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Students' Perceptions on Social Work Profession: Implications for Program Improvement

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Abstract. This study aimed to investigate the lived experiences of graduating social work students and practicing field social workers in the field practicum. The study sought to evaluate the effectiveness of the social work program, understand how field experiences shape professional identity and sense of purpose, and analyze students' perceptions of public and community views regarding the social work profession to inform program improvements. This study employed a phenomenological approach; data were collected using validated semi-structured interview guides through key informant interviews for students and focus group discussions for field social workers. Results reveal that the students and their AFIs shared field practicum experiences, emphasizing that experiential, field-based learning provides critical, eye-opening preparation for practice by bridging classroom theory and community reality. In professional identity and purpose, field immersion catalyzed a profound shift from viewing social work as a job to embracing it as a rights-based profession rooted in empathy, compassion, resilience, leadership, and human rights. Lastly, for program improvement insights, participants identified crucial areas for enhancement, including the need for longer and more diverse field exposures, the integration of sectoral alongside the generalist model, and a stronger emphasis on ethical grounding, communication skills, and Knowledge-Skills-Attitude integration. The findings underscore that social work education is a holistic, transformative process requiring close synergy between academic institutions and field placement agencies. Recommendations include moving higher education institutions from basic compliance toward contextualized, resource-supported outcomes-based education, institutionalizing structured field supervision, and fostering robust school-agency partnerships to ensure optimal graduate readiness.

Keywords: Field Practicum; OBE; Program Improvement; Social Work; Students

Introduction

Throughout the world, higher education institutions are required to meet 21st-century standards that call for students to perform at higher levels and for teachers to be held accountable for student learning rather than merely providing instruction. Students' success is always the focus of educational mandates and a prime agenda item in every institution of higher learning. Likewise, it is believed that success hinges on the quality of teachers and administrators and on the way, they have mentored and guided students (Fallorina, 2021).

Ealdama (2019) states that social work as a profession emerged from the western part of the globe; as such, western perspectives are embedded in its theoretical and philosophical tenets. The influence of Western perspectives has been taken for granted by social work academics and practitioners in Southeast Asia, who have been using Western textbooks, and not a few have been educated in the West (ASEAN Social Work Journal, 2019). Smith and Jones (2016) explored the experiences of social work students at a private higher education institution in the United States.

In the Philippines, the BS in Social Work is a four-year undergraduate program offered by higher education institutions. It plays a crucial role in preparing students for careers in social welfare, as stipulated in CHED CMO No. 39 s. 2017, known as Policies, Standards and Guidelines for the Bachelor of Science in Social Work Program in shift to learning competency-based standards to outcomes-based education" Despite existing literature there is no scant evidence on whether expectations are met by HEIs offering BS in Social

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Work in the Philippines, despite the guidelines set in the curriculum; no study has yet examined the extent of compliance with the standards set.

However, there is scant evidence on whether expectations are met by higher education institutions offering BS in Social Work in the Philippines, despite the guidelines set in the curriculum; no study has yet examined the extent of compliance with the standards set (Fallorina, 2021). Although standards and guidelines have been established, little empirical evidence exists regarding the extent to which HEIs adhere to these standards or the perceptions of students and practitioners regarding the effectiveness of program delivery. No comprehensive study exists on the congruence between curriculum implementation and the lived experiences of graduating students and field social workers. This gap emphasizes the importance of the present study.

This study aims to investigate social work education from the experiences of social work students in their field practicum, how the participants experiences shape their professional identity and sense of purpose as future social workers and insights perceive regarding the community's view of the social work profession to determine the Social Work program improvement.

This study is important at the global, national, and local levels because it offers empirical, student-centered insights for improving social work education. At the global level, the findings contribute to discussions on the effectiveness of pedagogy and competency-based social work training in line with international standards. The study offers evidence-based guidance at the national level for social work educators, academic leaders, and policymakers on strengthening curriculum design, field instruction, and program delivery in line with the country's social welfare priorities. The findings assist higher education institutions, faculty members, and students in identifying program improvement areas unique to their context and in strengthening academic-industry partnerships at the local level. Together, the study contributes to the development of responsive, practice-oriented, and student-centered social work programs based on students' and practitioners' real experiences.

This study is aligned with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4. Quality Education: To provide inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all enrolled in social work, especially the disadvantaged and indigent students in General Santos City and nearby municipalities, to achieve a productive and fulfilling life, and eradication of poverty. Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8) aims to promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. Serves as the macro-level policy anchor that validates social work not merely as a vocation or charity, but as a recognized, professionalized, and sustainable career path contributing to national workforce development.

