

Challenges to social work education in Kerala: an exploratory problem analysis

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Abstract

This article is an outcome of an exploratory study conducted with the objective of identifying the challenges to Social Work Education with a special focus on the Kerala context. Key Persons interviews with nine Social Work Educators who were selected through purposive sampling method with a set of inclusion criteria has been the method used for collecting the data. Thematic analysis has been used to analyze the qualitative data and nine major themes were identified. Prevalence of misconceptions about the profession, general perception about the less employment opportunities for the profession in the local context, mushrooming of Social Work Educational Institutions, lack of adherence to the quality standards by Social Work Educational Institutions, presence of Students with less attitude and aptitude, less practice exposure to the students in a supervised environment, less field and practice exposure and experience among the educators, less indigenized and contextual referral materials in Social Work and no adequate refresher programmes for social work educators were the major themes identified on the challenges to social work education. Narrative summaries were given under each of the above-mentioned themes by synthesizing the facts derived from the key informants.

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These themes were further analyzed based on the cause-effect relationship and depicted in the form of a problem tree to facilitate a discussion on the interconnectedness of the challenges existing. Absence of a regulatory mechanism to accredit and license social workers and social work educational institutions has been identified as the root cause for the existing challenges through the problem tree analysis.

Introduction

The success of a professional discipline depends largely on the quality of its educational sector. It also depends on the contributions by the concerned academia and practice fields, with mutual interactions, for deepening the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the profession. The role of curriculum and pedagogy in molding the young professionals with competence, ethics and compliance to all the essential quality standards prescribed by the profession, undoubtedly holds a prime position among the different and varying responsibilities of the educational sector. Threats and challenges are natural in all professions and it is an inevitable part of its growth and development. But its proper and timely detection and resolving through appropriate strategies and interventions would lead a profession to a better height with higher quality outcomes. There should be sufficient mechanisms to identify and address the contemporary and upcoming challenges in the fields to direct a profession and its academic discipline into better prospects and also to grow with enough attributes essential to cater to the ever-changing demands of the globalized world.

Social Work is a global profession which grows out with a humanitarian and democratic philosophical base. Service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence are the core values of Professional Social Work (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021). The Global definition of Social Work jointly introduced by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) in 2014 describes “Social Work as a practice-based profession and an academic discipline”. Social

Work Education is generally understood as an all-encompassing enterprise that includes multiple and interrelated professional functions aiming to develop competent social work practitioners (Bogo, 2010). Theoretical training through interactive classroom sessions and field work practicum with adequate practice exposures in a closely supervised environment are the two essential components of Social Work Education. The interactive classroom and outside practice exposures are to be designed in such a manner that it should help the students to develop a critical sense on the causes and consequences of various psycho social problems prevailing in societies and the practical measures to identify and address them. In the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) (2022), of the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE), United States, the Field Practicum has been described as the Signature Pedagogy of Social Work Education. The practice-based nature of Social Work (IASSW & IFSW, 2014) signifies the importance of field work practicum in social work education. Developing knowledge, skills and attitudes desirable for professional practice through a continuous process of praxis is the major objective of Social Work Education. The social work curriculum and the methodologies to be used in social work pedagogy should be thus designed with appropriate care and attention. The IASSW and IFSW set up and published the Global Standards for Social Work Education in 2004 and it has been revised in 2020 with adequate consultation with the stakeholders in the member countries (IASSW & IFSW, 2014).

The social work profession, represented by professional practice and education, is presently growing in Kerala with a phenomenal increase in the number of social work educational institutions and professional networks. 70 institutions are presently offering social work educational programmes in Kerala. Social work professionals are rendering their services in many sectors in Kerala and the opportunities for aspiring and competent professionals are increasing day by day. Although some bottlenecks hinder the development and expansion of social work profession and education, with a higher quality standard, are still prevalent in Kerala, it is to be considered normal in the developing stages of a comparatively younger profession and an academic discipline and its expansion to the regional and local levels.

