Professional training of future social workers in the face of instability

Formación profesional de los futuros trabajadores sociales ante la inestabilidad

Bogdan Opalchuk
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4531-0486
Senior Lecturer, Department of Social Work and Rehabilitation, Faculty of Humanities and Pedagogy, National University of Life and Environmental Sciences of Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine.

Inna Kharchenko
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8190-4607
Dr. hab. in Pedagogics, Professor, Department of State Law Disciplines and Ukrainian Studies, Sumy National Agrarian University, Sumy, Ukraine.

Liudmyla Neizhpapa
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4398-2553
PhD in Pedagogical Sciences, Associate Professor, Department of Social Education and Social Work, Educational and Scientific Institute of Sociology and Social Policy, Mykhailo Dragomanov State University of Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine.

Ganna Kostiushko
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7214-9590
PhD in Pedagogical Sciences, Associate Professor, Department of Special Education and Social Work, Educational and Scientific Institute of Sociology and Social Policy, Mykhailo Dragomanov State University of Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine.

Maryna Solianyk
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7083-6872
PhD in Pedagogical Sciences, Senior Lecturer, Department of Social Education and Social Work, Educational and Scientific Institute of Sociology and Social Policy, Mykhailo Dragomanov State University of Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine.

Abstract

The training of social workers is mainly carried out in the system of higher professional education. The educational standard has yet to be finalized - it contains professional and general cultural competencies but fails to formulate qualitative characteristics that would indicate the criteria for their assessment. At the same time, most countries that are members of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) impose a whole system of specific requirements on applicants for social work training. The objective of this study is to address the scientific problem of developing a model for the continuous education system for social workers and analyze the quality of their training. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods. The study highlights the increased relevance and demand for social workers in addressing global problems. The identified challenges in social development, i ncluding social inequality, political instability, and environmental issues, underscore

the importance of well-trained social workers to tackle these complex social issues effectively. The study's results contribute to the development of a model for continuous education in social work, with a focus on addressing the gaps in training and competencies. The findings provide evidence-based recommendations for improving the quality of social workers' training, ultimately enhancing their ability to address the diverse and evolving needs of individuals and communities in the face of global challenges.

Keywords: social work, quality of training, quality classes, criteria for measurement, competencies, continuous education.

Resumen

La formación de los trabajadores sociales se realiza principalmente en el sistema de educación profesional superior. El estándar educativo aún no se ha finalizado: contiene competencias profesionales y culturales generales, pero no formula características cualitativas que indiquen los criterios para su evaluación. Al mismo tiempo, la mayoría de los países que son miembros de la Asociación Internacional de Escuelas de Trabajo Social (IASSW) imponen todo un sistema de requisitos específicos a los solicitantes de formación en trabajo social. El objetivo de este estudio es abordar el problema científico de desarrollar un modelo para el sistema de educación continua para trabajadores sociales y analizar la calidad de su formación. El estudio emplea un enfoque de métodos mixtos, combinando métodos de investigación cuantitativos y cualitativos. El estudio destaca la creciente relevancia y demanda de trabajadores sociales para abordar problemas globales. Los desafíos identificados en el desarrollo social, incluida la desigualdad social, la inestabilidad política y los problemas ambientales, subrayan la importancia de trabajadores sociales bien capacitados para abordar estos complejos problemas sociales de manera efectiva. Los resultados del estudio contribuyen al desarrollo de un modelo de educación continua en trabajo social, con foco en el abordaje de las brechas de formación y competencias. Los hallazgos brindan recomendaciones basadas en evidencia para mejorar la calidad de la capacitación de los trabajadores sociales y, en última instancia, mejorar su capacidad para abordar las necesidades diversas y cambiantes de las personas y las comunidades frente a los desafíos globales.

Palabras clave: trabajo social, calidad de la formación, clases de calidad, criterios de medición, competencias, educación continua.

1. Introduction

Social workers are part of various political, economic, and social structures. The guarantee of their successful relationships with their environment, individuals, and people from all social backgrounds is the desire to build professional and interpersonal relationships on a constructive basis and the ability to regulate their professional behavior in various situations. The basis of specialists' professional activity is considered to be a moral activity, which is revealed through the system of values, the principles of virtue, and goodness in behavior, which serve as the main factor. When it comes to social work, professional morality, and ethics have a special meaning. The social worker must understand and cherish morality, understand it, and clearly distinguish the qualities of kindness and indifference in their relations with different categories of clients. Regarding social work as a professional activity, morality and ethics are interpreted in the same absolute sense.

