

The Practice Instructor System: Salvation or Illusion in Master's-Level Social Work Education?

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ABSTRACT

Although master's programs in social work claim to prioritize the cultivation of practice-oriented professionals, in reality, they have long been trapped in a dilemma of "emphasizing theory while neglecting practice." As a result, graduates often find themselves ill-equipped to address complex social issues. The practice instructor system has been heralded as a potential panacea for bridging this gap. However, its implementation has repeatedly faltered due to a lack of qualified mentors, institutional deficiencies, and structural limitations. Adopting a critical perspective, this paper questions the effectiveness of the current model of social work education at the master's level and directly confronts the multiple constraints facing the practice instructor system. Despite the numerous challenges, the paper argues that the practice instructor system is not an unattainable ideal. With targeted institutional design and well-calibrated incentive mechanisms, it holds significant potential to become a catalyst for substantive reform in social work education.

KEYWORDS

Paradox of the Practice Instructor System; Challenges in Educational Reform; Shortcomings in Practice-based Teaching; The Myth of Application-oriented Training.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, the Master of Social Work (MSW) education has been entrusted with the significant responsibility of cultivating high-level applied talents. However, in practice, educational activities often deviate from this original intention, with the tendency to "emphasize theory while neglecting practice" becoming a persistent issue in MSW education. This issue hampers industry development and talent growth [1]. In the classroom, students continuously study social policies, social service models, and case analyses. However, when confronted with complex social issues, they often appear inadequate. This disconnection between theory and practice not only reduces the effectiveness of education but also, to some extent, diminishes the status of social work within the public service system [2]. The misalignment between academic education and social needs has increasingly subjected MSW education to external scrutiny.

To address this issue, universities and educational policymakers have proposed the "fieldwork mentorship system," which aims to introduce front-line social work practitioners to bring real-world social service experience and skills directly into the teaching process [3]. Ideally, the fieldwork mentorship system should serve as an important supplement to address the insufficient practical experience of academic mentors, helping students acquire skills to tackle real-world problems beyond academic learning [4]. However, the implementation process has not been smooth. Issues regarding the sources of fieldwork mentors, their teaching capabilities, incentive mechanisms, and role

positioning have frequently emerged during the implementation stage, causing the system to become merely formalistic in many universities [5]. The involvement of many fieldwork mentors is more symbolic than substantial, failing to truly take on the responsibility of cultivating students' practical abilities. This paradox of the system has sparked much criticism, with some even regarding it as a “stopgap measure” rather than a genuine educational innovation [6].

This paper undertakes a critical examination of the necessity and feasibility of the practice instructor system within master's-level social work education. Building upon an analysis of the limitations inherent in the current educational model, it seeks to uncover the institutional challenges that hinder the effective implementation of this system in practice, while also exploring its potential future directions. Although theoretically sound and widely endorsed, the practice instructor system's practical efficacy remains uncertain: can it truly serve as a transformative solution to bridge the persistent gap between education and practice, or is it merely a temporary fix that fails to address the structural weaknesses of practice-based training in social work education? Through a multidimensional analysis, this paper aims to offer new perspectives and pathways for reform, with the goal of advancing more effective strategies for cultivating practical competence in social work graduate education.

2. THE PARADOX AND PRACTICAL DILEMMAS OF MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK (MSW) EDUCATION

2.1. The Gap between Theoretical Ideals and Reality

The original intent of MSW education is to cultivate applied talents capable of addressing complex social issues. However, this ideal often remains unattainable in reality [7]. Although the education system emphasizes the equal importance of theory and practice, practical teaching still occupies a relatively secondary position in actual curriculum settings. Theoretical courses dominate, while practical training is confined to limited internships or short-term social practices. Students acquire academic analyses of social policies and social service models in the classroom, only to find themselves lacking the ability to solve real-world problems when they enter social service settings. This gap not only diminishes the effectiveness of education but also results in students' insufficient competitiveness in the job market.

2.2. The Current State and Criticism of Practical Teaching

Despite the increased proportion of practical courses in MSW education in many universities in recent years, overall, practical teaching remains more formalistic than substantive [9]. Many practical courses, while emphasizing hands-on operations in name, actually rely on case analysis or situational simulations, lacking genuine opportunities to engage in social service settings. Even when students enter the internship phase, their actual improvement is limited due to short internship durations and weak guidance. This situation reveals the structural flaws in the current MSW education in terms of practical teaching, which means that even after completing their studies, students still need to go through a lengthy period of adaptation to practical work when they enter the workplace [10].