Research Questions

This study aims to investigate social work education from the experiences of social work students in their field practicum to determine the improvements of the Social Work program in General Santos City; Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of social work students in their field practicum?
2. How do social work students' experiences shape their professional identity and sense of purpose as future social workers?
3. What insights do students perceive regarding the community's view of the social work profession?

Scope and Delimitation of the Study

This study is limited to the perspectives of BSSW graduating students and excludes those of students in lower years, faculty, administrators, or other institutional stakeholders. For social work practitioners, data will be collected through a FGD to promote collective reflection on their professional praxis and industry needs. Participants participated voluntarily, with the understanding that participation is entirely their choice. The participants were chosen within General Santos City. Because the study used a qualitative phenomenological design and purposive sampling, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable and do not guarantee institutional change.

Literature Review

Outcome-Based Education

OBE represents a shift from traditional, input-focused teaching toward an educational approach that emphasizes student achievements and demonstrable competencies after instruction (Spady, 1994; Iqbal et al., 2020). Spady (1994) originally articulated, OBE "means clearly focusing and organizing everything in an educational system around what is essential for all students to be able to do successfully at the end of their learning experiences." Training future social workers requires a comprehensive educational approach. This

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highlights the significance of translating theoretical knowledge into practice to effectively address the complex nature of client systems and social contexts here in the Philippine setting. (Leyson, Pablo & Nicolas, 2014, p. 260). According to Nicolas, J. (2014), theories and concepts are part of the social worker's knowledge based in the helping process, and notably, they have been drawn mainly from foreign literature. Nevertheless, the teacher's innovative teaching skills enable a social work student to learn beyond the textbooks and reflect on the gap between theory and practice. Thus, they can realign the helping process with the existing realities and influences of culture, the physical and social environment, and maximize local values to facilitate change, empowerment, and development. Learning is best optimized during field instruction or Field practice.

Social Work

Social Work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people (IFSW,2014). It is a professional activity of helping individuals, groups and communities to enhance or restore their capacity for social functioning and creating societal conditions favorable. Social work was conferred professional status through the enactment of R.A. 4373, known as the Social Work Law. After intensive education and training, social work graduates prepare for professional social work practice in line with global standards, passing the licensure examination and obtaining the Professional License issued by the Professional Regulation Commission.

Field Practicum

Field education in Social Work is experiential form of teaching and learning in which the student is help to consciously bring selected knowledge to the practice situation. Field Instruction in the Bachelor of Science in Social Work (BSSW) curriculum consists of 30 units – fifteen units are usually taken during the first semester (agency based) and fifteen units during the second semester of the senior year on a block arrangement (community based). These two field instruction courses (FI 1 and FI2) make for a total of 1,000 hours of supervised field instruction required for social work board examination and it was legislative support institutionalized field instruction with Republic Act no. 4373 sec 12 (e) of 1965, required the completion of a minimum period of one thousand hours of practical training under the direct supervision of fully trained and qualified social workers.

Hay (2020) argues that social work field education is highly contextualized, pedagogically driven, and collaborative. By improving this program, students, as generalists, empower individuals, families, groups, and communities towards their transformation and liberation from the cycle of poverty through a well-integrated program of theory and practice, skills in social analysis, research, advocacy, social action, and social legislation. The students are trained to work with business, government, and civil society in an integrated effort to promote the wellbeing of society. As the demand for social workers in the country and abroad continues to grow, it is essential for higher education institutions to continually enhance their social work programs to meet the evolving needs of students and the community, especially in the post-COVID and modern-era. Social work is identified as one of the priority courses together with natural sciences (biology, chemistry, marine biology, applied physics, geology, earth science); psychology; mathematics (applied mathematics, statistics); and accountancy and business analytics (The Freeman, 2013). In the field of education, the primary goal of Social Work is to prepare and develop future professional social workers (Manapol, 2014, p. 108)

The Field instruction and industry partnerships play a vital role in preparing students for social work practice by connecting learning and practice through structured curriculum and experiential learning, in which students engage with different client systems. These industry partnership agencies serve as vital training grounds where students interact with clients, institutions, and communities. These industry partners provide valuable experience working in the traditional and auxiliary settings of Social Work: social casework, group work, community organizing, social research, and social welfare administration. Crucially, they foster the development of essential professional competencies, ethical judgment, and a grounded appreciation of the realities of social work practice.

Methodology

Research Design

To be specific, this study uses a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of graduating social work students and field-practicing social workers on the implications for program improvement. Phenomenology was selected because it is appropriate for understanding how individuals make meaning of their experiences, particularly in contexts marked by program improvements (Creswell &

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Poth, 2023). Data were collected through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), with sessions conducted in a quiet, comfortable environment or in a private room on the school premises. Each interview lasts approximately 30 minutes, and the sessions are audio-recorded with participants' consent and supplemented with observational notes. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) sessions are held via face-to-face or online platforms such as Zoom or Google Meet, as appropriate; the discussion will last approximately 45 minutes. The researcher will facilitate the discussions, guided by the semi-structured interview guides, while allowing flexibility for probing and follow-up questions. These sessions are either audio- or video-recorded with the participants' consent.

