

Social Work Education in China: The Development, Difficulties and Solutions

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Abstract: In the course of nearly a hundred years' development, China's social work education has gone through different stages of initial development, suspension, recovery and reconstruction, as well as rapid development. Great achievements have been made. But there are still many practical difficulties affecting the developing progress. Starting from reviewing the development of social work education in China, this paper analyses realistic difficulties faced by social work education in our country, and points out solutions to these problems.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, China is in a critical period of social transformation. With the deepening of reform, social problems continue to emerge, which restricts the speed of transformation and affects the effect of reform. In order to properly solve contradictions between the transformation and the governance, and effectively address above problems, the function of social work must be given to full play. Social work plays an important role in solving social problems, resolving social contradictions and promoting fairness and justice. In October 2006, the Sixth Plenary Session of the 16th CPC Central Committee passed the CPC Central Committee's Decision on Several Major Issues Concerning the Construction of a Harmonious Socialist Society, and proposed to build a team of social workers for the first time. Since 2015, social work has been included in Report on the Work of the Government for four consecutive years. Social work is a crucial institutional arrangement in modern society, as well as an important symbol of social development and the progress of human civilization.

Social work education is an important prerequisite for realizing the professionalization and specialization of social work. With the support of the government, China's social work education has achieved remarkable results. According to the statistics of the China Association for Social Work Education, due to 2014, there were 298 undergraduate social work specialties in China, and more than 60 colleges and universities enrolled students major in social work or community service, elderly service and other specialties related to social work. A total of 104 universities have been approved by the Academic Degree Committee of the State Council to set up program of cultivating Masters of Social Work (MSW). Some universities have already recruited doctoral students in the direction of social work and launched their own doctoral programs.

2. The Development of Social Work Education in China

Influenced by western academic circles and religious groups, and promoted by some Chinese scholars once studied in Europe and America, social work education in China started in the 1920s and developed for nearly a hundred years. The development process can be roughly divided into three different stages.

2.1 The stage of preliminary development (1922-1951)

China's social work education began to carry out in the 1920s, marked by the establishment of the Department of Sociology in Yanjing University in 1922. The department focused on training professionals in social services. In 1925, it changed to the Department of Sociology and Social Services. Since then, University of Shanghai, Soochow University, Hangchow University, University of Nanking, Jinling Women's College of Arts and Sciences, Fudan University, Jinan

University, Tsinghua University and other institutions of higher learning also opened courses or specialties in social services and social work.^[1] These educational contents basically continued after the founding of New China.

Social work education was introduced into China during this period and became an independent subject for specific historical reasons. The first is the emergence of academic atmosphere. At that time in China, sociology achieved good development. Academic teams were established; the academic influence was produced. As a secondary discipline of sociology, social work was put on the academic agenda. Teaching and practical activities began to carry out. Secondly, it is the need of social services. Before the founding of New China, the Chinese nation suffered from war disturbances, the decline of national strength and popular destitution. Social construction and social services were in urgent need. It is with such a social mission that social work entered the Chinese society.

2.2 The stage of suspension (1952-1986)

In 1952, in the adjustment of higher education institutions and departments, the New China drew lessons from the educational experience of the former Soviet Union and cancelled the specialties of sociology and social work. As a result, China's social work education entered a period of suspension for more than 30 years. At that time, the reason of cancelling above-mentioned majors was that the socialist system in New China was a new social system that serves the people. It can meet the fundamental needs of the people. Social problems would not occur under that circumstances. At the same time, Marx and Engels, who designed the socialist system, are excellent sociologists themselves. Their theories contain rich ideas of social construction and social service, which can fully meet the needs of the construction of New China. The suspension period of more than 30 years greatly hindered the development of social work practice and education in China. The professional development of social construction and social services lagged behind. A large number of social work teaching and research personnel have been forced to transfer to other disciplines.