2.3. Imbalance in Teaching Resources and Talent Structure

Faculty in university-based social work education programs are predominantly academic-oriented, with strengths in policy analysis and theoretical development. However, many lack substantial experience in direct social service practice. This imbalance in faculty composition has a direct impact on the quality of practice-oriented teaching. While academic advisors can provide students with solid theoretical foundations, they often fall short in equipping them with hands-on practical skills. At the same time, frontline practitioners—those actively engaged in social service delivery—are frequently

excluded from university classrooms due to a lack of teaching experience or academic credentials. This disconnect prevents the effective integration of theory and practice in the curriculum, further widening the gap between education and professional practice.

2.4. Constraints of the Social Environment and Industry Development

The social work profession in China is still in a developmental phase, with limited public awareness of the role and value of social workers. Consequently, the demand for professionally trained social work practitioners has not been fully recognized, nor has their significance been adequately emphasized. These limitations at the industry level have a direct bearing on the positioning of master's-level social work education and hinder the optimal allocation of practical training resources. Moreover, the inherently practice-oriented nature of social work education necessitates close collaboration between universities and social service agencies to co-develop field education platforms. However, differences in goals, priorities, and institutional interests often result in superficial partnerships lacking long-term mechanisms, thereby compromising the depth and effectiveness of practice-based teaching.

3. THE NECESSITY OF THE FIELD MENTORSHIP SYSTEM: REALITY OR ILLUSION?

3.1. Theoretical Basis: The Original Intent and Vision of the Field Mentorship System

The proposal of the field mentorship system originates from the long-standing deficiency in practical teaching within Master of Social Work (MSW) education. As a supplementary educational mechanism, the core concept of the field mentorship system lies in introducing practitioners with extensive experience from the front lines of social work to compensate for the insufficiencies of academic mentors in practical operations. In theory, field mentors are capable of transforming complex social issues into teaching cases and, through the reenactment of real-world work scenarios, provide students with more targeted guidance and feedback. This model attempts to break away from the singular path of "theoretical instruction—academic research," placing students directly at the forefront of social work practice and achieving seamless integration between education and professional development.

Under ideal conditions, the field mentorship system is not only capable of cultivating students' practical skills but also encourages a deeper understanding of the ethical norms and professional values of social work. Through direct interaction with field mentors, students can gain diverse perspectives on social issues and gradually develop critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. Moreover, the field mentorship system can also promote cooperation between universities and social institutions to some extent, forming an educational model of collaborative talent cultivation between schools and enterprises, thereby further expanding the depth and breadth of MSW education.

3.2. Questioning the Necessity: Problems That the Field Mentorship System Cannot Fundamentally Solve

Despite the promising blueprint painted by the field mentorship system in theory, its necessity and effectiveness have gradually come under scrutiny in actual implementation. The complexity and diversity of social work practice determine that a single field mentor is unlikely to comprehensively cover the internship and practical needs of students. Although a field mentor may have rich experience, their area of expertise is usually limited. When students encounter different social issues, they may still face gaps in experience and skills. Additionally, regional differences in social work and

the diversity of service recipients make it difficult to fully replicate the experience of field mentors in different social environments, restricting the broad applicability of their practical guidance.

Meanwhile, the field mentorship system faces a series of practical challenges at the operational level. Many field mentors, burdened with heavy workloads in social service institutions, often regard participation in university teaching as an "additional burden," lacking sufficient time and energy to deeply engage in the students' growth process. Even if field mentors can spare time for teaching, their methods often lack systematicness, relying more on personal experience sharing, which can lead to classes becoming mere case presentations rather than forming structured teaching content. Moreover, there are differences between field mentors and academic mentors in educational goals and evaluation criteria. Field mentors emphasize practical skills, while academic mentors focus more on students' theoretical literacy and research achievements. This conceptual divergence further exacerbates the contradictions in the allocation of educational resources.

3.3. The Limitations and Symbolic Significance of the Field Mentorship System

The field mentorship system is gradually taking on a "symbolic" role in social work education. Although many universities have incorporated the field mentorship system into their curriculum, in reality, the frequency and depth of field mentors' involvement are often low. Some universities only arrange for field mentors to provide guidance during the internship phase, and even then, the guidance time is limited. This superficial involvement makes it difficult to achieve true integration of theory and practice, with field mentors often playing more of a "decorative" role to meet the superficial requirements of practical teaching in the educational system, rather than substantially enhancing students' practical abilities.

More alarmingly, in the absence of sufficient field mentor resources, some universities choose to have full-time teachers or social work doctoral students temporarily "double as" field mentors. This practice undermines the professionalism of the field mentorship system and further exacerbates the distortion of practical teaching. Under such circumstances, the field mentorship system not only fails to address the practical shortcomings of MSW education but may also obscure the importance of practical teaching, leaving universities lacking sufficient motivation for reform in practical teaching.

