

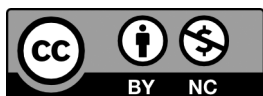
Research on Curriculum Reform of Master of Social Work Based on Competency Characteristics: Taking “Social Work Ethics” as an Example

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Abstract: This study analyzes the competency characteristics of social workers through behavioral event interviews with front-line social workers. It connects the teaching of social work ethics with the cultivation of competency characteristics for master’s students in social work, taking competency characteristics as the training goal for postgraduates. In the teaching of social work ethics, educational reforms are implemented by establishing the core socialist values as an important basis for social work values, regarding individual dignity and value as the fundamental goal of social work, and adopting heuristic teaching to promote student participation. This teaching reform provides an empirical reference for cultivating social work professionals with strong practical capabilities.

Keywords: Competency characteristics; Social Work Ethics; Curriculum reform



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1 Background

According to the Professional Degree Graduate Education Development Plan (2020-2025), the graduate education of social work professional degree should pay more attention to the cultivation of students’ practical abilities. The training objectives should be closely aligned with the development trends of the social work industry, ensuring that the trained students can support the professional development needs of social work. Therefore, it is necessary to continuously reform and innovate the training system for master’s students in social work based on the development status of the social work industry, so that the trained students can meet the requirements of professional practical abilities in social work.

Competency characteristics refer to the potential and deep-seated characteristics that can distinguish high-

Research/Funding project: The Provincial Teaching Research Project of Higher Education Institutions in Hubei Province, No. 2020274.

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Article Citation: Zhang, L., & Bei, F. Y. (2025). Research on Curriculum Reform of Master of Social Work Based on Competency Characteristics: Taking “Social Work Ethics” as an Example. *Guide to Education Innovation*, 5(3), 19–23.

performers from average performers in a position (Ma & Tang, 2012). Many scholars regard competency characteristics as an important goal of talent training, analyzing the competency characteristics required by a certain profession and then constructing or improving talent training and education models based on them (Wang et al., 2025; Zhu, 2025; Wang et al., 2025). The training of master's students in social work should also take the competency characteristics of social work service talents as the training goal to adapt to the requirements of the social work industry. Social work values and ethics are important characteristics that distinguish social work from other professions, serving as key content in the education and training of social workers and core professional courses in the curriculum system for master's students in social work (Zhao, 2024). Therefore, this study takes the curriculum teaching of "Social Work Ethics" as an example to explore how to carry out teaching reforms based on the competency characteristics of front-line social workers.

2 Research Methods

2.1 Research Subjects

The research subjects were 10 front-line social workers from a social work agency in Wuhan, all of whom had been engaged in social work for more than two years. To distinguish between the high-performance group and the average group, the peer expert review method was adopted, and the performance criteria were defined by combining the agency's assessment results in the past two years: (1) high reputation in Wuhan's social work community; (2) obtaining excellent ratings at least once in the agency's annual assessments in the past two years; (3) recognition by two peer experts. According to the defined high-performance criteria, five outstanding social workers who met the criteria were assigned to the high-performance group, and the remaining five were assigned to the average group.

2.2 Behavioral Event Interview

Respondents were required to recall and recount, in a storytelling manner, three key events each that they felt satisfied and most successful, as well as frustrated and least successful, in their work since employment. The examples should include details such as time, background, characters, the respondent's actions, and final results. The average interview duration was 84 minutes and 28 seconds, resulting in a total of 253,100 words of empirical materials.

2.3 Competency Characteristics Coding

Using the *Competency Characteristics Coding Dictionary for Social Work Service Talents* as a reference, the research team identified competency characteristic themes in the audio text materials that matched the dictionary and determined their behavioral levels based on specific behavioral content. Two graduate students in social work were trained in coding, including understanding and mastering the *Coding Dictionary*, coding requirements, and operational methods. After training, the two coders independently coded the behavioral event interview materials. During the coding process, competency characteristics that appeared repeatedly in the audio texts but were not included in the *Coding Dictionary* or partially overlapped with it were additionally marked to form supplementary materials for the dictionary.

The coding results of respondents' words and behaviors in the "six key events" from 10 audio texts were statistically analyzed, including interview duration, text word count, and the occurrence times of each competency

characteristic at different behavioral levels. Based on this, the frequency and average grade score of each respondent’s competency characteristics were calculated using the following formulas:

$$\text{Frequency} = \sum(\text{occurrence times of each competency characteristic at different behavioral levels})$$

$$\text{Average grade score} = \frac{\sum(\text{behavioral level of each competency characteristic} \times \text{occurrence times})}{\text{Frequency}}$$

3 Research Results

Based on the behavioral event descriptions of front-line social workers, the coding frequencies in the competency dictionary were statistically analyzed to reflect the competency characteristics required by front-line social workers. The 11 competency characteristics with the highest frequencies are shown in Table 1. Among them, Initiative, Information Collection, Relationship Building, Analytical Thinking, and Resilience were mentioned by all interviewees. These competency characteristics are fundamental and can be regarded as the general abilities required by front-line social workers, which should be focused on in training qualified social workers.