2.3 The stage of recovery and reconstruction (1987-1998)

On September 12, 1987, the Ministry of Civil Affairs convened the Conference on the Development of Social Work Education at the Beijing Foreign Economic Exchange Center near Madianqiao. The meeting demonstrated the necessity and feasibility of carrying out social work education in China. It is historically known as the Madian Conference. The conference reconfirmed the status of social work as a subject and laid a foundation for the recovery and development of social work education in China.^[2] In the same year, the former State Education Commission approved the establishment of social work majors in universities such as Peking University. In 1988, the Department of Sociology of Peking University officially added the major of social work and began enrollment in 1989. Then, Renmin University of China, Jilin University, Xiamen University and Shanghai University also offered social work majors or courses. In 1993, the Department of Social Work was established in China Youth University of Political Studies, which became the first professional education institution at the departmental level after social work education was restored in China. In the summer of the same year, the college recruited the first batch of undergraduates majoring in social work and management. In April 1994, the Asia-Pacific Association for Social Work Education and the Chinese Association for Social Work Education jointly organized the second seminar on the development of social work education in Chinese communities. During the meeting, the China Association for Social Work Education was established, which provided organizational support for the rehabilitation and reconstruction of social work education in China. From 1987 to 1998, social work education was restored and developed to a certain extent throughout the country.^[3]

This period is not only the recovery period of China's social work education, but also a turning point. Since then, social work education restored its status as an independent discipline. Teaching and scientific research were effectively carried out; the number of undergraduate graduates increased; scientific research achievements also emerged. It is worth noting that the social work education at that time was different from the early social work education began in the 1920s. The

participation of a large number of Chinese culture elements and Chinese experience fundamentally changed the practice of “copying” Western experience, and formed the social work education model with contents with Chinese characteristics.

2.4 The stage of rapid development (1999-present)

In 1998, the Ministry of Education re-promulgated the Catalogue of Undergraduate Specialties in Institutions of Higher Education, which changed the social work specialty from “controlled development” to “non-controlled development”, providing institutional guarantee for the further development of social work education. In 1999, the Chinese government decided to expand the enrollment scale of higher education institutions. Higher education entered a stage of rapid development; the social work specialty was also given a rapid development opportunity in this process. More importantly, at the beginning of this century, the Communist Party of China put forward the goal and strategic deployment of building a harmonious socialist society and accelerating the social construction with the focus on improving people’s livelihood. It also proposed that a team of large-scale social work talents should be established. These goals and deployments provide an important opportunity for the rapid development of social work education. Since 2000, China’s social work education has entered the fast lane of development. The number of newly established institutions of social work specialty has increased rapidly. The enrollment scale has expanded, and the level of enrollment has constantly upgraded and improved. The speed of development is unprecedented both in China and in the world.

3. Difficulties in the Development of Social Work Education in China

Some scholars regard “late start and rapid development” as the most important feature of the development of social work education in China. The advantage of “late start and rapid development” is that we can learn the experience and lessons from other countries and regions in that course, so as to avoid detours and make fewer mistakes. To be sure, the brilliant achievements of China’s social work education in the short term benefit from the development characteristics of “late start and rapid development”. But it also has disadvantages. We want to complete the journey that other countries and regions have traveled for hundreds of years in the shortest time; problems and contradictions that appear in other places in the long-term may emerge in a short period of time in our country. We have to cope with a lot of problems, which make us feel exhausted and even cause serious problems that hinder the further development of China’s social work education.

3.1 Copying Western experience and lacking Chinese experience

Professional social work originated in the West. China’s social work education learnt a lot from Western experience. Especially in the aspects of basic value system, theoretical basis and working skills, China adopted the basic model of Western social work. Through this way, a complete educational model with rich teaching contents was formed in a short period of time; progresses were also made. But in that process, the core contents of social work theory and methods were copied the western experience directly. There is still a long way to go to establish a theoretical framework and practical model of social work with Chinese characteristics. The different attributes of Chinese and Western society are a consensus of academia. In addition, social work attaches great importance to “people in situations”. The teaching process of social work without the specific Chinese situation cannot match with the actual situation of China and will affect the actual effect of social work. These drawbacks have been reflected in the practical activities of social work in recent years. If teaching activities cannot effectively solve practical problems, teaching will become a mere formality and the subject will be marginalized. Therefore, this problem is an important one related to the development of social work education.