Research Locale

This study was conducted in General Santos City, formerly known as Dadiangas, officially known as the City of General Santos or Gensan (abbreviated as G.S.C.). Located in the southern part of the Philippines, it is a Highly Urbanized City (HUC) situated within the province of South Cotabato, at the head of Sarangani Bay, but administered independently. It is the 15th-most populous city in the Philippines and the regional center for commerce and industry. General Santos City has a population of 722,059 as of the 2024 Census, and a land area of 492.86 square kilometers. It consists of 26 barangays.

Research Participants

The participants of this study are categorized into two distinct groups to provide a comprehensive view of Social Work education. The researcher interviewed five (5) BSSW graduating students and seven (7) practicing field social workers in industry partners. Twelve participants were an adequate number for conducting the phenomenological research study. According to Creswell (2013), the number of participants ranged from 1 (Dukes, 1984) to 325 (Polkinghorne, 1989). Dukes (1984) recommends studying 3 to 10 subjects and one phenomenology; Riemen (1986) studied 10 individuals. This number should provide ample opportunity to identify themes across the cases and to conduct cross-case theme analysis. In Group 1, participants are BSSW graduating students for the 2025-2026 academic year. A target of one (1) participant was interviewed from each of the five recognized HEIs in General Santos City, namely: Ramon Magsaysay Memorial Colleges (RMMC); Cronasia Foundation College, Inc. (CFCI); Goldenstate College (GSC); Stratford International School; and Mindanao Medical Group (MMG) College. In Group 2, practicing Field Social Workers will understand the implications for practice-based pedagogy. The researcher interviewed seven (7) field social workers who are area field instructors and currently practicing in General Santos City. Participants came from various sectors, including the National Government, LGUs, NGOs, and the private sector.

Research Instrument

The primary instruments used to gather data were researcher-made qualitative interview guides designed to elicit in-depth descriptions of the participants' experiences. A follow-up interview with probing questions will be conducted to ensure that the researcher correctly interpreted the answers. Furthermore, a semi-structured interview will be used to reduce the researcher's bias in participants' perceptions. The questionnaire is divided into two parts: for the student participants, data will be collected through KII. This study is limited to the perspectives of BSSW graduating students and FGD for field social workers to promote collective reflection on their professional praxis and industry needs.

Data Gathering Procedure

Approval was also obtained from the school administration of each participating higher education institutions and industry partners where recruitment or data collection occurs, prior to initiating study activities. Once authorization was granted, all required documents—including the endorsement letter, the Administrator's approval, consent forms, and the survey questionnaire— the researcher coordinated with the VP for Academic Affairs and administrative staff to identify qualified participants. Data were collected through indept-interview, sessions conducted in a quiet, comfortable environment or in a private room in the school premises. Each interview lasts approximately 30 minutes, and the sessions are audio-recorded with participants' consent and supplemented with observational notes. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) sessions are held via face-to-face or online platforms such as Zoom or Google Meet, as appropriate; the discussion will last approximately 45 minutes. The researcher will facilitate the discussions, guided by the semi-structured interview guides, while allowing flexibility for probing and follow-up questions. These sessions are either audio- or video-recorded with the participants' consent.

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Results and Discussions

Research Question 1: What are the experiences of social work students in their field practicum?

Table 1. Experiences of social work students in their field practicum

Themes	Significant Ideas
1. Experiential and Field-Based Learning as Preparation for Practice	Learning from experience and field exposures
	Real-life experiences in the field are eye openers
	Combining classroom learning with field experiences
2. Social Work Education as Challenging but Meaningful	It is challenging as a field, yet meaningful
	Challenging yet fulfilling
	Not an easy job
3. Value of Interactive and Practical Teaching Strategies to Enhance Learning	Prefer Interactive learning
	Doing the three-method rule
	Doing action plan

Table 1 Shows that the participants emphasized that field exposure, interactive learning, and immersion in the community greatly assisted their preparation for real social work practice. Both participants in the Key Informant Interview (KII) and the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) described social work education as meaningful yet demanding, requiring emotional resilience, adaptability, and interpersonal competence. The results confirmed that social work education is more than a theoretical teaching process; it is a transformational process affecting students' personal and professional development. Participants reported that field exposure and experiential learning had prepared them for real-world social work practice. They noted that classroom theories are useful when applied in community settings.