A literature review on the contemporary challenges to Social Work Education at national context highlights the following aspects: absence of a licensing body or a council for the accreditation and standardization of social work education and practice (Adaikalam, F. 2014; Babu, A. & Jose, S. 2019; Baikady, R. & Shengli, C. 2020; Botcha, R. 2012), non-recognition on the professional identity of social work (Baikady, R. & Shengli, 2020; Botcha, R. 2012), poor awareness among the public about the profession and presence of various misconceptions (Babu, A. & Jose, S. 2019), Mushrooming of social work educational institutions (Adaikalam, F. 2014), teacher centric pedagogy with lack of student perspective (Baikady, R. & Shengli, 2020), mismatch between the concepts and methods taught in social work educational programmes (Baikady, R. & Shengli, 2020), lack of indigenous theories & literatures and models of practice (Adaikalam, F. 2014), lack of global perspectives in the education and practice of social work in the local scenario (Baikady, R. & Shengli, 2020) and less practice and research involvement of educators (Botcha, R. 2012)

Based on the above facts, it is certain that the challenges to social work education are highly prevalent in the national scenario and it's for sure reflects in the regional level as well. Thus, it is very important to facilitate a situational analysis on the problem scenario of social work education to find out and prioritize the contemporary challenges and to organize them based on the cause effect relationship to frame appropriate strategies to overcome the existing challenges. The policy planning process and the setting of objectives and goals need information from the grass root level. As social work educators play a key role in executing the various components of social work education with a direct involvement, an attempt to explore their perception on the existing challenges would help to get a comprehensive picture about the current realities. The existing literature on the challenges to social work education specific to the Kerala context are either vague or lack the contemporary context. At the same time regionally relevant information is highly essential for planning the initiatives at the National level with regional specifications. Also, the insight on the existing challenges to social work education relevant to the Kerala context

would be beneficial to plan and act locally to incorporate the global approaches and standards with enough contextualization to bring better outcomes. In this context the present study has been initiated with the major objective of identifying the major challenges to Social Work Education and to evolve strategies to enable the quality enhancement.

Method

The study was conducted with the objective of identifying the contemporary challenges to social work education in the national and regional context as perceived by the social work educators. Exploratory research design was followed in the study. The data was collected by conducting key informants' interviews with nine eminent social work educators who were selected using a purposive sampling method. The selection of the key persons was based on the following inclusion criteria:

- Educators with a minimum of 15 years of teaching experience,
- Membership in the Board of Studies of Social Work Educational Programmes,
- Occupying/ occupied reputed academic positions in Social Work,
- Occupying / Occupied leadership positions in social work Associations.

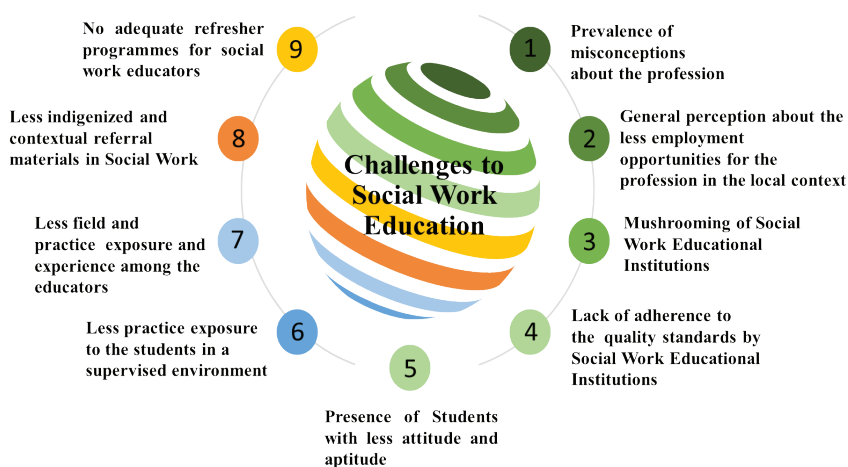
An interview guide was used as the tool for conducting the key informants Interview. Thematic analysis method was used to generate themes out of the qualitative data and narrative descriptions were given under each theme in a synthesized manner to communicate the results. The themes generated from the qualitative data analysis were further analyzed and presented in the form of a problem tree in the discussion part of the article by organizing the themes based on its cause-effect relationship.

