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# Integration of ADEI Competencies in the Specialized Practice of Social Work Students and in the Act of Professionalization of Social Work

**Petronela Polixenia NISTOR** [1]

[1] Lecturer PhD, Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iași, Romania, polixenianistor@yahoo.com

**Abstract:** *Considering the set of key competencies supported by social work organizations in the development of the social work profession at the global level, we aim to analyze from a theoretical point of view those competencies that presuppose the integration in professional practice of attitudes and behaviors that encourage non-discrimination, cultural diversity, equity and inclusion in the training of social work students. The student in the field of social work here can be both the one who benefits from training and continuing education, and the one who in turn perpetuates future practices and balanced client-professional relationships, after being integrated into specific social work organizations. The analysis starts from how the professionalization of future social workers is correlated with their guidance and involvement in practices based on anti-racism/non-discrimination, equity, equal opportunities, cultural diversity and inclusion. The objective of this paper is to draw, at a theoretical level, lines of connection between professionalization practices at the international level - as formulated by the Boston University School of Social Work in agreement with the Council on Social Work Education, the national association that represents education of social work from the United States, with Romanian national norms - adopted from European and international practices - the National College of Social Workers in Romania (NCSWR/ CNASR - the acronym in Romanian language), in agreement with UNICEF and ISCO.*

**Keywords:** *equity; inclusion; non-discrimination; diversity; continuing education; the professionalization of social workers.*

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## Introduction

In their daily practice, social workers go beyond simply providing services, they empower individuals and their families by strengthening their strengths and encouraging their resilience (Harvey, 2021). Furthermore, through counseling, skill development, and community engagement, social workers equip people with the tools they need (Alexander & Charles, 2009) to overcome challenges and thrive. Social workers are on the frontline, working with marginalized communities who often face discrimination and neglect. They provide a critical voice for the unheard, advocating for policies that address systemic inequalities and promote social justice (Quinn et al., 2022).

Furthermore, social disadvantage clusters in families across multiple generations (Cheng et al., 2016). Generational poverty, poor health care, abuse and lack of opportunity can create a seemingly inevitable cycle, but social workers intervene at critical moments and provide support and resources that break these cycles (Cheng et al., 2016) and pave the way for a future brighter.

Social workers do not limit themselves to individual cases, they become through practice promoters of social change, they use their experience and data to advocate for wider social change. Social workers play a vital role in shaping public policy (Lopez, 2021), influencing legislation and raising awareness (Reamer, 2020) of potential and existing social injustices (Sousa-Meixell et al., 2022).

And if we refer to the investment in the future (UNESCO, 2021), we see this being fulfilled through the empowerment of individuals and families. Thus, social workers are the co-creators of a generation of more resilient, more self-sufficient individuals who can contribute positively to society.

We see the professionalization of future social workers based on fundamental ethical values as imperative, and this can be implemented starting with the integration of fundamental skills into the specialized practice of social work students.

The education of future social workers is what makes the difference for the better towards a professionalized practice that comes to support the development of the client of social services, up to the achievement of his/her individual, relational and social autonomy.

### *The ADEI model and the professional competences of social workers from the perspective of CNASR and ISCO*

During this work, we will approach the C3 - ADEI competencies, theorizing ways in which these competencies can be integrated into the training and professionalization of future social workers and the improvement of those already active in the welfare system, in connection with the Code on the practice of social workers, issued by The National College of Social Workers in Romania (CNASR), in agreement with UNICEF.

From American welfare practice, we have identified 9 competencies, as reproduced by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and adopted by the Boston University School of Social Work (Boston University School of Social Work, n.d; Nistor, 2023). From these 9 competencies, we will highlight the C3 competence: C3. Involvement in professional practice of attitudes and behaviors that support **A**nti-racism/non-discrimination, **D**iversity (cultural, spiritual, etc.), **E**quity and **I**nclusion (**ADEI**) (Boston University School of Social Work, n.d; Nistor, 2023).

Although the model taken from the curriculum of the Boston University School of Social Work exposes competencies that are not delimited by stages of development/professionalization of the social worker, we see the implication in daily professional practice of attitudes and behaviors that support non-discrimination, diversity, equity and inclusion as being imperative since the stage of specialized practice during the training period of students in social work. The competence that ADEI requires as necessary in welfare practice also assumes that social workers (in training, beginners, practitioners, experts) understand the impact that discrimination and oppression have in shaping human experiences, as well as the fact that these social constructs may bring influences into the practice at the individual, family, group, organizational and community levels (Hepworth et al., 1990), but also at the policy and research level (Boston University School of Social Work, n.d; George Fox University, 2023).