Theme 1, Experiential and Field-Based Learning as Preparation for Practice

Emphasizes the necessity of integrating theory and practice in social work education. Participants said that being in the real world allowed them to apply what they had learned in the classroom to community situations. The responses are:

"As a social work student na experience na ko ang both classroom learning and field work experience… mas makaprepare *siya sa ako as future professional since na experienced na ko in field real life situation." KII-SW1*

Learning from experience and field exposure

"Sa field man gud is didto na ma-apply nimo ang reality o makita nimo ang unsa ang social work jud mismo." KII – SW 4

Real life experiences in the field are eye-openers

"Social work education combines classroom learning with a practical field experience." FGD – FI 5

"They are not only limited to the four corners of the classroom, but they are implementing reality into the community." FGD – FI 2

Participant SW1 stated that field experiences prepared him/her for "real life situations", while FGD participants highlighted that learning is not confined to the classroom. These findings are consistent with the results of the research on Social Work Education by Archer-Kuhn et al. (2021), which showed that transformative learning in field education allows students to connect theory with practice through critical reflection and experiential involvement. Similarly, experiential learning was found to enhance professional identity and practical competence in social work students (Gallop et al., 2023).

Theme 2. Social Work Education as Challenging but Meaningful

Emphasizes that social work education goes beyond the study of laws and theories; it also involves developing a professional identity, a process that often requires significant emotional effort.

Participants regarded social work education as emotionally hard and intellectually challenging but also rewarding and purposeful. Some of the key points shared by the participants are:

"Social work is very challenging but meaningful at the same time." SW 1

lisud man siya nga course pero fullfilling lalo na pag makita ang positive impact sa buhat makaingon ka sa emong sarili na proud ka na buhat nimo. - SW3

A challenging field yet fulfilling, especially because it has a positive impact on the lives of others and makes you proud as an agent of change

"Challenging ang social work… kailangan jud is holistic jud ka especially sa tao." KII – SW 4

Social Work is challenging… A holistic

"Social work is challenging because it is not focused only in one field." FGD – FI 3

"Hindi basta-basta ang trabaho sa isang social worker." FGD – FI 4

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Social workers job is not an easy job

Participants capture the paradoxical nature of the social work professional experiences, characterized by a tension between significant psychological/intellectual strain and a profound sense of vocational alignment. These findings suggest that adult learners often reject ideas that do not align with their preconceptions until they engage in critical reflection. In social work, this "challenge" enables students and field social workers to develop an "autonomous, socially responsible" mindset (Mezirow, 1997). Also, Gvelesiani et al. (2023) highlight that relational client work is "emotionally challenging" and requires students and practitioners to manage "moral distress"—where practice conflicts with personal values — especially in Philippine settings, where families face a complex set of problems. Despite these pressures, research on social workers shows they often navigate "role ambiguity and systemic challenges" while simultaneously sustaining a "strong commitment" to healing and growth (Scholars Crossing, 2026)

Theme 3. Value for Interactive and Practical Teaching Strategies Enhance Learning

Highlights that social work education is most effective when it moves away from "passive" lecture-style learning and toward experiential pedagogy.

Participants consistently valued interactive strategies, such as role-playing, group discussions, immersion, and hands-on activities, as effective teaching methods. The responses are:

“Mas gusto ko yong interactive learning… group discussion and role play.”SW 3

I prefer interactive learning, group discussion, and role play

"Interactive teaching… using role-playing, discussion, and recitation." KII – SW 1

To do in the three social work methods: in casework, in group work, and in community work. So that, in preparation, we have a better understanding and, in our hearts, the profession itself. Moreover, after the board exam, we will not only pass it but also become social workers with a heart for service. KII-SW5

“The students will be doing their action plan or even community organizing.”-FI 7

Participants often find the practical strategies the most challenging (because they are "on the spot") but also the most meaningful, as they build actual confidence and rapport with their clientele systems. Lastly, all program media apply as effective strategies for becoming a social worker.

The field instruction strategies are essential because they taught students to "think, act, and retrieve" like a social worker simultaneously. Similarly, Kolb's cycle explains Experiential Learning Theory, suggesting that concrete experience is the necessary precursor to professional competence. Learning truly happens when a student moves from a "Concrete Experience" to "Active Experimentation"; it explains that learning is a process where knowledge is created through the transformation of experience, and it is necessary for growth, as this is called a "gold standard" for justifying practical teaching (B. Kolb, 1984).

Research Question 2: How do social work students’ experiences shape their professional identity and sense of purpose as future social workers?

