressing need. For internship helps students to recognize the importance of practice for social work, so professional internship has been incorporated into the teaching program, if students can't complete certain social work practice courses, they wouldn't be able to graduate. Each professional internship program is at the beginning and the end of the sophomore and junior year in summer vacation, and lasts about 30-45 days or so.

Training and practice is under the supervision of tutors and after the internship, a report is required, and sharing session will be held once a year during internship year.

According to our in-depth interview, it is found that professional internship has good impact on social work students' understanding of social

work, enhancement of their professional ability, career choice, personal adaptability to society and other abilities. Specifically, the positive impact of professional internship on professional identity of social work major students mainly includes the following aspects.

3.1 Professional Practice Helps Students Enhance Their Self-cognition

To achieve professional identity, individuals must go through the stage of self-identity, which means they must have a clear understanding of themselves, their personality and future development orientation.^[9] Professional internship help enhance the self-knowledge of the interns. During the internship, students will be required to provide necessary social work services to the service objects, and in the process, students will have the opportunity to examine their own personality and ability, which will help them improve their self-knowledge. One of the interviewees emphasized that through her two internships, she had a new understanding of herself.

"New self- knowledge, I think, tells me what is right for me, and right for what field. I think I am more suitable for serving disabled people, not teenagers. I think when you do social work, you have different countermeasures for different objects, and it's important to know what your personality and interests are and which work suits you better.

3.2 Service Effectiveness Improves Students' Sense of Achievement

As a teaching task, social work internship has assessment requirements for students. Each internship requires students to complete different types of work. However, in order to avoid the negative impact of internship on students, internship supervision is necessary for the the effect of internship, and understanding of the students' potential and enhancement their personal sense of achievement. The sense of achievements students feel during internship will further enhance their professional identity.

"I didn't feel like I was a social worker until they called me one. But when I do something that makes my service object feel they're making progress, they let you build that identity, and they let you know that you're a social worker. "

"Actually, I didn't do well in the first two years of my college, but when I finished my internship after my sophomore year, my supervisor give me high praise for my work, that is when I began to recognize the value of professional social work. It makes me feel very proud of myself and am capable of helping people, so that experience really inspired me."

"My service objects were people with mental disabilities, about whom I practically know nothing about. When I was with them, They make me feel very happy. Personally, I think the happiness when doing a job plays a big role in whether you choose this job as a carrier or not. When I serve the mentally disabled, it just make me feel very happy, This ,I think, is the best thing about being a social worker. "

3.3 Internship Helps Strengthen Students' Recognition of Professional Value

Social work values and ethics is an important link of teaching, but classroom teaching is not adequate to enhance the students' understanding of professional values and ethics, while internship experience can complement the shortage of classroom teaching, and help students understand professional value better.

" I think as a social worker, you must accept this value, when you see a service object comes to you for help, if you do not accept him at all, then how can you help him! So I think this value has a deep influence on me. If you, as a social worker, do not accept it at the very beginning, then you will find social work very hard. I think I need to identify with this value if I want to do the work well. "

3.4 Internship Helps Students Integrate Their Theoretical Knowledge and Practical Ability

The integration of theoretical learning and practical ability is the key to social work. Through professional practice, students will be able to

combine their theoretical cognition and practical ability, so as to build their professional knowledge system.

"I seldom read books. After the internship, I regret not reading a lot, so now I want to read books. Before the internship, I always thought theory is very boring, but after participating in social work I found that the theory is very useful and easy to remember. "

"When you start a group or start a case, ,and when you feel that your help is very needed to help the objects to figure out how to achieve their goal or how to get better, when you think about what should you do to help this person, that's when you need the theory, that's when you need it to support how you can help this person. And in the process, you feel that what you need most is theory and data, and that's when you start learning. "

3.5 Internship Helps Students Improve Their Career Cognition

During the internship in social work institutions, students will be exposed to professional environment of social work and get to know the organizational culture, nature of work etc., which is very good for students' understading of professional career and their intention to engage in social work in the future.

"The intership made me less afraid of this profession, because I have no experience before, so I was a little afraid, but after the internship I feel I'm better prepared for my future job. And through the experience of working in the organizations, I've learned how to work with people well."

"When you talk to people who have been social workers, you'll began to understand what social workers are all about. The experience they tell you will inspire you a lot. It makes you want to be a great social worker and feel more confident about it.