3.2 The disconnection between teaching and practice

Social work has significant practical attributes at the beginning of its birth in the West. The Poverty Relief Act, as a source of social work, is an action plan of the government aims to solve the

poverty problem. A large number of practical activities aimed at poverty relief led to the final formation of social security and social policy. Chalmers, another origin of social work, was a British pastor who engaged in religious practice and tried to solve the suffering of the civilian population. It can be said that there is no social work discipline without practical activities. However, most of the teachers of social work education in China are transferred from sociology, philosophy, history, ideological and political education, pedagogy, psychology and other related majors. The lack of practical experience in social work makes it difficult for them to undertake the relevant tasks of guiding students in carrying out practical activities, which also restricts the social function of social work to a certain extent.

3.3 Lacking of professional social work positions

In today's Chinese society, professional posts related to specific social work such as social construction and social services are scarce. The existing positions in civil affairs, trade unions and community departments are occupied by non-social work professionals, which affect the employment of students majoring in social work and hinder the further development of social work education. Many families pay a lot of tuition fee for their children to study in higher education, expecting their children to get better employment opportunities through higher education. However, the current situation of social work education has broken parents' expectations, affected the enrollment scale of social work discipline, and hindered the development and growth of social work discipline.

4. Strategies for the Development of Social Work Education in China

4.1 Exploring local resources and enriching China's experience

China is a large country with thousands of years of historical tradition and culture, as well as rich local cultural resources. This is not only the basis of China's experience, but also the starting point of China's social work education. We should have the consciousness to develop and explore the contemporary value of local culture, enhance our vitality, transform cultural matters with transformation conditions into education resources, integrate western experience reasonably and appropriately, and bring the social work value of "local resources" into full play. We should establish the dominant position of China's experience, regard the study of "people in situations" as the top priority of social work education, put the ability to solve social problems in the first place, properly refer to the mature experience of the West, construct the educational model and content of social work with Chinese characteristics, and further improve the influence and attraction of social work.

4.2 Adjusting system design to promote the development of practical activities

Based on the reform of social work education mode, we should enhance the level of social work education, adjust the system of social work education, promote practical activities of social work education, and realize the unification of social work education with social work practice. The primary task is to change the promotion and assessment system for social work teachers. The time and scope of social practice activities organized by the teacher should be included into the assessment system, so as to guide teachers to participate in social practice activities. Secondly, we should re-arrange the teaching content, and put social practice activities into the syllabus. Through these measures, students can apply what they have learned, strengthen their social service abilities, and become qualified social workers.

4.3 Expanding employment

Social work posts are related to the scale of social work education. Now the existing employment posts are inadequate, which hinders the further development of social work and affects the social identity of social work. As what Tajfel said, "The social identity is part of the individual's self-knowledge, and self-cognition stems from the knowledge of identity of the ethnic group member, and the values and emotional significance of the identity of the group".^[4] To this end, it is

necessary to provide more social work positions in a planned way, and to hand over the right of implementing social policies and social welfare to professional social work institutions. The government can purchase more services, and create more opportunities for social work talents to participate in social construction. At the same time, in the process of employ social work personnel, the departments of civil affairs, trade unions and street communities should adopt the qualification admission system. The qualification of social workers should be taken as the criterion of recruitment and assessment, which can not only increase employment posts, but also improve the quality of social construction and enhance social service levels.

5. Conclusion

Although social work and social work education are facing many difficulties in the process of localization, we are still confident that social work educators and professional social workers can shoulder the historic task together, promote the continuous development of social work education in China and uplift the level of social welfare. It is believed that with the support and assistance of the Chinese government and the joint efforts of all relevant personnel in social work, China's social work and social work education will embark on a localized road that suited to our national conditions.

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