Contextualising 21st Century Life skills for Social Work Students: A holistic approach for practice in changing world

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Abstract

The advent of new technologies swiftly intertwining with social fabric has drastically changed human relationships patterns and interactions with their surroundings; leading to challenges requiring specialised approaches and skill sets. Currently, traditional unaided competences are no longer enough; hence the need for blending of 21st-century life skills into social work education becomes significant to equip students' with requisite skills, for dealing with the complexities of changing social landscape. Exploring through the lens of Real Lifeworld Approach and synthesis of existing literature, narratives, and field practice insights, the paper critically evaluates the skills gap of students in current social work training and the requirements of modern practice. By integrating viewpoints from educators, practitioners, fieldwork supervisors, mentors and recent graduates, it identifies life skills as an essential component for professional success. These skills are examined within the context of social work education that reflects the diverse roles of social workers, from direct service provision like counselling to community engagement, policy advocacy and social action. The paper calls for inclusive approach and the smooth amalgamation of life skills into coursework, field placements, and on-going professional development of trainees. Further, recognizing the challenges of defining and assessing competencies empirically, it suggests for life skills incorporation into social work curricula. The future of social work education relies on updating of skills, equipping students with adaptable and practice-ready curricula. It also suggest for further research to assess the longitudinal impact of integrating 21st-century life skills into social work training and to establish best practices for their effective implementation to build a better world order.

Key Words: 21st-Century Life Skills, Social Work Education and Practice, Students, Holistic Development

Introduction

Social work is an a practice based profession (IFSW,2014) working with individual, groups and communities with a core mission for enhancing wellbeing on the principles of social justice and human rights (Ife, 2012). The world today is undergoing rapid technological advancement at one end and facing climate crisis at other end with humanity surviving in between with poverty, inequality, scarcity of natural resource availability, rising populations, food and water insecurity, pollution,   and rising mental health Issues. At this crucial junction the profession need to rediscover and reinvent itself to the need of contemporary times to produce effective practitioners who can cater to the modern demands. Traditionally, social work education which is grounded on ethics, values and its core methods of casework , group work and community organisation need to refurbish them with new set of skills so as to meet the evolving needs of society as well as maintain its efficacy and relevance by the usage of technology.

The two entry points where a student enters social work education course are at undergraduate or postgraduate levels from across all disciplines and with diverse or no skill sets for training of social work, to professionally deal with societal challenges in near future. It's an inclusive course and accepts students from all walks of society with different levels of social exposure and conditioning. The level of subjective and objective understanding of world views varies among student depending in which stream they have studied before joining social work course. To bring all students to a common ground the social work school becomes a melting pot to train and help them reinvent, and prepare for practice. The paper argues that the addition of 21st century skill to their learning will enhance their Individual capacities to deal with the pressing challenges of the 21st century; so that can provide holistic human services. These skills have the potential to lay the foundation for contemporary social work practice. A life skill provides practical skills needed for everyday activities and helps in self-management. This argument is guided by social learning theory which highlights the importance of experiential learning and observation in skill acquisition (Bandura, 1977) which students of social work hone up during field placements in diverse settings and active participation leading to reflection and reimagining of reality; and competency theory focuses on the specific knowledge, skills sets, and attributes that contribute to effective performance, providing a framework for defining, measuring, and evaluating the particular skill set (Spencer & Spencer, 1993) in social work students. They provide complementary frameworks for understanding development and application in professional practice. In a project of OECD aiming to outline the abilities people in new century, the concept of 21st century skills first appeared in the year 2006. The 21st century Life skills grouped in five broad categories mainly: 1. *Learning and Innovation Skills*, 2. *Digital and Technology Skills*, 3. *Career and Workplace Skills*, 4. *Personal and Social Skills*, and 5. *Financial and Entrepreneurial Skills* with their sub components are crucial foundation skills every individual should have to survive in this fast and competitive world. Hence it becomes important for social work trainees to develop them for interpersonal and intrapersonal growth and develop competence for professional practice. In this paper the relevance of these skills in context to social work profession will be explored and gaps identified to find common intersection points of confluence with core social work ethics, values and methods; and the benefits trainees will have post learning these skills as effective agents of social change.

Literature Review

This literature review examines the existing literature to understand the Intersectionality of the 21st century life skills with the social work education and practice for developing students to cater to the evolving social landscape of 21st-century. It explores a holistic approach to honing these core competencies in social work students for effective practice. The review also takes cognizance of gaps, impacts and outcomes of this innovative experiment to critically understand its relevance.