3.6 Internship Supervision Can Significantly Affect Students' Professional Identity

The tradition of supervision of social work practice can be traced back to the period of

charity organizations. In Hong Kong, a social work internship supervisor requires high ability, they must have a social work professional licence and have many years of experience, guiding ability and spare time to do the job, and they had to be employed by the school. Studies have shown that inexperienced practitioners doesn't have strong professional ego, and are more likely to cause the interns' a series of mood fluctuations, including excitement, fear, depression, disappointment and complacency, etc. On the contrary, the guidance of a qualified supervisor will help reduce the intern's work pressure, improve their efficiency as well as develop their professional skills and ability to work independently. ^[10] This research also found that supervision can help improve students' service level, enhance their sense of achievement and self-knowledge, and strengthen their professional cognition.

"It was my first time to be a social worker, I didn't know what to do at the beginning. My internship supervisor gave me a very clear indication of what I should do, and give me very strict requirements, and instruction of what level my service should get to. "

"The supervisor of my first internship taught me a lot. I didn't have much interest in the major of social work before, but under the influence of my supervisor, my interest in my major had gradually grew. Each week he will tell me some of his theory, his social work experience, and how to apply the theory and knowledge to practice, I learned a lot from him and when I do a good job I feel a sense of achievement. This made me more and more confident about myself in my work. Also, my supervisor told me what my shortcomings are. It made me know myself better, and how I can use my strengths in my role as a social worker, and how I can improve my weaknesses to be a good social worker.

4. Research Findings

Through in-depth interviews with ten students, it is not difficult to see that professional internship

has a lot of influence on social work students' professional identity.

4.1 Conclusion

Based on the text analysis of interview transcript, the researcher found that professional internship can significantly affect the professional identity of social worker major students in the following aspects: it is helpful for students to strengthen their self-knowledge and professional value identity, it is helpful for students to integrate theoretical knowledge and practical skills to enhance their sense of achievement, it is helpful for improving students' cognition of professional career, and in addition, internship supervision helps students to improve professional skills and service level, as well as enhance their sense of accomplishment and self-knowledge, and strengthen the recognition of professional image.

4.2 Advice

The results of this study confirms that professional internships to improve social work students' professional identity is of great importance, however, in the current social work practice in mainland China, there are many deficiencies.

Based on practical work of the students' and supervisor's, this article provides the following suggestions to social work education in mainland China.

Assist Students to Integrate Their Internship Experience and Enhance Self-perception.

Firstly, both the educational circle and the practical circle should emphasize on methods in the practice teaching, which is, to help students integrate the professional theory and practical experience. ^[11] Universities should increase the number of supporting courses of professional practice, such as internship guidance courses, self-knowledge and growth courses, and focus on the goals of professional knowledge and professional identity, so as to maximize the quality of students' internship. Secondly, both internship instructors and practical supervisors should attach importance to the application of

reflective teaching methods, so as to link it to relevant courses and supervise the education process to help students improve their self-awareness.^[12]

Improve the Quality of Internship Supervision. First, strengthen the construction of supervision system, clarify the concept of supervision, the scope of supervision responsibilities, supervision forms and methods, supervision and assessment mechanism. Second, colleges and universities can develop relevant supervision courses, compile localized supervision teaching materials, and accumulate the local supervision theory and practical experience, and sort out and introduce overseas supervision research results. Third, universities should improve the professional quality supervision, in order to combine it with the practice of teaching practitioners to become a supervisor of professional quality. Fourth, strengthen the evaluation of internship supervision, so as to ensure that the supervisors can effectively perform their duties of supervising the interns.

Strengthen the Construction of Internship Institutions. Firstly, colleges and universities which have social work major should have strict requirements in the selection of internship institutions, and choose appropriate institutions to cooperate with them to

implemente the education internship. Secondly, colleges and universities with social work major should cooperate closely with internship institutions. On the one hand, universities can provide business guidance to internship institutions to help them improve service quality and help build existing and potential institutions. On the other hand, institutions should also cooperate with schools to create conditions for internship teaching and relavent materials for teaching and scientific research, so as to jointly help social work majors to improve their ability.

Setting Educational Standards for Social Work Internship. In 1952, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) in the United States established the standards for education

internship and further regulated the requirements for education internship in social work specialty in its Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards revised in 2008. Hong Kong also formed a set of normative education standards for social work practice in 1997.^[13] However, there is still no unified and standardized internship education standard for social work majors in mainland China where there are many difficulties such as unclear training objectives and irregular internship arrangements,^[14] which directly affect the quality of professional internship. Therefore, setting up the standards of regulating education for professional internship should be the focus of current social worker professional community in mainland China.

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