In summary, although the field mentorship system has undeniable theoretical value, its necessity and feasibility face severe challenges in actual application. For MSW education, it is neither realistic nor sustainable to expect the field mentorship system to solve all practical teaching problems in one fell swoop. Against this backdrop, how to re-examine the functional positioning of the field mentorship system and avoid its becoming a mere formality in institutional design has become a core issue that urgently needs to be addressed in the process of social work education reform.

4. FEASIBILITY ANALYSIS OF THE PRACTICE INSTRUCTOR SYSTEM: BARRIERS TO PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION

Although the practice instructor system is widely regarded as a key approach to addressing the deficiencies in practical training within master's-level social work education, its implementation has encountered numerous real-world obstacles, making it difficult to sustain or produce notable outcomes in many universities. In theory, the introduction of practice instructors should facilitate a stronger integration of theory and practice. However, the developmental stage of the social work profession, the misalignment in human resource distribution, and the lack of effective collaboration between universities and social institutions have created substantial barriers to its application. This section explores four core challenges to the effective implementation of the practice instructor system: scarcity of mentors, inconsistent teaching quality, weak institutional incentives, and collaboration barriers between academic and practice mentors.

4.1. Scarcity and Uneven Distribution of Practice Instructors

The most immediate challenge to the implementation of the practice instructor system is the severe shortage and uneven distribution of qualified mentors. As the social work profession is still developing in China, the number of practitioners who are both experienced and capable of taking on mentoring roles is limited. Many frontline social workers, though rich in field experience, lack formal pedagogical training and theoretical knowledge, making it difficult for them to meet academic teaching standards. Moreover, while major metropolitan areas like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou benefit from relatively abundant mentor resources due to a more developed social service infrastructure, institutions in other regions struggle to find suitable mentors due to the absence of strong local social work agencies. This geographic disparity results in significant differences in the effectiveness of implementation across regions, limiting the practical impact of the system in many universities.

In an attempt to mitigate this issue, some universities have introduced remote instruction or short-term appointments to engage social work experts from other regions as practice instructors. While this may temporarily alleviate resource shortages, it lacks the sustained interaction and follow-up necessary for meaningful mentor-student development. Furthermore, the cost of cross-regional collaboration is often high, making it difficult for institutions to maintain such arrangements long-term. As a result, the sustainability of the practice instructor system remains a major challenge.

4.2. Challenges in Ensuring Teaching Quality

Even if the issues of quantity and distribution are addressed, inconsistent teaching quality among practice instructors remains a central issue. Social work is a highly practice-oriented discipline, but practical experience does not automatically translate into effective teaching ability. Many practice instructors are proficient in service delivery and program management but lack formal training in pedagogy or curriculum design. In classroom settings, instruction often relies heavily on personal anecdotes and case sharing, with little effort to connect theoretical knowledge with practical skill-building. As a result, teaching content tends to be fragmented and unstructured, limiting students' comprehensive acquisition of practice competencies.

Additionally, teaching methods are often overly reliant on one-way communication, such as narrative case studies, with insufficient use of interactive or participatory techniques. This hinders the development of students' critical thinking and innovation in practice. Some students report that the content shared by practice instructors is too specific to their own service areas and lacks broader applicability across different fields, making it difficult to build a well-rounded competency framework. Thus, despite its theoretical value, the actual effectiveness of the practice instructor system is constrained by disparities in mentor capability and instructional design.

4.3. Institutional Gaps and Insufficient Incentives

Even among highly competent and experienced mentors, enthusiasm for participation depends significantly on the presence of robust incentive mechanisms. At present, most universities in China have not established adequate compensation or institutional support systems for practice instructors, which undermines the effectiveness of the program. Many social work organizations face limited funding and cannot afford to allocate additional time or resources for staff to engage in teaching roles. Even if universities offer honoraria, these are often insufficient to motivate sustained involvement, and many practice instructors view teaching as an additional burden, leading to low engagement and reduced instructional quality.

On the institutional side, existing evaluation and performance assessment frameworks often fail to account for the contributions of practice instructors. In many universities, academic advisors are evaluated primarily based on research output and publications, while the teaching and mentoring

efforts of practice instructors are rarely integrated into formal appraisal systems. This lack of recognition and career advancement incentives marginalizes practice instructors within the academic system, limiting their long-term impact.