Conceptualizing 21st-Century Life Skills

Pellegrino et al., in 2013 stated that "21st century life skills" lack a universally agreed upon definition due to its multidimensional facet, however a common theme across the literature emphasised everyday skills necessary for effectively dealing with technological advancements, globalization and increased complexities of rapidly changing world (Alekseeva et al., 2020; Fajri, Yusuf, & Yusoff, 2021; Le, Hlaing, & Ya, 2022). These skills stand apart from regular academic engagement and incorporate a broad range of proficiencies required for personal, social, and professional accomplishments. The significance of critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, communication, collaboration, and adaptability have been given due importance in many of the frameworks (Caggiano & Ragusa, 2023; Oluwagbohunmi & Alonge, 2023).The personality traits like resilience, persistence, and ethical conduct has also been emphasized (Oluwagbohunmi & Alonge, 2023). All these skills are interconnected for personal and professional development and should not be looked in isolation. (Newell, 2019; Zegarac & Isakov, 2018) in their study has stated that for effective functioning, the interplay between cognitive abilities, emotional intelligence, and social skills has to be looked holistically to make a sense of it.

Integrating Life Skills into Social Work Education

The study by (Lee, Kourgiantakis, & Hu, 2021) emphasised on the integration of 21st-century life skills into social work education for preparing students to effectively address the multifaceted challenges faced by clients in diverse settings. The need for a shift from traditional, content-focused curricula to approaches that emphasize experiential learning, reflective practice, and the development of practical skills has been highlight by several studies (DiLauro, 2018; Gibbons & Gray, 2004; Zegarac & Isakov, 2018). The case method, is considered as a valuable tool for promoting integrative and reflective learning (Zegarac & Isakov, 2018). Furthermore, the use of problem-based learning (PBL) and project-based learning (PBL) models is endorsed for engaging social work trainee in active learning and developing their problem-solving and collaborative skills (Fajri, Yusuf, & Yusoff, 2021; Le, Hlaing, & Ya, 2022). The integration of technology in social work education is also gaining attention, with the possibility to augment accessibility to learning resources, facilitated communication, and create opportunities for computer-generated practice (Alekseeva et al., 2020; Fajri, Yusuf, & Yusoff, 2021; Le, Hlaing, & Ya, 2022; Oluwagbohunmi & Alonge, 2023). However, (Dewey et al., 2020; Lestari, 2018) stated that for effective integration of technology careful consideration of pedagogical approaches need to be planned and the possible blockheads related to digital literacy and equitable access be considered for optimization.

Contextualizing Life Skills for Social Work Practice

In 2015, Weiner and Schwartz in their study highlighted that application of life skills in social work practice necessitates a contextualized approach, recognizing that the effectiveness of interventions is influenced by the unique circumstances of clients and their environments. In another study by (Grise-Owens, Miller, & Owens, 2021; Makhubele & Qalinga, 2009; Newell, 2019) emphasised on holistic approach that acknowledges the interaction of individual, interpersonal, and societal factors that shape client experiences and well-being. Social workers need to be equipped with social and cross cultural skills to evaluate client requirements within their specific settings, bearing in mind factors like cultural background, socioeconomic status, access to resources, and dominant social norms (Lee, Kourgiantakis, & Hu, 2021) to better help them. This demands the development of culturally sensitive and ethical practices that promote social justice and address systemic inequalities (Lee, Kourgiantakis, & Hu, 2021). Additionally, social workers require skills in inter-professional collaboration to efficiently address client needs that often require the expertise of multiple professionals (Benton et al., 2023; Ekornes & ye, 2021). The ability to work collaboratively with other healthcare providers, community agencies, and policymakers is essential for achieving positive outcomes (Grise-Owens, Miller, & Owens, 2021; García, Mizrahi, & Bayne-Smith, 2010) and has been highlighted as a significant life skills.

Methodology

The Reflective Lifeworld Approach (RLA) is a qualitative research methodology developed by Dahlberg, K (2006a, 2006b) has been taken as the foundational approach for this study; and is based on exploration of lived experiences of participants and had been adapted from a study by (Agnimitra & Sharma, 2022) where they used RLA to describe their research. The Lifeworld Approach allows gaining deep insights into the meanings that individuals ascribe to their natural world, devoid of reflecting on ones' own experiences. The aim is to understand the essentiality of 21st century life skills for social work student's in their professional practice in changing world. The paper aspires to find new meanings from the already existing literature and experiences in the sphere of the teaching-learning of social work values and methods for understanding the need for 21st century life skills in social work education in India. Reflections on the prolonged deliberations with colleagues, social work educators from various universities, practitioner and representatives of civil society organisations, present and past students from his own department enabled the author to draw critical thoughts on need for 21st century life skills as part of curricula in context of social work education. Narratives, reflections on students' skill sets, self-narrative and their interpretation were used to describe the phenomenon.