In CSWE's approach, under the same aspiration of integrity and professionalism, social workers understand the impact of majority supremacy and privilege and use their knowledge, awareness and skills (George Fox University, 2023) to engage in non-discriminatory practices and respect for both majority and minority rights minorities - ethnic, cultural, religious, racial, sexual, etc. Regardless of level of training, social work practitioners understand how diversity and intersectionality shape human experiences and identity development and how they pose challenges to

equity and inclusion. Thus, social work practitioners also come to comprehend that intersectionality involves that a person's life experiences may include oppression, poverty, marginalization and alienation, or even self-exclusion/self-marginalization, but also may include privilege and power (George Fox University, 2023). Also, in the light of the applying a more inclusive and equitable welfare practice, social work professionals comprehend the societal and historical roots of injustices from social and racial level, but also the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination (George Fox University, 2023). Social workers understand cultural humility and recognize the extent to which the structures and values of a culture, including social, economic, political, racial, technological, and cultural exclusions, can create privilege and power that lead to systemic oppression (Boston University School of Social Work, n.d; George Fox University, 2023).

The role of social workers transcends the formal character with which we are familiar from an administrative point of view. Social workers around the world are the ones who daily navigate the labyrinth of systems (Graeber, 2015): individuals and families facing social challenges (Wulczyn et al., 2010) often become entangled in complex bureaucratic systems within which social workers come to act as guides and supporters for them. Social workers ensure access to essential resources such as health care (Andermann & CLEAR Collaboration, 2016), housing and education. This support empowers them to overcome systemic barriers and reach their full potential.

By virtue of understanding the complexity of factors that come to transform the lives of individuals, families, groups with whom social workers (both those in training and those already professionalized) work in direct relationship, we consider their continuous training an imperative.

At the level of welfare practice in Romania, we analyzed elements from the Code regarding the practice of social workers, issued by the National College of Social Workers in Romania (CNASR), in agreement with UNICEF, as well as elements from the International Standard Classification of Occupations ISCO-08, ESCO Competence 2635 - Specialists in social work and counseling.

We can observe from the opening of the competency 2635 - Specialists in social work and counseling, how the overall characteristics of the social work profession are based on international practice: "Specialists in social work and counseling offer guidance and counseling to individuals, families, groups, communities and organizations in response to personal and social difficulties" (National Authority for Qualifications, n.d.; ISCO, 2008, ESCO). Moreover, they help clients "develop skills and have access to the

resources and support services needed to respond to problems arising from unemployment, poverty, disabilities, addiction, criminal and delinquent behavior, marital and other problems" (National Authority for Qualifications, n.d.; ISCO, 2008; ESCO).

But until these guidance services are manifested in relation to the clients of social workers, the latter require thorough training, which is initiated within the training programs of specialized education. Preparing professionals to possess the knowledge and practical skills necessary to practice at a high level involves a complex endeavour.

Iovu et al. (2020) refer to the complexity of the training of social workers in relation to "the overall picture of the qualifications and regulation of professionals in the field of social work".

If we refer to the way in which CNASR approaches the competences of the social worker, we can see how the CNASR Code reproduces the professional standards in the activity of the social worker describing "the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for a competent professional practice". Thus, CNASR identifies a set of 8 professional standards, grouped into 2 different groups: professional standards in relation to the profession and professional standards in relation to the client (CNASR, n.d.).

Among the professional standards in relation to the profession, we identify: 1) professional integrity, 2) professional competence, 3) continuous training, 4) supervision and consultation. The CNASR Code organizes the professional skills also in accordance with the professional training specific to the service to be implemented in relation to the client. Thus, we reproduce the main categories of responsibilities/skills: case management, group intervention, community intervention, education and professional development, development and implementation of social programs, professional leadership/manager/entrepreneur, research in the social field (CNASR, n.d.). These responsibilities are associated with the professional levels of the profession: beginner, practitioner, specialist, principal.

The professional standards in the relationship with the client are: 5) building and supporting a correct professional relationship with the client, 6) assessment of needs carried out in partnership with the client, 7) carrying out social intervention, 8) teamwork (CNASR, n.d).

In the contents of the CNASR Code, each of the 8 standards is detailed, and next to the details, the types of associated activities are exposed.

We note that these standards have a technical character, which rather regulates the use of social intervention tools, both in relation to clients and in relation to other professionals, organizations, trainers.