4.4. Barriers to Collaboration Between Practice and Academic Instructors

Even when issues of resource availability and institutional support are addressed, a lack of effective collaboration between practice and academic mentors remains a significant limitation. These two groups often differ markedly in their educational philosophies and goals: practice instructors emphasize hands-on skills and professional readiness, while academic mentors prioritize theoretical understanding and scholarly development. These differences manifest in divergent course designs, learning outcomes, and student evaluation criteria, often leading to confusion among students and fragmented learning experiences.

While some universities have adopted a "dual-mentor" system-assigning each student both an academic and a practice mentor-this model has yet to deliver the desired outcomes. Practice mentors frequently play a secondary role due to time constraints and workload, while academic mentors continue to dominate the training process, rendering the collaborative aspect largely symbolic. Moreover, the absence of clear mechanisms for cooperation and division of responsibilities hampers communication between mentors, resulting in redundant or disconnected content delivery, further diminishing the effectiveness of the practice instructor system.

5. THE FUTURE OF THE FIELD MENTORSHIP SYSTEM: BREAKTHROUGHS AND DIRECTIONS FOR REFORM

Despite the numerous practical obstacles faced by the field mentorship system in MSW education, its potential value in nurturing talent and driving the transformation of educational practice still offers a breakthrough for future social work education reform. As a highly practice-oriented profession, social work cannot avoid the high standards required for practical skills. How to break through the current institutional bottlenecks and enable the field mentorship system to truly function effectively has become the key to future reform. Against this backdrop, starting from multiple aspects such as institutional innovation, resource integration, and university-enterprise collaboration is expected to inject new vitality into the sustainable development of the field mentorship system.

5.1. Institutional Pathways and Multi-Party Collaboration Mechanisms

To truly implement the field mentorship system, it is first necessary to clarify the role positioning and scope of responsibilities of field mentors at the institutional level, ensuring that their practical teaching activities are supported by policy and regulated. Universities can develop a "Field Mentor Management and Evaluation System" to refine the selection criteria for mentors, division of responsibilities, curriculum design, and evaluation methods, thereby preventing the field mentorship system from becoming a mere formality during implementation. At the same time, field mentors should be incorporated into the formal teaching evaluation system of universities, allowing their practical guidance outcomes to serve as a basis for assessment and to enjoy a sense of professional honor and responsibility comparable to that of academic mentors. This will not only help enhance the teaching enthusiasm of field mentors but also effectively promote the stable development of the practical curriculum system.

Moreover, the sustainable development of the field mentorship system requires the collaborative efforts of multiple parties. Governments, universities, and social service institutions can establish a "University-Institution-Government" tripartite collaboration mechanism to jointly build a social work education practice platform. For example, the government can provide special funds to support social service institutions in dispatching personnel to teach in universities, universities can be responsible

for providing basic teaching skills training for field mentors, and social service institutions can ensure that mentors have sufficient practical experience and teaching motivation. Through this linkage mechanism, the interests of all parties can be balanced, which is conducive to building a more comprehensive and sustainable field mentorship system.

5.2. Establishing a Field Mentor Training System

The teaching ability of field mentors directly affects the effectiveness of the field mentorship system. To address the issue of uneven teaching quality among field mentors, universities can establish a dedicated "Field Mentor Teaching Capacity Enhancement Program" to provide systematic teaching methods training for promising social workers, including curriculum design, case teaching, and interactive teaching skills. Through systematic training, field mentors can better transform their practical experience into teaching content, enhance the standardization and systematicness of classroom teaching, and effectively avoid the limitations of "experience-sharing" teaching.

In addition, a "Field Mentor Certification System" can be considered, which certifies mentors who have rich practical experience and have completed teaching training. Certified mentors can not only serve as part-time field mentors in universities but also enjoy relevant career development policies, such as priority participation in industry conferences and policy consultations, further enhancing the social recognition and professional status of their practical teaching.

5.3. Optimizing the Dual Mentor System and Collaborative Talent Cultivation Model

The "dual mentor system" is considered an important way to solve the collaboration barriers between field mentors and academic mentors. However, the existing dual mentor system often suffers from low participation and unclear responsibilities of field mentors, which weakens its substantive role. In the future, to optimize the dual mentor system, it is necessary to further clarify the responsibilities of academic and field mentors and build a truly collaborative talent cultivation mechanism.

On the one hand, a mentor division of labor system can be considered, where academic and field mentors take on different guidance tasks at different stages of student development. For example, during the coursework phase, academic mentors are responsible for theoretical teaching, while during the internship and practice phase, field mentors provide in-depth guidance and evaluation. On the other hand, universities can introduce a "joint guidance meeting" system, where academic and field mentors regularly assess students' progress together each semester to ensure the coherence and consistency between theoretical and practical learning. Through this multi-level and multi-dimensional cooperation, the effectiveness of the dual mentor system can be gradually enhanced.