Discussion

21st-century life skills are essential competencies that help individuals succeed in a rapidly changing world. Three major life skills critical thinking, digital literacy, and inter-professional collaboration have been taken to explain the necessity of inclusion of life skills in social work curriculum. These highlight the importance of life skills for dealing with the challenges faced by social workers in the 21st century, from addressing ethical dilemmas in an information-saturated environment to leveraging technology effectively and ethically and collaborating effectively

across disciplines to provide holistic human services.

Critical Thinking in Social Work

The foundation of effective social work practice involves the ability to analyse information objectively, recognize biases and form rational judgements, hence critical thinking is the key skill (Gibbons & Gray, 2004) one should possess to engage in field. In dealing with clients (Weiner & Schwartz, 2015) highlight that social worker must adhere to credible sources, evaluating evidence, and recognizing the influence of social and political contexts and not get lost in plethora of information. This becomes more relevant in current times when misinformation and competing narratives creates ambiguity on the root cause of complex social problems and hinders effective interventions. Further, critical thinking helps in dealing with ethical dilemmas in situations where competing values and interest are at stake (Caggiano & Ragusa, 2023). Social workers must be able to critically evaluate ethical contexts, consider the probable costs of their actions, and make informed decisions that uphold the profession's core values. As Zegarac and Isakov (2018) established, the use of real-case scenarios in social work education can be a valuable tool for nurturing reflective and integrative learning, thereby enhancing students' critical thinking abilities in the context of real-world field practice. However, research on assessment methodologies for critical thinking skills within social work education, particularly in relation to the unique ethical challenges faced by the profession need to be exploring.

Digital Literacy for the 21st-Century Social Worker

Today, every human being has digital presence directly or indirectly. Digital foot prints have a lasting impact on people's lives; hence relevance of digital literacy becomes important in the world of internet and ways to use it responsibly. As per (Alekseeva et al., 2020) Digital literacy, is the ability to efficiently and properly use technology, and has become increasingly crucial for social workers in the 21st century. Oluwagbohunmi & Alonge in 2023 stated that technology plays a substantial role in present-day social work practice, right from retrieving and handling client data, and to communication with varied stakeholders for advocacy regarding policy changes,. Digital literacy need to be handled with critical thinking aproach to evaluate the trustworthiness of online material, understand the ethical implications of data collection and usage, and address issues of digital equity (Dewey et al., 2020; Lestari, 2018). For example, social workers must be able to critically assess the potential biases rooted in procedures used to make decisions about service distribution. As highlighted by Fajri, Yusuf, and Yusoff (2021) and Le, Hlaing, and Ya (2022), technology can enhance, at the same time pedagogical approaches and equitable access to technology must be safeguarded. To ensure confidentiality and data security of clients, ethical use of technology in social work practice need to be examined.

Inter-professional Collaboration: A Holistic Approach to human Service Delivery

Social work is a profession which works on diverse issue and with multiple stakeholders. Collaborative skills are must for getting better results in the interest of clients and helping them. Ekornes and ye in 2021 stated that ability to work across different groups is important to to provide integrated services to clients. Social workers usually have to collaborate with healthcare

service providers, educators, legal practitioners, and other community institutions to cater to the multifaceted challenges faced by individuals, families, and communities (Benton et al., 2023). Effective collaboration requires mutual respect, strong communication skills, and a shared feeling of each profession's roles and responsibilities (García, Mizrahi, & Bayne-Smith, 2010) to attain the desired result. Social workers practitioner must be able to explain their perspective to others and understand the viewpoints of others, and work together to develop integrated service provisions. Moreover, as Grise-Owens, Miller, and Owens (2021) highlighted, organizational success and vast no of social work practice are increasingly relying on effective collaboration across various sectors. For example a trainee specialised in drug addiction can engage trainee working on domestic violence in their field and alternately work on drug awareness in their field as and when the need arises. However, empirical data implies less of inter-professional collaboration in social work, and is often hindered by communication gaps, differing professional cultures, and a lack of shared we feeling and cooperation about shared roles and responsibilities.

Integrating Core Competencies into Social Work Education

These life skills set an elaborate example for integrating life skills relevance to social work education and seeks shift in pedagogical approach with adaptability and assimilative perspectives. More over increasing more of experiential learning and reflective practice on social problems will generate more insights for solving the social problems and move beyond routine lecture-based instruction (DiLauro, 2018). Social learning theory also highlights that students develop skills most effectively through doing and participation, role-modelling, and case reflection within field placements and simulated situation reaction activities. Competency theory provides a scope for educators to develop targeted learning activities and assessment tools as per the needs of students. Furthermore, simulation-based learning, as explored by Lee, Kourgiantakis, and Hu (2021), has highlighted about blended teaching approaches with reflective situation based activities to develop holistic competence, in cross-cultural social work practice among students. Inculcation of new pedagogical methods will require will to adapt as well as faculty training and infrastructural support to initiate partnership with service provides from the field and assimilate their challenges in class room teaching –learning for better reflective learning on real life situations and cross learning from other field settings.