Results

Key informant interviews were conducted with nine Social Work Educators to explore the challenges to Social Work Education in the regional and national context. Thematic interactions took place in each of the interviews with the

basic question of what are the contemporary challenges to Social Work Education. Probing questions were also asked to explore the challenges based on the existing literature on the area and also based on the responses of the key informants to the basic question under study. The qualitative data collected from the key informant interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically. The themes identified on the challenges to Social Work Education from the analysis are presented below in the figure 1. Narrative descriptions are also given under each theme based on the synthesis of facts disclosed by the key informants.

Figure 1
Themes identified on the challenges to social work education from the key informant interviews



Narrative description on the identified themes have been presented below:

Prevalence of misconceptions about the profession

The participants of the key informant interview have reported that several misconceptions are still prevalent about the Social Work profession locally. Many people misunderstood the profession as social service or as charitable

services of religious or social organizations or even as the works of politicians and the like. These misconceptions are prevalent even among the policy makers, management representatives of certain Institutions offering Social Work Education and even at the University level. Misconceptions are also prevalent among other significant stakeholders like students, parents, employers of Social Work Graduates, officials of Field Work agencies and also among the general public. Thus, it has been a great challenge to implement Social Work Education in many institutions as it is supposed to be implemented with compliance to the standards as prescribed at the National or International levels. The decision makers in many Social Work Educational Institutions and in many Field Work agencies are not professionally qualified Social Workers and their approach towards the major decisions which could influence Social Work Education has been not favorable to the profession, especially when it comes to the matters related to the professional growth of Social Work Students.

The professional status of Social Work is not widely recognized because of the presence of the misconceptions. Many best practices are happening at the local level initiated by Social Workers but these efforts are not well documented and disseminated among the significant stakeholders as said by one of the Key Informants. The Social Workers are yet to demonstrate what changes that they can bring in addressing the social problems through the application of Social Work methods at micro, mezzo and macro levels, in the local circles. Many times, the specific roles of Social Work Professionals are misinterpreted and misunderstood in comparisons with the roles of other related professionals such as Psychologist or Sociologist and the like. A role clarity is highly essential for Social Workers working in various fields of practice and it should be properly communicated and well understood by other stakeholders of the profession as well to enable the Social Workers to do what is expected to be performed by them as Professional Social Workers. A wide spread sensitization about the roles of Social Workers and what they can and have to do in various fields of practice needs to be widely disseminated among the significant stakeholders of the profession.

General perception about the less employment opportunities for social work professionals in the local context

Another major challenge shared by the key informants was the presence of a general perception about the less employment opportunities for Social Work Professionals at the local levels contradicting the fact that the demand for Social Work Professionals is comparatively higher as compared to that of other professionals locally. One of the major reasons for this negative perception is the lack of reservation to the Social Work Professionals in significant Government vacancies where the need of trained Professional Social Workers is substantial. Many times, the job vacancies for Professional Social Workers are shared by other professionals such as Sociologists, Psychologists or Management Professionals because of the influence of these profession's associations at the administrative or influential circles.