Table 2. Impact of field practicum on students' professional identity and sense of purpose as future social workers

Themes	Significant Ideas
1. Development of Compassion, Empathy, and Service Orientation	Developing patience and empathy for people
	Deeply rooted in compassion, justice, and human rights
	Serving the people as an enabler
2. Formation of Professional Identity and Purpose	Involving the self-concept
	Better understanding of the profession
	Building confidence and competence in the profession
3. Resilience and Personal Transformation	Molding oneself for the better
	Feeling a sense of belongingness
	Shaped my leadership skills

Table 2.0 Shows that the participants described the theme as moving beyond the "what" of social work education (skills and theories) and into the "who": the internal transformation of the student's character and professional ethos. This often represents the "heart" of the data, where participants discuss how their social work education transformed their perspectives and strengthened their compassion toward others.

Theme 1. Development of Compassion, Empathy and Service Orientation

The participants describe this theme as moving beyond the "what" of social work education (skills and theories) and into the "who": the internal transformation of the student's character and professional ethos. This often represents the "heart" of the data, where participants discuss how their social work

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education transformed their perspectives and strengthened their compassion toward others. The responses are:

"Maka develop ka din ng more patience at empathy sa tao." KII – SW 3

Developed patience and empathy towards people

It is not a job but a profession deeply rooted in compassion, justice, and even human rights. – FI 5

I view myself as a social worker, one of the enablers and facilitators, facilitating knowledge, FI7.

Participants described the "heart-opening" process as shifting from "pitying" a client to recognizing their shared humanity, compassion, empathy, and service orientation. Empathy and unconditional positive regard are not just "techniques" but core personality traits that may be cultivated for therapeutic change to happen (Carl Rogers, 1961). While Bloom's taxonomy focuses on thinking, Krathwohl focuses on how we internalize values such as Receiving/Responding: being aware of social injustices; Valuing: attaching worth to the dignity of the person; and Characterization: when compassion becomes a consistent lifestyle and professional identity. Similarly, it exemplifies Gerdes and Segal's (2011) model of social work empathy, which suggests that education provides the cognitive framework necessary to transform raw emotion into professional compassion."

Theme 2. Formation of Professional Identity and Purpose

This theme is essentially the "bridge" between being a student and a practitioner. Professional Identity Formation (PIF) is generally described as a transformative process in which a student's values, the professional code of ethics, and the lived experience of the field combine into a cohesive sense of self.

The data indicate that professional identity development was not a static event but a continual process of 'becoming'. The participants expressed that social work education helped them discover their purpose, role, and identity as future social workers. The responses are:

"Those experiences can shape them, involving the self-concept of social work." FGD – FI 4:

"Now, na nandito na ako sa profession, I totally understand kung ano talaga ang profession bilang social worker." FGD – FI 1

Now that I am in the profession, I totally understand what the social work profession is

A social worker's sense of identity and purpose is to build confidence, competence, and a sense of belonging in the social work profession. FI4

This reflects Wenger's (1998) concept of 'Communities of Practice,' in which identity is forged through active participation and the internalization of the profession's collective values.

The participants are transitioning from viewing social work as a "career path" to a "calling" or a "mission." This is the "purpose" element that sustains participants during difficult times. Ibarra (1999 suggests that people in transition "try on" different professional identities (provisional selves) by observing role models and imitating their behaviors until they find a style that feels authentic. (Wenger, 1999) By participating in the "community" of social workers, students move from the periphery to the center of the profession. Also, Adams et al. (2006) suggest the Professional Identity Model, which identifies a balance between Personal Identity (who I am) and Professional Identity (what the job requires). The social worker who is "purposeful" has been able to integrate the two.

Theme 3. The Resilience and Personal Transformation

This subject captures the "alchemy" of the educational process—how students take the high-pressure demands of the curriculum and field assignments and transmute them into personal strength and a revised sense of self. The responses are:

"Na mold talaga ako bilang isang leader bilang isang estudyante."

(I was really molded as a leader and as a student.) KII – SW 2

"They build the confidence and also the competence and the sense of belongingness." FGD – FI 4

Social work shaped me a lot in developing the leadership skills or style that we need first to recognize the opinion FI 7

The findings reveal that the social work profession acts as a transformative catalyst for students and field social workers, a sentiment strongly echoed by KII-SW 2 and FI 7, who noted a profound shift in their leadership capabilities. This means that a developmental environment changes and enhances people's abilities, values, and self-image, thereby enabling them to become proactive leaders (Bass, 1985). Moreover, the necessity of being 'resilient' (KII-SW 2) relates to Masten's (2001) Resilience Theory, which states that significant exposure to the field acts as a basic buffer against professional burnout. In the end, as shown in FGD-FI 4, the simultaneous growth of confidence, competence, and sense of belongingness is an empirical reflection of Bandura's (1977) Self-Efficacy framework that demonstrates that a supportive educational climate directly strengthens the belief of a student in his/her ability to carry out effective social work interventions. Hence, the participants mentioned that social work education helped develop their resilience, confidence, and character.

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Research Question 3: What insights do students perceive regarding the community's view of the social work profession?