5.4. Developing Social Work Education Practice Bases

The effectiveness of practical teaching relies on stable practice platforms. In the future, MSW education can establish long-term and stable social work education practice bases in various regions to promote in-depth cooperation between universities and social service institutions, providing students with continuous practical opportunities and venues. These practice bases can not only serve as platforms for student internships and research but also extend the teaching space for field mentors, further strengthening the linkage between classroom learning and social practice.

Universities can establish an "Off-Campus Social Work Practice Base Network" to build long-term cooperative relationships with multiple social work institutions, allowing students to rotate through different fields and service populations for internships, thereby broadening their horizons and practical skills. At the same time, through the construction of practice bases, field mentors can be provided with a wider range of teaching resources and real-world cases, enhancing the practicality and relevance of their teaching, and promoting the in-depth development of social work education reform.

5.5. Introducing Incentive Mechanisms to Safeguard the Rights and Interests of Field Mentors

The lack of incentive mechanisms is a significant factor that constrains the enthusiasm of field mentors. Therefore, it is necessary to build a comprehensive incentive system in the future, providing field mentors with corresponding economic remuneration, career advancement opportunities, and social recognition. Universities can establish a "Field Mentor Special Fund" to provide teaching subsidies and rewards for outstanding field mentors, encouraging more front-line social workers to actively participate in university teaching. Additionally, by setting up awards such as the "Outstanding Field Mentor Award" and the "Social Work Education Contribution Award," the sense of honor and belonging of field mentors can be enhanced, and the social impact of their practical teaching can be increased.

Moreover, the teaching achievements and guidance experience of field mentors should be incorporated into the professional title evaluation system, making their practical guidance experience a part of career development. For example, records of field mentors' guidance of student internships and practices can be considered as important bonus points in professional title assessment. This will encourage more social workers to enter universities from a systemic perspective, forming a two-way flow mechanism between "teaching and practice," further promoting the deep integration of social work education and social practice.

6. CONCLUSION: REFLECTION AND OUTLOOK

As an exploratory pathway for reforming master's-level social work education, the practice instructor system carries high expectations for bridging the long-standing gap between theory and practice. However, the practical challenges exposed during its implementation have, in some institutions, reduced it to a symbolic mechanism with limited substantive educational impact. A range of issues—including the scarcity of qualified mentors, uneven teaching capabilities, inadequate institutional incentives, and weak collaboration between academic and practice mentors—have hindered the system's further development and slowed the pace of educational reform. While these challenges appear to be operational obstacles, they, in fact, reflect deeper structural imbalances and a lack of practical orientation that have long plagued the field of social work education.

Despite the practice instructor system's limited outcomes to date, its necessity and relevance remain undeniable. In the broader transition of social work education toward a more practice-oriented model, this system offers a crucial reform strategy: leveraging the experience of frontline practitioners to build a bridge between theoretical instruction and real-world application. Although imperfect, this approach represents an important breakthrough in the professionalization and applied development of social work education. Dismissing the system due to its flaws would be shortsighted; rather, the challenges it has revealed serve as signposts for future reform.

The advancement of social work education must move beyond a narrow focus on the practice instructor system and situate it within the broader context of social service system reform and higher education transformation. Close collaboration among government agencies, universities, and social service organizations may be key to resolving the difficulties surrounding the system's implementation. At the policy level, governments should provide targeted support and institutional safeguards to ensure the system's long-term sustainability. Universities, for their part, must revise institutional frameworks to grant practice instructors substantive pedagogical responsibilities and academic recognition, making their practical contributions a meaningful part of teaching quality evaluation. Likewise, social service organizations should actively engage in talent cultivation by co-developing field education platforms with universities to ensure better alignment between practical training and real-world needs.

Educational reform is inherently a systemic endeavor, and the implementation of the practice instructor system will not yield immediate results. Moving forward, it is essential to dismantle the barriers between academia and practice, establish a more stable and diversified mentor selection mechanism, and enhance teaching capacity and professional identity among practice instructors through ongoing training and evaluation systems. Moreover, a truly collaborative dual-mentorship model must be constructed, one in which academic and practice mentors complement each other at different stages of student development, jointly fostering students' holistic growth.

Ultimately, the challenges unveiled by the practice instructor system reflect not only internal tensions within social work education but also the broader contradictions between education and social practice. It is precisely this tension that drives ongoing reflection and adaptation in the field. Looking ahead, as the system matures and educational institutions continue to reform, social work education is poised to take more solid steps toward integrating theory and practice—better preparing graduates to meet the real-world demands of professional social work.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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