Challenges and Opportunities

There is growing acknowledgement on the significance of life skills, still several hindrances remain in effectively integrating these skills into social work education and practice. A significant challenge highlighted by (Pellegrino, Hilton, & Skills, 2013) is the lack of standardized definitions and assessment tools for life skills. Thus, making it difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of intervention and track progress of students in the absence of clear benchmarks. Furthermore, (Chambers & Norton, 2016; González-Pérez & Soledad, 2022) have emphasised on the necessity and relevance of adaptation and refinement of life skills curricula to respond to the emerging needs of evolving nature of 21st century world. Another study highlights that integration of life skills into social work education will require a paradigm shift in pedagogical styles,

towards more experiential, active, and participatory learning strategies and retracting from traditional lecture-based methods (Camacho & Legare, 2016. Also, the need for vigorous inquiry to evaluate the effectiveness of life skills interventions and to recognize best practices remains a grave area for future investigation (Benton et al., 2023; Chambers & Norton, 2016). However, the increasing emphasis on holistic and person-centered approaches to healthcare provides a favorable context for integrating life skills into social work practice (DiLauro, 2018; Schroeder & Lorenz, 2017) is a significant opportunities for advancement. Technological advancements offer the possibility to generate innovative learning experiences and improve access to resources for both students and practitioners (González-Pérez & Soledad, 2022). Also, increased inter-professional collaboration can influence the know-how of diverse professionals to address client needs more effectively (Ekornes & ye, 2021; Pearl & Oliver, 2020) enhancing the efficiency of professional practice. Finally, the growing recognition of the importance of critical thinking, digital literacy, and inter-professional collaboration across various professions creates a favourable background for social work education to take a leadership role in developing and disseminating best practices for teaching and assessing these essential life skills.

Interactions with the students in and outside classroom highlighted their concerns about life skills so as become better individuals and professional as they were not able to manage their own lives. Many of the students highlighted issue from lack of decision making capabilities to digital and financial illiteracy. Some showed concern on emotional imbalance and stress while lot had issues with time management and communication with opposite gender. These challenges will impede there growth in professional settings. Students from rural settings has own set of challenges as compared to those from urban settings in terms of life skills and coping with field training challenges. Until these challenges are catered to through teaching life skills as part of curriculum in social work institution, the contemporary professionals produced will lose relevance and employability of them will be in great danger. Its high time the profession understand the relevance of life skills integration as demand of this profession to cater to the global advancement, or it will lose its relevance to other human service profession in due course of time where technology is already putting a lot of profession in danger.

Conclusion

The social work schools and their curriculum is defines and traditionally been training social worker to develop as human service professionals. But with changing time and changing patterns of human relationships there has emerged huge gaps in basic life skills among youths. This has been substantiated by several studies and one of many cause of huge mental health crisis, which is alarming and same time need urgent attention. Since social work is human service profession, it should take charge for the current crisis and integrated life skills in its teaching pedagogy to prepare well trained and balanced professionals. These practitioners will be well equipped to cater to the need of contemporary social challenges emerging out of climate crisis, technological advancement and the digital maize humanity is getting trapped into. This paper is the a product of the lived experiences of researcher himself, with shared experiences of educators, practitioners, students, and community stakeholders in the field of social work education. The findings reveal the necessity of life skills to be included as central to ethical and effective social work practice

skill. These are crucial to deal with the emerging complexities as a result of individualism from collectivism being borrowed from west, in context to India. The frameworks used provide holistic approach to integration and assimilation of life skills in core social work methods. The idea is reflective practice and ensuring competency development remains a continuous process of critical introspection and contextual adaptation to evolve to the needs of society. This will help in cultural sensitive, balanced approach with ethical foundations to deal with changing social design. It is agreed challenges do exist, including the difficulty of assessing these competencies, but with the rapid evolution of digital tools, solutions will come up. However, with more fast lives new opportunities will thrive, and there will be increased emphasis on person-centred care and innovative learning skills. By nurturing experiential learning, critical reflection, and ethical awareness, social work programs can equip students to become flexible and principled professionals. While this study provides key understandings, its scope is shaped by the Indian context, necessitating further research for global applicability in social work curricula. Future studies should explore long-term impacts and organizational support for professional development of faculty. Ultimately, integrating 21st-century skills is not just an adaptation—it is an opportunity to strengthen social work education and its commitment to social justice and human rights.

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