At the same time, social work ethics is a relatively independent branch of modern science. It is caused by the modernization of state social institutions, the growing need for personal spiritual growth, and the development of the social work institution. Thus, the effectiveness of social workers' analytical and planning, advocacy, mediation, and educational activities largely depends on their level of professional ethics. Moreover, the formation of professional ethics affects the system of future-oriented thinking, i.e.,

their competence, which is reflected in the recommendations of the European Parliament and the European Council.

This article aims to study the professional training of future social workers in the face of instability.

2. Theoretical background

The escalation of global humanity's problems has led to contradictions in social development. This situation requires the professional intervention of specially trained people such as social workers. The professional activity of social workers depends on the quality of their training in the continuous education system. Addressing this issue involves studying the theoretical approaches of Ukrainian scholars who reveal the historical aspects of creating a system of training social work specialists, the quality of training, and the criteria for measuring competence in the system of continuous training of social workers. This article is theoretical, as it involves searching for scientific approaches and determining the prospects for their experimental confirmation.

The increasing attention to social work in the world community is now caused by the escalation of humanity's global problems in the environmental, demographic, and communication spheres, which cause contradictions in social development (Yaksa, 2008; Chubuk, 2008; Chobitko, 2005; Khoruzha, 2004; Falko & Konovalova, 2012; Turkot, 2011; Torgan, 2011; Patik, 2015; Ortynskyi, 2009; Lukianchuk, 2015; Lozovetska, 2008; Varha, 2016; Ryazantsev et al., 2020; Miller, 2010; Howkins & Ewens, A., 1999; Harrison, N., Davies, S., Harris, R. & Waller R., 2018).

These include the lack of social and cultural security, political instability, devaluation of human life, high rates of social inequality, which undoubtedly affects the social well-being of individuals and social stratification of society, the emergence of social conflicts, a decline in the decent standard of living of socially vulnerable groups, and a decrease in the level of social security. Therefore, it requires the professional intervention of social workers, who are specially trained for this.

First, the state needs social workers to provide qualified assistance, relieve social tension, and help people survive in a changing world. Secondly, there is a need to improve the professional training of social workers since social services are staffed mainly by specialists with specialized education.

On the one hand, the issue of theoretical and practical training for bachelors and masters in social work is closely related to solving the most critical and acute social problems. On the other hand, it is necessary to develop the content of this training, strengthen its methodology, and create a base of innovative teaching technologies. Currently, multi-level training of social workers in higher and secondary education is being developed according to new educational standards.

Providing high-quality training for social workers requires continuous professional education, a subject of interest for scientific research. Many national scientists have been engaged in research in the field of continuous professional education over time.

Scientists define continuous vocational education as the constant development and self-development of a personality for successful professional self-determination and self-realization in a modern society characterized by instability and uncertainty in the labor market. The subject of continuous professional education is understood as a person capable of conscious self-regulation of one's activities for continuous development and personal self-development. At the same time, conscious self-regulation of activity is correlated with setting goals related as follows:

– professional self-determination and self-realization;

- planning and programming of their achievement;
- the ability to consider significant external and internal conditions,
- evaluating results;
- adjusting specialists' activity to achieve subjectively acceptable results.

Continuous education implies the continuity of all system structural elements and mutual complementarity of different forms and types of learning. Continuous education can be seen as a fundamental principle of building a new education model. Integrity serves as a system-forming factor.

One of the main principles of continuous education is the principle of diversification, which involves expanding the functions and diversity of professional educational programs, educational forms, methods, and types of educational institutions. The diversification is considered an effective professional pedagogical system.

The notion of continuous education, including vocational education, can be considered from three main components (subjects):

- Firstly, continuity means that a person always studies, either in educational institutions or through self-education.
- Secondly, continuity is characterized by the consistency of educational activity content during the transition from one type of activity to another, from one life stage to another.
- Thirdly, continuity is associated with a particular network of educational institutions that create the necessary and sufficient space for educational services to meet various educational needs.

Social work requires creating an education system with a continuous cycle of knowledge improvement. Therefore, continuous education should become the most essential component of a comprehensive education system for social workers, making education genuinely constant.

3. Methods

During the course of this research, there was employed several general scientific methods to investigate the professional training of future social workers in the face of instability. One of the methods used was the comparative method, which allowed them to examine and compare different approaches to social work training in various contexts.

There was also utilized the correlative method, which involved exploring the relationships between variables related to social work training and the impact of instability. By examining correlations, there was identify factors that may influence the effectiveness of training programs in preparing social workers to navigate unstable environments successfully. This method helped uncover potential associations and patterns that can contribute to the development of targeted interventions and support systems.