Most of the job vacancies available to the Social Work Professionals in the Government sector are only on contract basis with less job security and unfavorable work environments. Less salary and related unfavorable conditions of work environment for the professionally qualified Social Workers in many institutions also contributes to the general perception about the less employment opportunities for Social Work Professionals locally. Less competency among Social Work Students who are qualified from the institutions with no much concern to the quality standards and resultantly with less theoretical and practice exposures are also responsible for widening this gap. Because of this negative perception about the less employment opportunities for the Social Work Professionals at the local level, a significant portion of the Social Work students joining for MSW or BSW programmes in Kerala are the aspirants of Social Work jobs abroad and it is one of the reasons for the sustaining demand for the Social Work Educational Programmes in Kerala. To sustain the high demand for the Social Work Educational Programmes in Kerala, many Educational Institutions are also attempting to influence the students highlighting the high demand for the Social Work professionals in outside India but a significant number of such institutions pays little attention to the professional development of the students with adequate competence required for the members of the global profession. The growth and development of the

profession locally with higher recognition and standards require the generation of employment opportunities locally with global outlook and standards. The professionals should be competent enough to practice social work with high quality standards, at the same time there should be a professional environment to facilitate the professionals to ensure quality practice.

Mushrooming of social work educational institutions in kerala without much concern to the quality standards

It is an appealing trend that Social Work Education has an increasing and sustaining demand in Kerala as opined by the Key informants of the study and this fact is leading to a phenomenal increase in the number of Social Work Educational Institutions in Kerala in the recent past. On the other hand, this higher demand triggers many of the self-financing institutions to offer Social Work Educational programmes only for profit with no much understanding on the philosophical underpinnings of the profession and also with no compliance to the quality standards to be maintained by the Educational Programmes in Social Work. The presence of such institutions creates significant problems for executing Social Work Education with quality standards in the local context. The students who are not trained properly in theoretical as well as practical aspects may not be able to demonstrate the strength of the profession in the concerned fields where they are employed and it may create a negative impact for the profession as well. This fact is to be read along with the quality services given by the Social Work Professionals from Kerala across the world as opined by the key informants. In order to sustain the demand for Social Work Education, it is highly desirable to maintain all the quality standards prescribed for the profession and its education while executing the Professional Social Work Education.

The increase in Social Work Educational programmes should be in line with the demand for Social Work vacancies locally and also in consideration with the possibility of getting jobs for the trained professional in the National or International job markets. The Universities and other significant bodies who are responsible to sanction Social Work Educational Programmes should

consider the background of the institutions and their capacity to ensure quality Social Work Education with required standards while sanctioning these programmes.

Lack of adherence to the quality standards in the functioning of social work educational institutions

One of the major challenges to Social Work Education as highlighted by the key informants of the study is the lack of adherence to the quality standards in the functioning of Social Work Educational Institutions. Standards for Social Work Education have been prescribed at the National and International level but a significant number of institutions, especially the new institutions are not adhering to the standards prescribed as expressed by the Key Informants. There are no mechanisms to license Social Work Educational Institutions considering the quality standards and there is no body to accredit Social Work Educational Institutions in the local as well as national context. If there are enough mechanisms to monitor the standards followed by the Social Work Educational Institutions, it would be a motivation for the institutions to keep quality standards in their functioning. There are situations in which the Social Work Educators who are waiting for the final semester results of their Masters Programme are getting appointments in certain Institutions. Field Work Practicum is considered with lesser importance in certain institutions as reported by the Key Informants. Quality standards to be maintained with regard to the student's admission, teaching and learning process, explicit criteria for making assessments on student's progress, field work practicum and administrative provisions to the Social Work Departments are also absent in many institutions as said by the Key Informants of the Study. A good number of institutions and educators are even not aware about the quality standards which are in place and so adequate sensitization in this regard is also highly desirable.

Presence of students with less aptitude and attitude favorable for social work

The Key Informants of the study were unanimous in their opinion that the attitude and aptitude required for the Social Work students as the aspirants of

