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Social Work Professional Competencies and Educational Programs Specialized Practice. Theoretical Analysis

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Abstract: *The practice of social work starts from the period of university education – bachelor and master educational programs, where students are guided, supervised by experienced professionals to develop the competencies and skills of relating to clients of social work services, step by step.*
The purpose of this work is to theoretically analyze the relation between specialized education programs during bachelor's and master's studies and the desired competencies of social workers. We will refer to the international literature to understand a global perspective on the practice of social work from the perspective of education in the field. We will focus on the identification of key competencies of social workers, in Romanian and American social work practice and educational system.

Keywords: *specialized educational practice; professional competence; social work specialist; university education practice.*

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Introduction

Contemporary social work demands, more than ever, efficiency and a high level of empowerment among its clients. These requirements simultaneously amplify the need to research and understand how the professional skills of specialists are developed. That's why we find in the specialized literature models such as the Norwegian (Malmberg-Heimonen et al., 2016) and Russian (Davletkaliev et al., 2015) models that, inspired by local and global practice, seek to identify the best educational and training strategies for future specialists, by amplifying the professionalization of the systems. As Mulder (2014) expresses, "professional and practice-based learning is a process that takes many different forms. They differ in the personal characteristics of the learners, the levels of their professions, the fields of practice, the intentionality of their learning and the formalization of learning activities".

The Romanian university environment supports the practical training of social workers through educational programs that involve "specialty practice" - a mandatory discipline for students majoring in Sociology in years 1 and 2. The specialized practice can be carried out during the study year or as a compact internship in the summer, during the official practice period or, in certain cases, during the summer. According to the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work of the University of Bucharest, specialized practice represents for students the framework for applying and consolidating theoretical knowledge, the framework for their professional perfection. (https://sas.unibuc.ro/practica)

International practice (Berkeley Social Welfare, n.d.; Boston University School of Social Work, n.d), as well as international literature (Sim & Dominelli, 2022; Drisko, 2014), supports the need to acquire basic skills in social work. These competencies represent, in the professional-client relationship, the dimensions of social work practice that all social workers must master during their professional training. The training starts already during the bachelor's and master's studies, through the specialized practice during the semesters' study, where the students make contact with the clients of the social services.

Competencies and skills in social work profession

Starting from a randomized design, the study conducted by Malmberg-Heimonen et al. (2016) examined the effects of a government-coordinated professional skills training program for social workers in

Norway. The purpose of the training program was to improve the professional skills of social workers by improving and systematizing the subsequent work undertaken with long-term unemployed clients. The study was methodologically based on the motivational interview and the appreciative survey, taking place over an eighteen-month follow-up period of the study participants. What the researchers of this program identified was that the skills training program positively affected the social workers' evaluations of their professional skills and the quality of the work supervision they received. The results were based on social workers acquiring and mastering a set of specific tools and techniques, a comprehensive supervision structure and the opportunity to adapt the skills learned to local conditions.

These specific skills resulted from a government program among social workers already active in the field of social services, and we consider it valuable to understand the usefulness of the students' training prior to graduating from the social work specialization.

Key competencies of social workers in the American model

At the United States level, the accrediting agency for social work education is the Council on Social Work Education. This agency requires that all master's programs in social work develop and implement an explicit curriculum that prepares graduates for practice by mastering a set of nine core competencies (Boston University School of Social Work, n.d):

C1: Demonstrating ethical and professional behavior

C2: Promoting human rights and social, racial, economic and environmental justice

C3: Involvement in professional practice of attitudes and behavior that support anti-racism, diversity, equity and inclusion

C4: Engagement in practice-informed research and research-informed practice

C5: Involvement in policy practice

C6: Interacting with individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities

C7: Assessing individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities

C8: Intervention in favor of individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities

C9: Evaluating practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities

Each of these competencies is elaborated comprehensively by the Council on Social Work Education, and the description of each one makes the understanding of the role of the social worker even better, especially by those in the university education process.

For this paper we will enlarge 2 of these competencies.

Thus, through *competency 1 - Demonstrating an ethical and professional behavior*, social workers understand the imperative that underpins the profession: the basic values of the profession and its ethical standards (Kaslow et al., 2007.), as well as the relevant policies, laws and regulations that can influence the practice with direct clients of the care system. The ethics of social work is based on the principles of human rights and social workers apply them in their daily practice for the realization of social, racial, economic and environmental justice. Through their continuous training, social workers understand ethical decision-making frameworks and apply principles of critical thinking to those frameworks in practice, research and policy (Plant, 2013). Competence 1 encompasses very ecologically the social workers' understanding of their own personal and professional values. The ability to distinguish between these two types of values comes in support of the professional, as he sees how it is necessary to identify those personal experiences, as well as the affective reactions to the environment to which they are exposed, can actually influence the making of balanced decisions in favor of the client. Professional and non-judgmental behavior is imperative in exercising an ethically balanced practice, and for this social workers take steps to care for themselves professionally and personally, understanding that self-care is essential to competent and ethical social work practice. In a relationship of interconnection and professional interdependence, for the greater good of the client, social workers understand the role of other professionals when they are involved in interprofessional practice. Under the same vision of competencies, social workers recognize the importance of lifelong learning and are committed to continually updating their skills to ensure relevant and effective practice (Boston University School of Social Work, n.d).