In the competencies represented by the American model, transposed in a variety of social work schools, we find competencies that describe the understanding by social work professionals of how social, cultural, ethnic, spiritual, etc. differences can have effects on quality the lives of individuals. Social workers are transferred by their trainers, during their career, values that support inclusive, fair, non-discriminatory behaviors and attitudes, in acceptance of diversity, and the focus is on the interpersonal relationship between social worker and client.

Initiating a search in the text, starting from specific keywords (which we can also consider expressions of ethical values) such as "inclusion", "diversity", "equality", "rights", "equal" in the content of the International Standard Classification of Occupations ISCO-08, Competence 2635 - Specialists in social work and counseling, we have identified a number of skills of social workers. We see these competencies as rendered in a slightly different form, but covering the same needs for professional development of social workers and personal development of clients. We reproduce for example three such competencies that reiterate inclusion, diversity, equality, fairness, and respect for human rights:

- *promotes inclusion* - "in medical and social services, respecting the diversity of beliefs, cultures, values and preferences, and at the same time taking into account the importance of issues related to equality and diversity" (ISCO-08, 2008). We see this competency as being connected to the American model, the latter supporting the social worker's understanding of how diversity and intersectionality transform human experiences and identity development, and how these can also put pressure on equity and inclusion.

- *provide social services in diverse cultural communities* - "which take into account different cultural and linguistic traditions, showing respect and validation for communities in their uniqueness, and acting in accordance with human rights, equality and diversity policies" (ISCO-08, 2008). The American model is especially oriented towards bringing understanding and acceptance beyond racial limitations, promoting anti-racism especially in the principle of ADEI (Anti-Racism, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion). We see how the European model particularly approaches respect for cultural and ethnic diversity, individual differences, and gender equality - in all the actions taken by the future social worker, he being guided to promote and support diversity in all its forms, through appropriate behaviors (Code CNASR)

- *promotes human rights* - "promotes and respects human rights and diversity through the prism of the physical, psychological, spiritual and social needs of autonomous people, taking into account their opinions, beliefs and

values, as well as international and national codes of ethics, as well as the ethical implications of providing healthcare, ensuring their right to privacy and respecting the confidentiality of healthcare information" (ISCO-08, 2008). Diversity can be understood as the intersectionality of factors including, but not limited to, age, caste, class, color, culture, disability and ability, ethnicity, gender, generational status, immigration status, legal status, marital status, political ideology, race, nationality, religion and spirituality, sex. Social workers understand that this intersectionality means that a person's life experiences can include oppression, poverty, marginalization, and alienation, as well as privilege and power (Boston University School of Social Work, n.d). We see the connection of this competence with the ADEI approach through the way in which the future social worker can integrate respect for diversity.

### *How do we educate students in social work towards a professional practice based on non-discrimination, diversity (cultural, spiritual), equity and inclusion?*

Social work education plays a vital role in equipping future professionals with the right knowledge, skills and attitude to uphold the principles that underpin their practice.

By consulting the specialized literature in the field, we considered several approaches for effective integration of ADEI in the daily practice of social workers: 1) curricular integration (Aldana et al., 2022); 2) experiential learning (Robinson et al., 2022); 3) continuous learning and development (Watts, 2020).

**1) Curricular integration**. When we refer to how we integrate ADEI principles into the social worker training curriculum, we can refer to the introduction of these principles in a) core courses, in b) courses dedicated to each principle, as well as in c) discussions on intersectionality. We will go through each one briefly.

We view *core courses* that train future social workers as needing to incorporate ADEI principles throughout the curriculum, starting with core social work courses such as human behavior and social policy. This provides a solid foundation for understanding diverse populations and the impact of social structures. Recognizing the inherent dignity and worth of each person is at the heart of social work. By learning about the prejudice, discrimination, and racism that different groups have historically faced and still face today, social workers become better equipped to advocate for their clients (Spring Arbor University Online, January 11, 2024); Council of Social Work, 2020, 2022).

We support respect for cultural and ethnic diversity, for individual differences, and for gender equality in all actions taken by the future social worker. Social work students are guided to promote and support diversity in all its forms through appropriate behaviors (CNASR Code), and these guidelines can form part of the foundation for ethical professional practice. In a study published in 2021, Iovu & Lazar (2021) exposed the perception of social work professionals from Romania in relation to a set of practice behaviours - professional and transversal competencies. The study's findings indicated that professionals in social work valued the most the competency that referred to "Promoting Diversity and Difference in Practice".