a humanitarian profession are deteriorating and getting worse year by year. The students with any degree background are eligible to apply for the MSW programme and thus a significant number of students who are applying for the MSW programme lack adequate understanding about the Profession and its core mission, major areas where Social Workers are getting employment and the major tasks to be performed by the professionals. Many are choosing the profession for getting a job but have not recognized the importance of certain underpinning values of Social Work such as Service, Professional Integrity and Acceptance to the inherent worth and dignity of all the individuals especially the vulnerable and downtrodden sections of the population. The critical awareness of the students applying and getting admission for Social Work Programmes about contemporary social problems, its causes and consequences and the realities of life in and around our surroundings are low as compared to the critical awareness of students who were joining for the Social Work Educational Programmes earlier times, as shared by the key informants. There are students who are reluctant to take part in Field Work Practicum or attempting to fulfill the Practicum requirements as it is mandatory but with less commitment and enthusiasm. Social Work Educational Programmes should be the right forum to guide students in the correct direction and enable them to develop a favorable attitude and aptitude required for the budding Social Work Professionals. The students should be given maximum possible exposures throughout the Social Educational Programmes and a special emphasis should be given to their attitude and aptitude formation in the initial semesters itself. Bridge programmes are highly essential in this context especially for the students who are joining for the post graduate programmes in social work from diverse degree backgrounds.

Less practice exposure to the students in a supervised environment

The Key Informants of the study were particular in describing the importance of Field Education as the key component of Social Work Education. They have also pointed out that students lack quality practice exposure in a closely supervised environment in many educational institutions. Busy

academic schedules and treating Social Work Educational programmes as same as other undergraduate or postgraduate programmes with lesser or no practicum components, while preparing the academic and examination schedules are resultantly leads to less focus to the practicum component than the required attention. Less Practice involvement of Social Work Educators prevents them from involving students in practice under their direct guidance and supervision. Absence of hours in the workload of Social Work Educators to carry out the activities related to field work supervision such as field inspection, report correction, individual and group conferences with the students etc prevents the Social Work Educators from providing quality supervision to the students. Absence of supportive staff and increasing administrative responsibilities to the Social Work Educators also contributes to the lack of quality supervision provided to the students. Lack of trained staff in field work agencies to look after the matters related to students undergoing Field Work Practicum, absence of well-developed training modules to engage the students in the field activities associated with the functioning of the concerned agencies, lack of articulated policies in field work agencies related to the training of Social Work Students, lack of proper communication between the agency supervisors and staff supervisors of the educational institutions and lack of adequate training to the agency supervisors by the educational institutions contributes to the poor supervision and guidance to the Social Work Students undergoing Field Practicum from the part of the agencies.

Less field and practice exposure and experience among the educators

Another common theme on the challenges to Social Work Education came to light from the Key Informant interview was the lack of practice exposure among the Educators. The Educators of the Professional Programmes should be practitioners as well to ensure quality practice exposures to the students in a closely supervised environment as opined by a Key Informant. The field experience of the educators is to be considered with prime importance while appointing faculty members to the Social Work Schools but this aspect has been given least priority in actual practice as conveyed by six of the key informants. A synthesized analysis

of the information shared by the Key informants on the possibilities of practice exposure to the Social Work Educators gave the following insights. Adequate practice opportunities for the educators are to be facilitated along with teaching as in the case of the professional education programmes of other disciplines. It can be possible through the involvement of social work educators through the Field Action Projects or through the involvement of social work educators in the Extension Services of the Institutions. It is also possible by facilitating the involvement of Social Work Educators in the service delivery processes of the collaborating Social Work agencies through adequate MOUs and policy decisions. But such a conducive environment is absent in many of the Social Work Educational institutions. Many of the Field Action Projects and Extension Services of the Educational Institutions are not functioning in a very professional manner and there is little scope for practicing social work methods through such initiatives in many institutions as clearly stated by a key informant. Moreover, such initiatives are purely absent in many other institutions. The culture of MoUs for collaborative practices are yet to be initiated in a significant number of institutions. As a result of all the above-mentioned aspects, a significant number of Social Work Educators lack practice exposures and as a result they fail to update many of the new innovations in the field and incorporate them in teaching. Research based practice and practice-based teaching are to be promoted in Social Work Education to improve the quality of Social Work Education.

