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POTENTIAL OF SERVICE-LEARNING IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION: EXPERIENCES OF THREE COUNTRIES

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Abstract. The study provides an answer to the question of the potential of service-learning in social work education in the context of the current challenges of the social work profession. Service-learning is a teaching and learning strategy that combines service with education to develop students' knowledge, skills, and civic engagement while solving community problems and challenges. The study reflects the theoretical background and examples of service-learning integration into social work education in Slovakia, Ukraine, and Georgia. Experience shows that the service-learning strategy can develop specific competencies necessary for the performance of social work in practice and has the potential to respond to current challenges of social work in the early stages of the professionalization of social workers.

Keywords: service-learning, social work education.

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INTRODUCTION

The social work profession develops dynamically and responds to the diverse requirements of society, which affect its status, identity, and the form of interventions. The role of social workers and the demands on their personal and professional equipment are also changing. The global crisis caused by COVID-19 and the Russian war in Ukraine poses particular challenges to European social work. The response to these challenges must be reflected in social work and in preparing students for the profession. The education of social workers focuses on developing their specific competencies for working with target groups within the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of social work. Therefore, higher education is the beginning of the professionalisation of future social workers. The optimal model of this preparation lies in the interconnection of its theoretical and practical components. As Matulayová (2005) stated, the University pursues anticipatory goals in the educational process based on the latest academic knowledge.

On the other hand, current social work practice does not often meet this goal and theoretical knowledge. There is a fundamental contradiction between theory and practice in implementing higher education. The service-learning strategy offers one way to alleviate this discrepancy and, at the same time, respond to the profession's current challenges and the requirements of higher education.

The study aims to reflect the possibilities of using service-learning in the education of social workers. We are looking for an answer to the question: What is the potential of service learning in the education of social workers in the context of current changes and challenges in the social work profession?

The study will present the theoretical background and specific examples of integrating service-learning into social work curricula in Slovakia, Ukraine, and Georgia. The education of social workers in these countries takes various forms, including creating specific programs, implementing service-learning in research practicums, and integrating service-learning into social work practice education. Still, it faces similar challenges related to the familiar historical context of anchoring social work as a profession and current global challenges.

Transformations and Challenges of Social Work

As Ornellas et al. (2018) point out, the revised global definition of social work emphasises the commitment of social work to contribute to social change and development, social cohesion, and empowerment and liberation of people. Changes in the global definition of social work have implications for social work practice and education. The authors analyse three areas in which there are differences compared to the 2004 definition, namely the emphasis on the theoretical background of social work, the shift from the focus to an individual approach to collective and macro perspective in social work interventions, and the change from the emphasis on micro to macro perspective on social inequalities. At the same time, the authors state that these shifts should be reflected not only in the deliberation of the purpose, role, functions, and interventions of social work but also mirrored both by educators and practitioners to respond to the current challenges of society, communities, and individuals.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian war against Ukraine have also brought new challenges for social work practice and transformed social work interventions, which need to be addressed by educators as well. Social work students should be able to take the role of active agents of change in society in tackling inequalities and promoting social justice and solidarity. They should be able to think critically, reflect on the sources of structural barriers, and be aware of their role in removing them. The COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian war in Ukraine have shown us the need, among other things, to support students' resilience and ability to adapt to changed conditions and to respond to difficult life situations. To achieve these goals, looking for effective educational strategies that consist of theoretical training has an effective connection with practical education and can be implemented in various forms.

Skyba and Šoltésová (2014) emphasise that social work requires adapting student education to address new demands. The authors recognise the need to implement modern teaching methods that better connect theoretical knowledge to practice and motivate students to engage with and actively participate in their communities. One such successful strategy implemented at universities worldwide is service-learning.

Service-learning and its Context in Social Work Education

Service-learning is frequently described in the research as an approach that blends community service with educational opportunities for participating students and as a balanced approach to experiential education that ensures equal emphasis on the community service provided and the learning experienced by the participating students. (Furco, 1996, Heffernan, 2001). Regardless of the multitude of definitions, the literature has identified several essential elements of service-learning: it is a pre-planned and structured student experience gained through community service that addresses authentic community needs; it involves active student participation across all stages of the project, from planning to evaluation; it is purposefully integrated into the academic curriculum or research context; it provides a temporal framework that enables participants to reflect on the service-learning experience; and it aims to foster the civic responsibility of students.(Bringle & Hatcher, 1996, Khiatani et al., 2023, Schelbe et al., 2014) Service-learning is a pedagogical tool designed to provide students with additional opportunities to develop practice skills besides traditional field placements. It is a part of experiential learning, a more holistic approach based on Dewey's concepts of reflective thought and the Lewinian tradition of action research (Sadzaglishvili, 2023).