*Courses dedicated to each principle* can materialize by offering specialized courses on anti-racism/non-discrimination and cultural competence and social justice issues. Furthermore, these courses can delve into specific topics and equip students with practical tools for inclusive practice. Prestigious educational institutions and training organizations for social workers, globally, are already developing and applying ADEI support policies in the continuous training and professionalization of current and future social workers - Spring Arbor University, Boston University School of Social Work, etc.

At the level of the Council on Social Work Education - Center for Diversity (CSWE), the program "The Educator | Resource of the Month" brings together carefully selected pedagogical approaches of anti-racism education and the promotion of diversity, equity and education for the realization of social justice. The resources presented in the mentioned report are extracted from the state of the art in the field and correlate with CSWE 2022 competencies in the field of educational policy and accreditation standards in diversity and social justice. Educators can use the materials to develop assignments or a variety of teaching activities (The Educator | Resource of the Month, 2022; CSWE, 2022).

*Intersectionality* needs to be introduced to students because of the importance of how different aspects of identity, such as race, gender, and class, can interact and influence experiences. A concept developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (2017), this refers to the overlapping and intersecting social identities that individuals embody (Weldon, 2008). The concept comes to recognize and normalize the fact that these identities are not isolated but interconnected, shaping unique and complex experiences. Mattsson (2014) introduces intersectionality in social work as a usable tool for critical reflection, which belongs to the critical tradition of social work, with that the researcher aiming to challenge oppression and inequality. Through his approach, Mattsson (2014) brings to attention how oppression and injustice

are often understood in general terms and that oppression and inequalities related to gender, sexuality, class and race are therefore at risk of being neutralized and undetected (Goldingay et al., 2018). His research suggests the use of an intersectional approach, which focuses on the interaction and complexity between gender, sexuality, class and race, in this context critical reflection gaining the ability to maintain central power relations in the priority of intervention.

**2) Experiential learning.** Diversification of teaching staff could represent an advantage in relation to students in social work. By employing teachers from diverse backgrounds who can bring their lived experiences and expertise to the classroom, a more inclusive learning environment for students can be fostered. We see the experience of a diverse learning environment of the future social worker as a priority as the knowledge and application of cultural competences in the relationship of the social worker with his future clients.

According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), cultural competence is a critical part of providing quality services to all clients. In its report, NASW emphasizes two fundamental elements of social worker cultural competence: 1) the ability to be present in the analysis of one's own cultural specificity and identity (Spivak et al., 2021) and 2) the acquisition of knowledge and skills that a social worker social needs to serve people with different cultural experiences. We see these two priority elements to be supported by the interaction with teachers from various student training environments. Exposure to new environments, to new trainers, from environments different from the usual one, broadens the ability to understand and adapt to the needs of others (Araujo Dawson et al., 2022).

Kolb (1984) through the theory of experiential learning shows how the acquisition of knowledge is largely based on the student's exposure to concrete experiences. The student can thus go through a process of reflective observation, but also of abstract conceptualization, thus being able to develop an understanding of that experience that he can actively apply in future situations. Adapted to the context of studying and applying social work, we see how the integrated process enables students to develop critical thinking and self-awareness (Cleary, 2001; Robinson et al., 2022). Learning is intended to be an experiential process and students learn by doing, by actively engaging students in classroom experiences. As social work is an applied profession, experiential teaching approaches can be particularly useful in training future practitioners. Robinson et al. (2022) note how "exposing students to real-world issues that challenge the social work

profession, and facilitating learning processes around those experiences, can facilitate and strengthen critical self-discovery and understanding of the profession" (Robinson et al., 2022).

Specialists in the field such as Kinney & Aspinwall-Roberts (2010), Schön (2015) observed how in social work education, there is a mutual exclusion between what students learn in college and what they need to know in practice. This difference, felt both by experienced practitioners and those new to practice, requires changes in approach and active learning.

Thus, one form of learning among social work students (Matthew & Lough, 2016) could be classroom simulations and role plays. Through the use of simulations and role-playing exercises, teachers can help students practice culturally sensitive communication and navigate challenging customer interactions.

Kinney & Aspinwall-Roberts (2010) brought a new perspective on the participatory, experiential learning process by borrowing from theater some learning techniques applicable to social work students in the 2nd and 3rd years of study in the study program degree. In the 2010 study, the authors demonstrate how an approach borrowed from theater in education - the "teacher in role" and the "mantle of the expert" - has been successfully used to bridge the gap between theory and social reality, and improve teaching and learning. These techniques allowed students to synthesize theory, practice, and classroom skills.