Less indigenized and contextual referral materials in social work

Another major theme on the challenges to Social Work Education derived from the analysis of the information collected through the Key Informant Interview was the less indigenized and contextual literature in Social Work suitable to guide professional social work practice in the local context. The major point common among the Key informants was that, most of the theories of Social Work have originated in the western countries and it cannot be directly applied to intervene in many of the local social situations without proper contextualization. To enable the social work practitioners and students to facilitate Evidence Based Practice suiting to the local context, a substantial

indigenous database is highly essential. Even though a significant number of Social Work initiatives are taking place locally in various fields, many such efforts are not properly documented or disseminated with adequate research insights. Knowledge Production and dissemination based on Social Work Practice to develop indigenous knowledge is highly desirable to enable the social workers and students to engage in quality practice.

No adequate refresher programme for social work educators

Opportunities for Professional Development through Continuing Educational Programmes are highly essential for the Social Work Educators but such opportunities are not adequate in the local context as opined by the Key Informants of the study. Even though some initiatives are in place in the form of FDPs or similar Professional Development Programmes organized by the Social Work Associations, many Social Work Educators are not in a position to attend these because of the busy academic schedules and other administrative constraints. Many of the institutions are not interested in sending the Educators to take part in such initiatives especially from the self-financing sector and so the interested Educators have to attend such programmes without any monetary or other incentives from the Institutions they represent. Increasing staff turnover is the reason for the lack of interest from the part of the management to send the Educators to such programmes on one side and as well as many Managements are not truly concerned about the professional development of the Educators on the other side as opined by the Key Informants of the Study. Opportunities for the Continuous Professional Development of Social Work Educators are highly essential to lead the professional education in the right direction and so the Managements of Social Work Educational Institutions and Social Work Associations are to jointly work towards a conducive environment for the Professional Development of the Educators.

Discussion

In order to facilitate a discussion based on the identified themes on the challenges to Social Work Education, a problem tree has been constructed by

organizing the themes based on its cause-effect relationship. Presentation of the problem tree with its detailed narrative summary has been included in the discussion part of the article. Implications of the study with the recommendations are also included in the discussion part of the article.