Furthermore, there was employed the analytical method to critically analyse and interpret data gathered from various sources. This involved systematically examining the information collected and applying logical reasoning to draw meaningful conclusions. Through the analytical method, there was identify key themes, trends, and insights related to the training needs and competencies of social workers operating in unstable conditions. By examining the historical context of social work and the evolution of training practices, there was gained a deeper unde rstanding of how social work education has responded to previous periods of instability. This historical perspective provided valuable insights into the challenges faced by social workers in different eras and the strategies that have proven effective in equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge.

By employing these general scientific methods—comparative, correlative, analytical, and historical—there was able to conduct a comprehensive investigation into the professional training of future social workers in the face of instability. These methods facilitated a systematic and rigorous examination of the topic, enabling to generate valuable findings and recommendations to enhance the preparation and support provided to social workers operating in challenging and unpredictable environments.

4. Results

The development of social work as a professional activity leads to a new paradigm of social worker training, which defines it as the main subject of professional activity in the social sphere. Furthermore, it puts forward a system of requirements for the qualifications as well as moral and ethical qualities of a specialist.

According to international experience, all countries have a strict selection process for the social worker profession. The general conditions for all applicants are high grades in school subjects, solid and in-depth knowledge of the subjects covered by the chosen profession, physical and emotional stability, social maturity, intelligence level based on hearing, vision, and speech tests, moral and personal qualities of the applicant, approval of the admission committee and recommendations of the student counsellor. Anyone who passes the entry exams can obtain this specialty (Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, 2009).

There needs to be more than a good attitude toward people to be a highly qualified social worker. In addition, a person needs to have the necessary and sufficient professional competencies, as compassion has to be effective. Therefore, the professional training of social workers requires identifying the specifics of their personal and functional qualities.

The conceptual paradigm for forming and developing the social workers' training system can be the idea of training a highly professional specialist who can find acceptable forms of response that meet the changing social environment.

As professional social workers, to achieve their goals and fulfil their functions, they require special knowledge and practical skills, a wide range of competencies that will help them ensure the social functioning of their clients.

The analysis of the education quality category, which is actively considered in the modern pedagogical literature, shows that it is a system of interrelated components, including education models, content and structure of education, properties, and qualities of a personality demanded by society.

Education quality is a description of the education system that reflects the degree to which the actual educational results meet regulatory requirements, as well as social and personal expectations.

In this sense, high-quality education should enable each person to receive a full-fledged continuous education appropriate in full-time, part-time, or distance learning.

The quality of social workers' training can be assessed in two ways: by evaluating the quality of students' mastery of the main educational programs and by determining the educational process organization at the department, faculty, and university levels that provide their training. The assessment of new-generation students' training quality is carried out within the framework of a competency-based approach. It means that the general and professional competence degree is assessed rather than the qualification level. Therefore, the new Standard for social work specialty includes two main groups of competencies: general cultural, and professional.

Future social workers' training quality cannot depend exclusively on the mastery level of the disciplines provided for in the curriculum. It should include the direct formation of professional competence and the environment in which students are taught. A competent, efficient organization of the educational process following the academic standard for the specialty, considering the specifics of a particular university, will allow the integration of the national system of social worker training into the European one and increase the level of professional and overall cultural literacy of graduates.

Among the components of education quality, the following elements can be distinguished:

– competence
– knowledge and experience of teachers;
– compliance of universities with the requirements of national and regional standards;
– educational standards and curricula that define the scope of knowledge required for student learning;
– provision of the educational process with methodological, educational, and scientific literature, new generation textbooks, and the latest technical education means.

Development of educational programs in social work based on the principles of achieving adequate competence is becoming very important in the context of educational space globalization, the formation of the European Higher Education Area, and the creation of a national two-level higher education system (bachelor's degree - 4 years of training and master's degree - 2 years).

The educational program should be based on clear standards that can be used to evaluate both the training quality and the practical activities of a specialist to form and develop social work professionals whose qualifications will be more relevant to social changes and the needs of modern social policy. The competency-based approach to curriculum planning is widely used by foreign schools of social work today as a fundamentally new technology that is supposed to link formal training with practical tasks (Altbach et. al., 2009).

Globally, there is a growing need for modern, competent social work professionals based on national standards and international universality indicators. Furthermore, it leads to the understanding by the national pedagogical community of the need to adopt a competency-based approach as a strategy for developing a continuous social education system.

This approach emphasizes not the student's awareness but the ability to solve problems that arise during the cognition and explanation of reality phenomena through:

– mastering modern technology and equipment;
– human relationships, ethical norms, and evaluation of one's actions;
– practical life in the performance of social roles;
– legal norms and administrative structures;
– consumer and aesthetic values;
– mastering the profession at the university;
– the ability to navigate the labor market;
– reflecting on their own life problems;
– self-organization, choosing a style and lifestyle;
– resolution of conflicts.