Table 1 Frequency statistics of competency characteristics

Competency Characteristic	Frequency	Competency Characteristic	Frequency
Initiative	10	Information Collection	10
Relationship Building	10	Analytical Thinking	10
Resilience	10	Empathy	9
Influence	9	Organizational Perceptiveness	9
Teamwork	9	Professional Knowledge	9
Self-confidence	9	-	-

To analyze the differences in competency characteristic coding levels between excellent and average social workers, since both groups had 5 participants, statistical significance testing was inappropriate. Therefore, a difference of more than 2 points was used as the criterion to distinguish the competency characteristics between excellent and average social workers, and the competency characteristics meeting this criterion are shown in Table 2. The top 5 competency characteristics ranked by difference were Guidance, Conceptual Thinking, Cultivating Others, Team Leadership, and Professional Knowledge. It was worth noting that there was also a large difference in Achievement Orientation between the two groups, with the average group scoring higher than the excellent group, indicating that the achievement motivation of the excellent group might be weaker. These competency characteristics are discriminative, capable of distinguishing the service effects between excellent and average social workers, and should be given special attention in training outstanding social workers.

Table 2 Difference analysis of average rating scores between excellent and general social workers

Competency Characteristic	Excellent Group		Average Group	
	M	SD	M	SD
Achievement Orientation	5.08	3.71	7.75	3.18
Influence	9.37	3.24	6.92	3.05
Organizational Perceptiveness	6.06	2.26	4.03	3.63
Cultivating Others	7.44	4.29	2.63	0.884
Guidance	8.50	-	1.83	1.04
Team Leadership	9.83	3.75	6.00	3.00

Continued

Competency Characteristic	Excellent Group		Average Group	
	M	SD	M	SD
Conceptual Thinking	7.25	4.60	1.75	0.35
Professional Knowledge	4.30	1.54	1.69	0.63
Self-control	1.73	2.16	-0.33	0.95

4 Curriculum Reform Measures

4.1 Matching Competency Characteristics with Social Work Ethics Curriculum

“Social Work Ethics” focuses on cultivating the value pursuit of master’s students in social work for their profession and teaching them the code of conduct for social work services. The ethical content covers ethical responsibilities to service users, colleagues, the profession, and society, as well as how to make choices in the face of ethical dilemmas. Based on this, the curriculum team discussed and concluded that the social work ethics curriculum can cultivate general competency characteristics such as Initiative, Relationship Building, Resilience, Teamwork, and Empathy, as well as discriminative competency characteristics such as Service Orientation and Guidance. Aiming at these competency characteristics, the curriculum team made reform adjustments in teaching design, especially in teaching content design.

4.2 Constructing Social Work Value System Based on Core Socialist Values

Social work operates based on social systems, and social work ethics need to be established on the cultural foundation of different countries and regions to achieve the localization of social work ethics. The core values in China are the core socialist values, namely prosperity, democracy, civilization, harmony, freedom, equality, justice, the rule of law, patriotism, dedication, integrity, and kindness. Based on this, in the content of social work values, the curriculum weakens the introduction of Western social work value sources in traditional textbooks and focuses on teaching the relationship between China’s core socialist values and social work values.

The research team divides social work values into three aspects: service, social justice, and individual dignity and value, and discusses the connection between each aspect and the specific content of core socialist values. This not only helps students master social work values faster based on their understanding of core socialist values but also deepens their understanding of core socialist values through specific explanations of social work values, implementing curriculum ideology and politics. The competency characteristic analysis found that excellent social workers adopt less Achievement Orientation but more Service Orientation. Emphasizing core socialist values can help students establish a work philosophy with stronger service and dedication awareness.

4.3 Emphasizing Individual Value and Respect

“Truly respecting the life value and dignity of every individual” is a concrete manifestation of the Party and the government’s practice of serving the people wholeheartedly, and also the value standard and ultimate goal of social work. In classroom teaching, the core social work value of “respecting the value and dignity of every individual” runs through all chapters. Especially when teaching content such as self-determination, respect, and relationship building, students are guided to understand that only by respecting the value and dignity of every individual can they truly

understand and recognize individual differences and uniqueness in service processes. This helps cultivate students' competency characteristics such as Relationship Building, Empathy, and Teamwork.

4.4 Promoting Student Reflection Through Heuristic Teaching

Heuristic teaching is used by presenting case problems and guiding students to think and discuss, allowing them to truly understand individual differences and their causes and appreciate the importance of respecting individual values through the collision of different ideas. After students have fully discussed, teachers explain decision-making suggestions, which helps students master knowledge points more firmly. Heuristic teaching can cultivate students' competency characteristics such as Initiative and Guidance.

For example, in teaching ethical conflicts and decision-making, students are guided to discuss how to choose when professional relationship requirements contradict traditional human relationship requirements. After full discussion, students' different choices and value propositions are listed, and finally, decision-making suggestions are given: professional values should take precedence over secular values, especially when secular values are inconsistent with core socialist values. Maintaining professional values helps guide individuals to form advanced social values. Through this process, students' initiative is strengthened, and they further understand how to carry out effective guidance.

5 Conclusion

By analyzing the current competency characteristics of social workers, matching competency characteristics with curriculum content, and designing curriculum content and teaching methods around the cultivation of competency characteristics, the teaching reform has enhanced students' classroom enthusiasm and engagement. The reform closely links industry needs with graduate training. Student evaluations show that "the curriculum content is practical, featuring real cases and emphasizing ethical practice and application", and "it helps students deeply understand the connotation and requirements of social work ethics, improve their ethical literacy, lay a solid ethical foundation for future social work practice, and learn to make correct choices in complex ethical dilemmas". In addition, the construction of curriculum ideology and politics has improved graduate students' political literacy, and the Party branch of social work master's students in our university has been approved as a provincial model branch construction project.

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