Figure 1

Problem tree analysis on the challenges to social work education

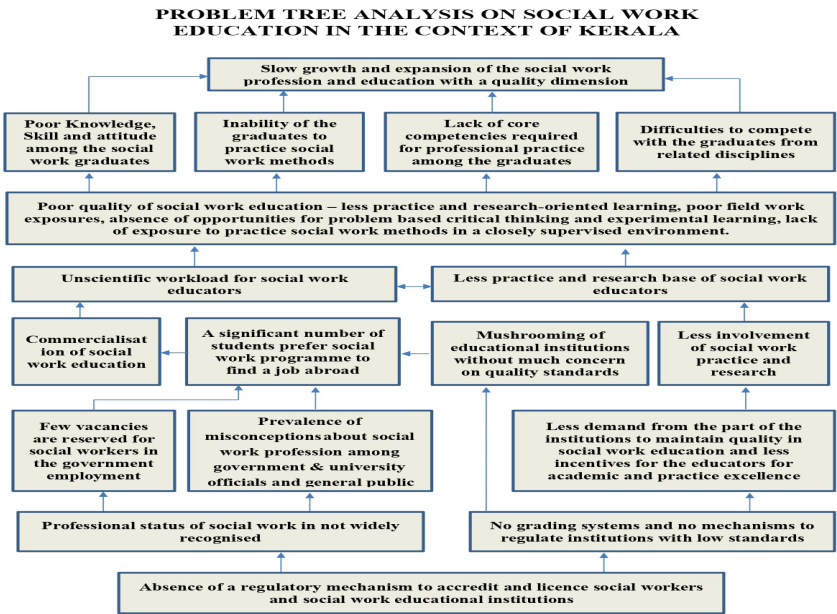
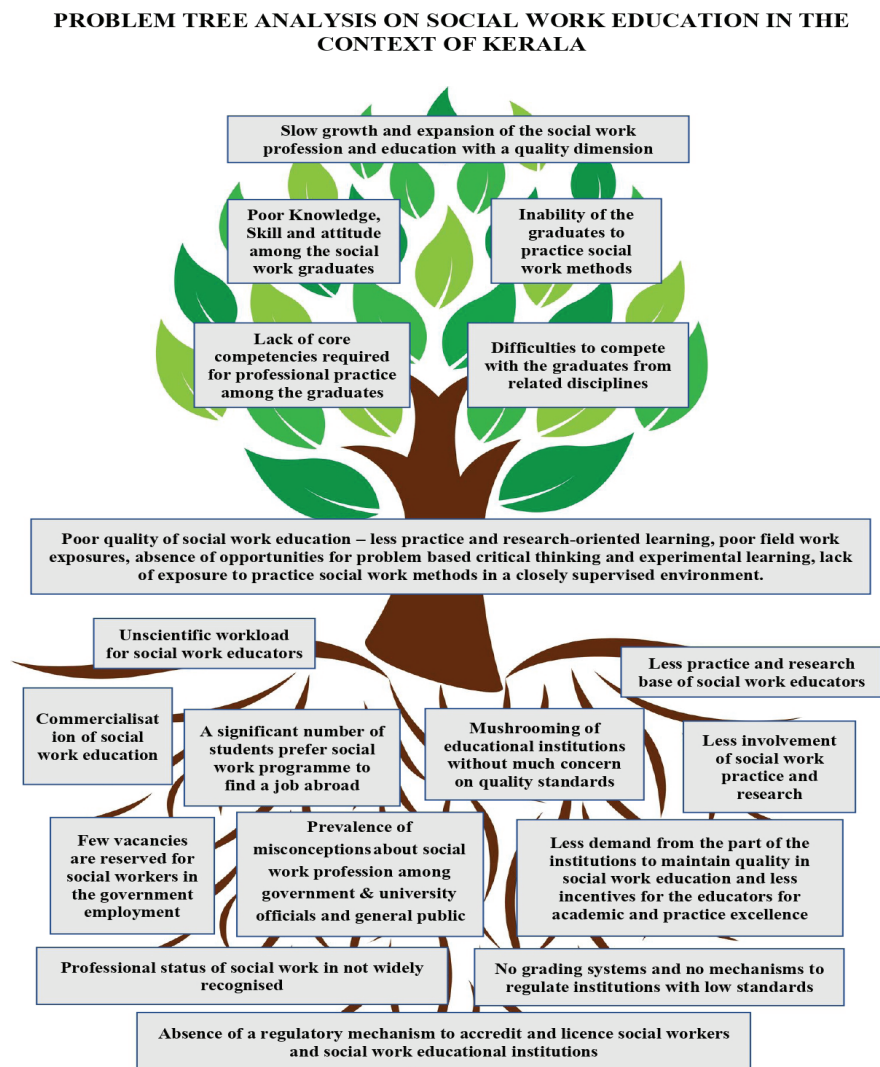


Figure 3

Depiction of the challenges to social work education in a problem tree

The problem tree analysis presented in figure 2 & 3 gives a clear insight into

the fact that the absence of a regulatory mechanism to accredit and license social workers and social work educational institutions has been the root cause for many of the existing challenges to social work education in the regional as well as national context. Due to the absence of such a regulatory mechanism, the professional status of social work is not widely recognized and parallel to that there are no systems to grade the institutions offering social work education and to regulate the institutions which are running without much concern on quality standards. The less recognition of the professional status of social work contributes to the prevalence of many misconceptions about Professional Social Work and Professional Social Work Education among the government and university officials and also among the general public. As a result, only a small number of vacancies are reserved for social workers in the public employment sector. The misconceptions prevalent among the officials contributes to the phenomenon of mushrooming of social work educational institutions as the authorities give sanctions to more educational institutions without considering the unique nature of the profession and the minimum and quality standards to be followed by the educational institutions.