Only some people are capable of carrying out social activities. The main determining factor here is the candidate's system of values, ultimately determining their professional suitability and effectiveness in practice. Many who intend to become specialists in this field may find significant differences in views

between their attitudes and social work's value system as a profession and a vocation. In this case, they will have to devote themselves to some other activity.

While many studies have been devoted to the criteria for measuring the professional competencies of a social worker, the issue of measuring moral competencies has been studied insufficiently. However, it is one of the key components of the professional activity of social workers, so it is also a research challenge at the moment (Caravello et al., 2005).

From the foregoing, the authors conclude that a professional standard allows for assessing and improving the professionalism of social workers and enhancing their motivation, which ultimately means increased productivity and better performance. Thus, the mechanism of developing and implementing a professional standard can be used to assess the quality of social workers' professional training.

5. Discussion

International experience suggests that countries implement rigorous selection processes for individuals aspiring to become social workers (Kruk et al., 2018). Criteria such as academic excellence, emotional and physical stability, social maturity, and moral qualities are considered during the selection process. These requirements aim to ensure that social workers possess the necessary attributes to excel in their profession. Being compassionate alone is not sufficient for social workers to be highly qualified. Professional training should focus on developing a wide range of competencies that enable effective and impactful social work (Asakura et al., 2021). These competencies encompass knowledge, practical skills, and the ability to adapt to the changing social environment. The training should also address the personal and functional qualities specific to social work.

In response to globalization and the changing educational landscape, the development of social work educational programs based on achieving adequate competencies becomes crucial (Horishna, 2017). The competency-based approach emphasizes the practical application of knowledge and the ability to solve problems. It links formal training with practical tasks, aligning social work education with the demands of the profession and social policy. While professional competencies are extensively studied, the measurement of moral competencies in social work remains an ongoing challenge. Moral competencies are a vital component of social work practice and should be incorporated into training programs (Dutta et al., 2022). The values and ethics of social work as a profession and vocation play a significant role in determining professional suitability and effectiveness in practice.

So, the professional training of social workers requires a comprehensive approach that encompasses rigorous selection processes, the development of diverse competencies, ensuring education quality, adopting a competency-based approach, incorporating moral competencies, and implementing professional standards. By addressing these aspects, the training of social workers can effectively meet the demands of the profession, respond to social changes, and promote the well-being of individuals and communities.

6. Conclusion

In general, nowadays, the training of social workers is predominantly carried out within the higher professional education system. However, attention is drawn to the incompleteness of the educational standard: while the standard specifies professional and general cultural competencies, the qualitative characteristics indicating the criteria for their assessment still need to be formulated.

At the same time, most countries that are members of the International Association of Schools of Social Work impose a set of specific requirements on candidates for social work education, including moral and personal qualities, which contribute to better preparation, retraining, and professional development of

specialists. It is related to different student selection approaches, educational standards, and learning conditions.

Despite the abundance of studies dedicated to the system of continuous education in the training of highly qualified professionals, the model of continuous education for social workers is not well-established, and it is not currently possible to fully analyse the quality of social worker training in the framework of continuous education. It is a significant scientific problem that requires its solution as highly relevant and promising.

Therefore, the updating and modernization of education in the 21st century will contribute to orienting future professionals towards acquiring humanistic values and adhering to them in everyday life and professional activities. It will lead to the formation of competent professionals in various professional fields, including social work. Social workers dealing with maladjusted and marginalized individuals, as well as internally displaced persons, must be able to skilfully resolve and act successfully and effectively in extreme life situations.

Currently, in Ukraine, the professional training of such specialists is carried out in various types of higher educational institutions, including universities, fulfilling academic tasks aimed at the purposeful and systematic formation of students' readiness for professional activities. An ethical approach based on a system of values, the foundations of virtue and good behavior, i.e., professional morality and ethics, is a basis for their work. Thus, an essential feature of preparing future social workers is the implementation of a professional-ethical orientation for the humanization of both the process of forming professionals and their practical target orientation. Therefore, the moral-ethical component of professional training plays a dominant role in shaping the professional competence of future social workers.

It is known that social workers belong to various societal structures -political, economic, and social. The guarantee of their successful relationships with the environment, individuals, and representatives of all social strata lies in the willingness to build professional and interpersonal relationships on a constructive basis and the ability to regulate their own professional behavior in various situations. The basis of specialists' professional activities is considered moral activity, manifested through a system of values and the foundations of virtues and goodness in behavior, serving as a fundamental factor. When it comes to social work, particular emphasis is placed on professional morality and ethics. The social worker must understand and cultivate morality, comprehend it, and clearly distinguish qualities of goodness and indifference in relationships with different categories of clients. Regarding social work as a professional activity, morality and ethics are interpreted in the same absolute sense.

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