In the light of the second competence - *Promoting human rights and social, racial, economic and environmental justice* - social workers understand that every person, regardless of their position in society, has fundamental rights that demand to be respected (Davis & Reber, 2016). Thus, social workers know the global injustices manifested throughout history, from which oppression and racism resulted, and they also know the role and response of social work to these realities. Social workers are committed to critically evaluating the distribution of power and privilege in society to support social, racial, economic, and environmental justice by reducing inequities and

ensuring dignity and respect for all (Boston University School of Social Work, n.d). By virtue of manifested social justice, social workers support and engage in strategies to eliminate oppressive structural barriers with the aim of ensuring that social resources, rights and responsibilities are equitably distributed and that human rights are protected.

In a synthesis of this competence 2 acquired throughout practice, social workers: support human rights at the individual, family, group, organizational and community level; and engages in practices that advance human rights to promote social, racial, economic, and environmental justice.

Romanian key abilities of social workers

In order to understand the context in which social workers in Romania develop and what values, principles and practices are the bases of their professional training, we sought to identify those competencies promoted at the national level, bearing in mind the previously described American model. In our theoretical analysis, we identified how the guidance of Romanian social workers has several levers, originating in international practices as well. The Association of Social Workers in Romania supports the training of social workers by recognizing a set of 15 professional skills that make up the professional profile of the Social Worker. These skills are inspired by the model developed by Hendrik Epe and the Center for Training and Evaluation in Social Work. We will display the abilities that the Association of Social Workers in Romania supports in the social workers professionalization, as they follow:

1. the ability to listen and understand the meanings that people associate with the things, people and situations they experience;
2. the ability to connect to the other's emotions and to use one's own emotions appropriately in the professional act;
3. the ability to reflect on one's own person and one's actions;
4. the ability to quickly identify/mobilize the necessary resources and use them in a way that creates maximum impact;
5. the ability to quickly adapt to new situations and create an appropriate response;
6. the ability to manage conflicts positively;
7. the ability to recognize and positively manage contradictions;
8. the ability to make decisions based on the data obtained and to argue the decisions;
9. the ability to use critical thinking;
10. the ability to coordinate their work in the work team;

11. the ability to connect and distance yourself, at the same time, in the professional act;

12. the ability to separate the person from the problems they face;

13. the ability to apply legal provisions to specific cases and different contexts;

14. the ability to use humor appropriately and to constantly use creativity;

15. the ability to anchor professionally in as many professional fields as possible.

It could be useful and worthy to stand the difference between skills and competences. On the official website of the Association of Social Workers in Romania the list refers to skills, but we may accept de possibility of a mistranslation of the Romanian terms, as the used terms are "capacitatea" (ability) not "competenta" (competence). Competence involves knowledge, behaviors, attitudes and even skills that lead to the ability to do something successfully or effectively, while skills are learned and applied abilities that use one's knowledge effectively in execution or performance. Competences are values-based, non-flexible and non-transferrable, while skills are flexible, measurable, and transferable.

Specialized Practice in Master of Social Work Programs

Worldwide, there are many guided master's programs with the final goal being to become a certified social worker in the specializations that the universities prepare from an educational point of view, and the local or national social context requires them to come to the support of individuals, communities, those who need social work. Each university offers educational programs to train future professionals as clinical specialists - through courses and field practice, students are exposed to a broad overview of therapeutic interventions and have the opportunity to develop advanced practice skills and therapeutic techniques, as well as to macro level - specialists who address the support and development of social innovation and leadership. In the case of the macro approach, courses and field placements offer students the opportunity to acquire practical skills that focus on advocacy, leadership and administration, financial management and resource development, and new approaches to drive social change and promote the common good, as in the model offered by the Boston College School of Social Work.

In the American model of social work, the Bachelor of Social Work certification qualifies for entry-level positions in fields such as mental health, senior services, or residential treatment. In order to become a Licensed

Clinical Social Worker, a master's degree in social work is required, which gives you the opportunity to offer individual psychotherapy or advanced clinical services. Moreover, a Master's degree in social work can help to occupy a position of program management or supervision in social work (NASW, n.d.).

The Romanian example of the University of Bucharest, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, Master of Counseling in Social Work provides a collaborative educational program, in clinical and research activities. The mission of such a program is to train highly qualified professionals in counseling individuals, groups and communities affected by social problems, who have the knowledge, skills and motivation to initiate and develop counseling services with a role in improving the quality of life of individuals, families and communities. Such a program maintains its usefulness in the training of new professionals in the field of social services whose aim is to prevent the installation of pathological social processes (abandonment and neglect of children, abuse and domestic violence, drug use, delinquency, school dropout, maladaptation to the stress produced of chronic diseases, HIV/AIDS, physical or mental deficiencies, etc.), as well as providing, through counseling, support to people who cannot overcome, by their own efforts, the difficult situations in which they find themselves (Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, Master of Counseling in Social Work, n.d)

Education in the field of social work involves a unique characteristic, namely placement in the field or specialized practice. This feature implies that in addition to classroom study, all social work students have field experiences, which provide them with an opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills in a real setting. Such work in the field, specialized educational practice can be any work setting in which experienced social workers work. Depending on the type of social services to be offered, students can experience the application of social work in mental health institutions, child and family service centers, non-governmental organizations.

Conclusions

The small examples of theoretical and practical competencies we used within this paper, but also the small selections of the educational programs from national and international social work system were used to exemplify the nature of training in social welfare practices. Either we refer to clinical or macro practice, future social workers need to get accustomed with practice in their field of activity. This accommodation needs to be within a specialized environment in order for them to better understand what a

professionalized practice means, in connection with their future clients. The educational programs within universities may be the start of the social worker's professionalization, by providing the graduates in social work the possibility to choose a social welfare carrier, on the basis they get to understand their work environment first.

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