The absence of systems to grade the educational institutions and the absence of mechanisms to regulate the institutions with low standards also contributes to the mushrooming of the educational institutions on the other side. The presence of more institutions which are less concerned about the quality standards further perpetuate the misconceptions by propagating wrong ideas among the potential and prospective students and their parents to increase the catchment of these institutions and to increase their admission rates. As a result, a significant number of students joining the social work educational programmes prefer this course only to get a career prospect abroad without considering whether they possess the right attitude and aptitude which are essential for professional social work practice. The less employment opportunities in the government sector and other problems in the local job market also contribute to make this issue more severe. All the above said facts lead to a kind of commercialization in the social work educational field locally. On the other hand, the absence of a system for grading the educational

institutions leads to less demand from the part of the institutions to maintain the quality standards and such institutions hesitate to provide any motivation or incentives to the educators for their excellence in practice and research together with quality teaching. As a result, very few educators are involved in social work practice, activities related to indigenous knowledge production and dissemination and also in the development of contextualized intervention models. Such attributes are highly essential for social work educators to improve the quality of teaching. Thus, the effect of a kind of commercialization in the social work education and all its causative factors results in an unscientific workload for social work educators and it in turn leads to the less practice and research involvement of social work educators. Poor quality of social work education, attributed in the form of inability of the institutions to engage its faculty members and students in quality practice and research ; poor quality of field work; gaps in theory and practice integration; less opportunities for problem based critical thinking and learning and the absence of practice exposures to the students especially in the area of practice of social work methods in a closely supervised environment; is the major contemporary challenge to social work education which is derived out from the root causes and its effects highlighted by the key informants of the study which are analyzed and discussed through the problem tree analysis so far. The effects of this problems as opined by the key informants includes: A significant number of social work graduates who are coming out from certain institutions are poor in knowledge, attitudes and skills which are essential for quality social work practice; many graduates are not competent enough to practice social work methods properly; certain essential core competencies are lacking in a good percent of the graduates; and the social work graduates who are in employment fails to compete with the professionals from related disciplines to demonstrate the uniqueness and strength of social work profession in handling the social as well as developmental issues. All these facts result in a slow growth and expansion of the profession with a quality dimension.

Recommendations based on the study findings

The study findings based on the nine key persons interviews with a qualitative dimension gives an exploratory picture on the prevalence of various

challenges to social work education as perceived by the social work educators. The findings of the study substantiate the existing literature on the challenges to social work education in the national and regional context. Based on the themes identified from the key informant's interview and the problem tree prepared based on organizing the identified themes, the study recommends the following:

- Revising and legitimizing the national standards for social work education with regional specification and enabling the formation of a national authority to license social work educational institutions with decentralized power structures.
- Adequate provisions are to be enabled to provide maximum practice exposure to the students especially for the practice of social work methods in a closely supervised environment as part of field work practicum.
- Brining workload reforms for social work educators with extra provisions for field work supervision. Allot adequate time and resources to promote the involvement of social work educators in practice, research and consultancy.
- Public perception about the social work profession and education are to be enhanced through right and timely interventions and also by demonstrating the strengths of the profession to effectively intervene in social issues.
- As the implication to the social work curriculum and syllabus the study recommends to include a paper on social work education in the syllabus of social work educational programmes at the postgraduate level. It would help the students to have a better understanding about the various components of social work education, standards for social work education and the contemporary challenges and prospects of social work education. The well-informed student community would be a greater prospect for resolving the existing challenges.
- The present study is more or less exploratory in nature with a more focus to the qualitative dimension. The study presents only an overall scenario

of the challenges to social work education with some general recommendations. More specific findings and recommendations can be arrived at if further studies are done in this regard. Further studies are also recommended specific to the Kerala context in connection with all the relevant components of social work education such as field work practicum, field action projects, extension services, knowledge production and dissemination, consultancy services, continuing and extension education and so on.

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