Kelly et al. (2023) reported an evaluation of collaboration between social work academics and educational psychologists using Video Enhanced Reflective Practice (VERP) to support social work students' communication and interpersonal skills development. Their research was developed among first-year undergraduate students in the UK. The model used builds on the strengths of reflective practice and professional development involving a specific method of video reflection to enhance individuals' capacity in 'tailored interactions'. The study indicates the potential of this model for developing students' awareness of the micro-skills involved in sensitive and adaptive interactions and building their confidence and agency in using these skills (Kelly et al., 2023; Social Care Institute for Excellence, March 2023).

Another form of hands-on learning is placing students in field placements with agencies that serve diverse populations. This gives them hands-on experience applying ADEI principles in real-world settings. Placement for the practice of social work students needs to be diversified, in schools, health facilities and hospitals, substance abuse clinics, community service organizations, child protection agencies, interpersonal violence crisis centers and mental health organizations. Client groups coming from

different backgrounds, from different cultures and educational backgrounds, as well as having different social-mental-emotional needs help the future practitioner in social work to understand the complexity of the profession.

**3) Continuous learning and development.** Being a practical profession in particular, with continuous human interaction, social work requires continuous learning and development, which can be translated through mandatory training regarding the correct and acceptable attitude regarding potential unconscious bias, micro aggressions and culturally sensitive practices, as well as through the participation of social workers in workshops, conferences on educational topics to support ADEI as a priority in daily practice.

Unconscious bias can appear in any profession, it is an almost natural manifestation of every individual. As social workers, it is necessary to identify such manifestations in our own practice and stop them before they turn into discriminatory behaviors. Acting in accordance with the values of social work means having the ability to observe from the outside your own actions in relation to yourself and then to the clients you serve, and to adjust your attitude and behavior in such a way as to offer them to whom you address an environment of safety, empathy, integrity and equity. It is important to honor all those frameworks or organizations, people with ethical expertise who can bring light to the process of rationalizing our own daily actions. By resorting to mandatory training programs dedicated to social workers, a constant awareness of the social worker's role in the social groups they represent can be supported.

In an opinion article, available online at communitycare.co.uk, Ellie Garraway argued that trainee social workers face unconscious biases just like anyone else, which affects the choices they make. Moreover, in this profession, more than most, professionals need the opportunity to confront their own limiting mindsets. There is a derailment of the focus from "being", through excessive "doing". So much focus is required on the ability to work, to do the job, and perhaps too little is about the 'being' or mindset to be effective, and yet this has a huge capacity to transform outcomes (Garraway, 2015).

Participation in educational and mental-emotional development events of social workers in the direction of non-discriminatory, dignified, fair and wholesome behavior encourages continuous professional development and keeps social workers up to date on evolving challenges and best practices.

Continuous growth environments are supported by the presence of experts in the field, who offer guidance and feedback to professionals at the

beginning of practice, and moreover, social workers evolve together with their peers in the field, especially when they are facilitated to share their own work experiences. Such educational events support continuous development.

## Conclusions

The article has an early character in the analysis of the frameworks for the development of the social worker profession, starting with the specialized practice of students in social worker.

We addressed a selection of social worker competencies - from the CSWE (United States of America) and CNASR (Romania) approaches, namely the involvement in professional practice of attitudes and behaviors that support non-discrimination, cultural diversity, equity and inclusion in the training of social work students, but also forms by which these attitudes can be integrated in the training of students in social work.

We have drawn, at a theoretical level, lines of connection between professionalization practices at the international level - as formulated by the Boston University School of Social Work in agreement with the Council on Social Work Education, the national association that represents social work education in the United States, with the Romanian national norms - adopted from European and international practices - the National College of Social Workers of Romania (CNASR), in agreement with UNICEF and ISCO.

The work of social workers extends far beyond the individuals they serve. Their actions create a ripple effect, promoting a fairer and more equitable society for everyone by strengthening communities, promoting empathy and understanding, investing in the future.

We see the strengthening of communities being achieved through the creation and support of strong social safety nets that in turn create a more stable and coherent society. Social workers play a vital role in building and maintaining these safety nets, ensuring that everyone has a chance to succeed. Moreover, social workers reduce the divisions between people, by stimulating empathy and understanding between different populations, which is absolutely necessary for building a society that respects the dignity and rights of all its members.

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