Table 3. Students' perception of the community's view of the social work profession

Themes	Significant Ideas
1. Social Work Education Requires Greater Field Exposure	More on field exposure, training seminars
	See more diverse and extended field placements for students.
	Combining classroom learning with practical field experience
2. Social Work Education Should Strengthen Sectoral Specialization	Hoping in the Philippines to have a specialized field in social work
	Theories are preparation for field practice for stronger specialization.
	Sticking through the process for better learning
3. Social Work Education Shapes Competent and Ethical Practitioners	Teaches about empathy, communication skills, patience, and social issues.
	Learning to respect diversity and uphold human rights.
	Knowledge, skills, and attitude are important

Table 3.0 Shows that the “alchemy” of the education process is exposure to this topic — how students take the high-pressure demands of the curriculum and field assignments and turn them into empowerment and a new sense of self. Participants identified a process of “Personal Transformation” that was inseparable from their ability to cope with the program's demands. The 'difficult' character of the schooling was a crucible for resilience, not just a source of tiredness.

Theme 1. Social Work Education Needs Greater Exposure to the Field

The “alchemy” of the education process is exposure to this topic — how students take the high-pressure demands of the curriculum and field assignments and turn them into empowerment and a new sense of self. Participants identified a process of “Personal Transformation” that was inseparable from their ability to cope with the program's demands. The 'difficult' character of the schooling was a crucible for resilience, not just a source of tiredness. The responses are:

Ano more on field exposure, training seminars kasi better siya sa student para ma-prepare good siya sir in the future. KII- SW 3

More on field exposure, training seminars; it is better for students in preparation for a good future

I recommend more diverse and extended field placements for students so they are exposed to different fields of the social work profession. FGD- FI 2

I explained a lot about the different theories and approaches in social work methods. However, the good thing is we were also allowed to go into the community so the students could implement their action plans, or even do community organizing, group work, and case studies. FGD – FI 7

This shows that the participants agreed on the importance of immersion in field instruction, stating that mastery of social work is achieved through integrating classroom theory with community action plans. This evidence is socially grounded in Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory, which shows how abstract notions derived in the classroom are transformed into professional competence through concrete experiences in the field. In addition, the recommendation from KII-SW 3 and FGD-FI 2 to expand and diversify field placements is a move towards increased job preparation, as suggested by constructivist pedagogies that require a student’s full immersion into ‘practical settings’ to facilitate progress.

Theme 2. Social work education needs to Strengthen Sectoral Specialization

This issue concerns a recurring complaint in social work education: the conflict between a "Generalist" background and the requirement for “Specialist” knowledge. This finding is frequently indicative of a view amongst participants that, while the broad theory is valuable, they feel underprepared for the specific technical demands of specialty sectors (e.g., child protection, mental health, forensic, juvenile or geriatric social work).

One of the key themes was the supposed ‘dilution’ of expertise in a generalist curriculum. The participants were very much into sectoral specialization, especially in the last phases of their degree. The responses are:

Kung ang field mo is gusto mo children, then for the children. For the family, then for the family. So sana dito sa Pilipinas, magkaroon ng ganoon, magkaroon ng specified field. FGD-FI 4

If your field is child, then go to child welfare. For family, then family welfare. Hoping in the Philippines have these specific settings

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Gusto ko ring makita ang reforms sa social work o pag-aaral ng social work o kung nagpa-practice na sila, gusto ko na maging specialize din sila, hindi lang naka-focus sa tatlong methods, which is the case study, group work, at C.O. FGD-FI 3

I want to see reforms in the Social Work program; I want them to be specialized, not only focusing on the generalist perspective of Casework, group work, and Community Organizing

Kasi, the theories are preparation for the field practice. So mahalaga sa classroom pa lang is matutunan na nila kung ano ang social work na course or profession. FGD-FI 2

The findings contribute to an important discussion around the structure and implementation of social work teaching. The contradiction between FGD-FI 4's preference for sectoral specialization (e.g child- or family-specific tracts) and FGD-FI 3's critique of tight methodological bounds points to a key narrative in contemporary educational reform. This corresponds to current worldwide publications that require combining the Generalist Practice Model with specific sectoral competences to avoid oversaturation of the system. Furthermore, as FGD-FI 2 mentions, the theory taught in the classroom is the key 'preparation for field practice'. It provides the cognitive scaffolding (Bruner, 1966) that enables students to engage confidently in professional responsibilities. This empirical fact confirms the dual nature of social work as a rigorous science of structured processes and as a fluid art of creative, goal-directed intervention.

Table 3. Social Work Education Shapes Competent and Ethical Practitioners

This theme is the 'summative' outcome of the study: despite the hurdles, the educational process successfully integrates knowledge, skills, and values into professional-level practice.

The analysis seems to seek evidence of how the curriculum functions as a socialization agent, turning a layperson or student into an ethical professional social worker capable of high-level clinical decision-making.

The theme of 'Competence and Ethics' reflects the culmination of the participants' educational journey. Participants reported that the program provided a 'moral compass' that superseded their personal biases. The responses are:

What I can share with the community is that social work teaches us empathy, communication skills, patience, and awareness of social issues. KII-SW 1

My education gives social work profound meaning. It is not a job but a profession deeply rooted in compassion, justice, and even human rights. FGD-FI 5

naalala ko pa talaga 'yong mga achievements like na mold talaga ako bilang isang leader bilang isang estudyante na-develop talaga ba na bit- bit talaga 'yong KSA na Knowledge, Skills at saka attitude po maam. KII-SW 2

I remembered the achievements that transformed me into a leader as a student; until now, I bring the KSA

This reflects how social work education transcends traditional task-oriented instruction, deeply influencing students' internal value systems. As articulated by FGD-FI 5, social work education infuses practice with 'profound meaning,' shifting it from a standard occupation to a profession explicitly anchored in the core pillars of social justice and human rights in the Global Definition of Social Work (2014). This is further supported by KII-SW 1, who emphasizes developing critical soft skills such as empathy, communication, and patience, which are necessary for the Relationship-Based Practice Framework, a value-driven approach. The internalization of the KSA (Knowledge, Skills, and Attitude) framework by KII-SW 2 best captures the holistic transformation experienced by the participants at the end.

The empirical evidence indicates that the academic curriculum is successful in socializing students by striking a balance between academic discipline and the practical skills required to effect sustainable macro-level changes in society.

Results have shown that the process of acquiring knowledge in the field of social work acts as a transformative experience, which modifies the personality, capability of overcoming challenges, and professional identity of an individual. Although classroom sessions provide the fundamental basis for acquiring theoretical knowledge, real work experience in the field and social interactions facilitate the transformation of theoretical ideas into compassionate, competent, and ethical practices. In order to achieve even better results, the participants state that they need more extended and more varied experiences in the fields of social work.

Ethical Considerations

In accordance with the requirements of the UM Research Ethics Committee, the study adhered to ethical considerations. This study strictly complied with the ethical guidelines set by the University of Mindanao Ethical Review Committee (UMERC). Informed consent was obtained from the participants, who were fully informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without

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penalty. Names and identifiers were removed. Pseudonyms or codes were used to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Also, participation was entirely voluntary, with a neutral recruiter and no coercion or undue influence. This study strictly adhered to data protection standards, with data stored in encrypted files accessible only to the researcher. Lastly, the study ensured that no harm was caused to participants and that all possible risks were mitigated. A copy of the UMERC-approved informed consent form was issued to each participant prior to the interview. Before data collection, the researcher obtained ethical clearance from the UMERC under Certification No. UMERC-2026-122 to ensure compliance with ethical considerations in research.

Conclusion

This qualitative study sought to understand the perceptions of social work students and field-practicing social workers regarding the social work profession and the vital implications of these viewpoints for program improvement. Across the core domains examined, a common essence emerged from the students' narratives: entering and navigating the social work profession is fundamentally a transformative developmental process that requires balancing classroom theory with real-world practice, overcoming societal misimpressions, and building a strong, values-based professional identity. While participants encountered various institutional, curricular, and field-industry challenges, they consistently remained committed to upholding the discipline's core ethical principles, human rights framework, and social justice mission. The findings further revealed that shaping competent social workers cannot be achieved by academic institutions working in isolation. Rather, meaningful professional development is realized through the collective synergy of classroom instruction, peer dynamics, family support systems, Area field instructors and supervisors, and higher education policies working toward a shared vision of educational excellence and professional readiness. The participants' experiences affirm that effective social work education extends beyond rote academic compliance and depends upon experiential learning, reflective supervision, and structured mentorship that bridge the gap between classroom theory and the complex realities of field practice. Viewed through an ecological and transformative learning lens, the experiences of the students and field-practicing social workers reveal that professional education is not merely the transmission of technical skills but the internal evolution of empathy, compassion, critical consciousness, professional pride, and vocational commitment. Every classroom discussion, case analysis, and field immersion encounter represents an opportunity to challenge outdated stereotypes, reframe public perceptions of social work, and solidify a confident professional self-concept. The meanings participants attached to their educational journeys illustrate that, despite institutional and systemic limitations, they continue to perceive social work parlance as both a noble professional career and a profound societal responsibility. Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on social work education, professional identity formation, and curriculum development by providing an in-depth understanding of the lived realities and perceptions of students and field social workers. It affirms that strengthening institutional resources, refining curriculum delivery, enhancing and strengthening field industry partnerships, and embedding reflective pedagogy will significantly improve social work program delivery and educational outcomes. More importantly, the study reinforces the enduring belief that, when supported by a responsive, well-designed educational ecosystem, social work students will confidently emerge as competent, resilient, and dedicated practitioners equipped to transform communities and uplift vulnerable populations.

Recommendations

Implications for Practice, the findings demonstrate that effective social work education and professional readiness depend not only on sound curriculum design on paper, but also on the institutional capacity, resource allocation, and supportive environment provided by higher educational institutions. To move beyond "scant evidence" of performance and reach true professional preparation, the following changes in practice are advocated for HEIs: from Compliance to Context: HEIs need to move beyond the "checklist" approach to the Policies, Standards and Guidelines (PSGs). Students' experiences consistently revealed that heavy academic workloads, limited facility resources, and gaps between classroom theory and field realities remain significant challenges. These findings suggest the need for academic administrators and school management to continue investing in up-to-date learning facilities, well-resourced departmental offices, comprehensive student support services, faculty development programs, and sustainable institutional resources that enable faculty and students to thrive in a conducive academic environment. Also, the study adds a Filipino viewpoint to the global conversation on Outcomes-Based Education (OBE). Future academics can compare the Philippines with other ASEAN or Western countries to discover how localized "lived experiences" vary under comparable pedagogical frameworks. The study likewise highlights the importance of strengthening collaborative partnerships between academic institutions and field placement agencies (e.g., local social welfare development offices, non-governmental organizations, residential facilities, and

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communities). The students lived experiences indicate that strong, well-coordinated school-agency linkages, clear field supervision protocols, and structured mentoring mechanisms significantly enhance students' clinical confidence and bridge the theory-practice divide. Institutionalizing stronger collaborative networks and regular feedback channels between educators and area field supervisors may therefore improve training consistency, professional socialization, and overall continuity of learning. Another important implication concerns the integration of specialized competencies and reflective learning into social work practice and fieldwork. Students consistently emphasized the need to confront complex human realities, manage emotional distress, and apply evidence-based interventions during field exposure. These findings suggest that social work training programs should continue evolving toward holistic, trauma-informed, and multidisciplinary approaches that prepare students for the nuanced psychosocial, familial, and community contexts they will encounter as professional practitioners. The findings also underscore the indispensable role of peer support, faculty mentorships, and student organizations such as JSWAP, MPLSW, and DSC in sustaining the formation of professional identity. The participants lived experiences reveal that successful professional transition extends beyond formal lectures and requires collaborative group dynamics, safe spaces for critical dialogue, and positive faculty encouragement. Consequently, academic departments should foster supportive peer cultures, student-led initiatives, and structured debriefing sessions to reduce burnout and promote great professional pride. From the perspective of the social work profession, the study reinforces the importance of ethical grounding, professional competence, critical consciousness, and social justice advocacy. Social work students and emerging practitioners serve not only as learners acquiring technical skills but also as future change agents who will champion human rights, empower vulnerable groups, and uphold clients' core dignity. These findings emphasize the continuing need for values-driven capacity-building that instills a deep appreciation of the social work code of ethics, cultural sensitivity, and structural social work analysis. Implications for Future Research, the present study focused on the perceptions and lived experiences of social work students in selected higher education institutions. Future studies may expand this body of knowledge by exploring the perspectives of other key stakeholders, such as social work academics, area field instructors and supervisors, alumni working in various sectors, agency administrators, and clients who receive services from student interns. Examining these diverse viewpoints would provide a more comprehensive understanding of educational outcomes and the broader process of professional socialization. Future researchers may likewise employ mixed-methods, comparative, longitudinal, or multi-site research designs to examine the long-term career trajectories of graduates, the correlation between academic performance and field practice competency, the effectiveness of specific curriculum revisions, and the impact of evolving instructional modalities (such as hybrid or digital learning environments) on professional identity formation. Comparative studies involving different regions or institutions in the Philippines may also identify unique contextual challenges and institutional best practices to inform national social work education reforms. Furthermore, future qualitative studies may continue exploring the evolving meanings students attach to the social work profession as societal demands, economic conditions, and welfare landscapes shift over time. Such research will further enrich qualitative scholarship in social work education while contributing to the continuous enhancement of curriculum delivery, professional practice, and social welfare program development. Finally, this study will serve as a practical reference for future researchers, ensuring that educational frameworks remain responsive to the evolving needs of the social work profession. Furthermore, in conducting this research, there is no guarantee of direct benefits to participants. This study is expected to generate descriptive insights into participants' experiences and perspectives that may inform recommendations for program improvement; however, findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable and do not guarantee institutional change. Benefits are modest, exploratory, and not presented as an inducement for participation.

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