Service-learning is often distinguished from other forms of student participation and learning (Brozmanová Gregorová, 2013; Fiske, 2001; Furco & Holland, 2005). According to Lipčáková and Matulayová (2012) these forms can be distinguished by their respective goals, focuses, and time perspectives. The professional or field practice focuses more on the education and development of specific competencies needed for the profession's performance (Gusak & Volhyna, 2021). Service-learning integrates community service with academic instruction, enabling students to apply classroom knowledge to real-world challenges while fostering civic engagement. Unlike professional practice as part of training, service-learning emphasises reciprocity and the development of students' social responsibility. Furthermore, critical reflection is a key distinguishing feature, as it connects community service to course content, lectures, and

study. This pedagogical approach differs from other community-oriented activities by explicitly linking service to the curriculum, enriching the learning process through a deeper understanding of the subject matter and a broader perspective on the discipline, ultimately empowering students and communities. (Fiske, 2001; Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Hanover Research, 2011; Rusu et al., 2014).

According to Furco (2011), service-learning is a demonstrably suitable pedagogical approach for higher education institutions, as it aligns with constructivist and experiential learning theories. It is one of many initiatives in higher education that aim to foster sustainable and comprehensive development of students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes. This unique form of experiential learning engages students in active, relevant, and collaborative learning and opportunities for service delivery and education. (Barth et al., 2014; Bringle & Hatcher, 2000).

The key factors supporting the integration of service-learning programs into the strategic objectives of higher education institutions are: the renewed recognition of students as agents of social change, the realignment of the university's mission to address community needs, the availability of robust research evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of service-learning for various stakeholders and variables, and the existence of complementary initiatives related to service-learning. Additionally, a well-defined model for implementing service-learning at the institutional level, focusing on teaching, student, and community needs, is crucial. (Dostilio & Perry, 2017).

Social work, with its mission and values, provides an ideal environment for integrating service-learning into the education of future social workers. The individual dimensions of service-learning are closely aligned with the mission of social work, contributing to the development of key social work values such as service, social justice, and human relations. The literature has widely documented the benefits and impacts of service-learning for social work students. (Burke, 2011; Campbell & Bragg, 2007; Green, 2009; Nadel et al., 2007; Lemieux & Allen, 2007; Petracchi et al., 2016; Phillips, 2011; Skyba & Šoltésová, 2014; Zieren & Stoddard, 2004) Integrating service-learning into the curriculum can help students develop a deeper understanding of the social work profession, strengthen their commitment to social justice, and enhance their ability to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world challenges.

In the context of focusing social work on service and empowering and applying the practice to the training of students, education in social work is perceived as a historical contributor to service-learning development (Zieren & Stoddard, 2004). The authors present theoretical anchors, pedagogical models, and discussions to establish a common language, goals, and research on service-learning in social work education. Many authors view service-learning as theoretically grounded in social work, particularly in philanthropic, communitarian, and civic engagement models. (Abel, 2004; Watson, 2004; Codispoti, 2004, as cited in Phillips, 2011).

Additionally, the authors identify a strong connection between service-learning and social justice as a core value in social work. The potential and constraints of integrating service-learning and social justice education are frequently explored. (Carnicelli & Boluk, 2017). Burke (2011) argues that social work contributes to social justice, and service-learning is a means of achieving it. Similarly, Campbell and Bragg

(2017) contend that social workers should be leaders in service learning due to their enduring commitment to social justice.

Several studies have examined the application and assessment of service-learning in social work education. Lemieux and Allen (2007) provide an overview of this topic, while Nadel et al. (2007) offer service-learning models applicable to the social work curriculum. Petracchi et al. (2016), based on a national survey of accredited bachelor's programs in social work in America, found that service-learning is compulsory in at least one course during the study. The social work literature also includes research on 'experiential learning,' 'community learning,' 'participatory action research,' 'practical learning,' 'social change interventions,' and 'service-learning.' Green (2009) sees great potential in including service-learning in social work curricula due to several benefits, particularly in improving community interaction and strengthening social development. Additionally, service-learning can help students become active citizens, interested in their communities, and civically engaged (Skyba & Šoltésová, 2014).

Service-learning is perceived as part of competency-based education, which aims to demonstrate, integrate, and apply competencies in practice. (Philips, 2011)It is a suitable strategy in this direction. Service-learning can be incorporated into courses at various stages of the curriculum - at the beginning to introduce new areas of the field, in method or practice-focused courses to increase skills or prepare students for field placements, or at the end of studies to demonstrate accumulated knowledge and skills. At the practical level, there are diverse models of service implementation. Students may choose from the instructor's predetermined options or create their projects. The individual models also differ based on whether the service is provided directly within an agency or externally. The timing of service-learning is also an important consideration.

Critical service-learning approaches can deepen social work students' critical thinking about community problems, allowing them to perceive themselves as agents of social change and apply their service-learning experiences to address social justice issues.(Mitchell, 2008). These approaches go beyond traditional service-learning, which emphasises service without focusing on inequality-producing systems, to instead aim at eliminating structures that perpetuate injustice. Key distinguishing features of critical service-learning include a focus on developing authentic relationships among students and within the community and a perspective of social change. As an innovative strategy, service-learning creates an optimal space for connecting academic knowledge with real-world practice. Providing structured, hands-on service is a tool that enables students to reflect more deeply on power dynamics, experiences of oppression, and various forms of dominance present in social practice.

METHODS

In the study, we selected three case examples of service-learning integration into social work education in three countries. Slovakia, Ukraine, and Georgia authors collaborated on an international project that included exchanging experiences and developing service-learning in social work education. In the studies, we briefly present the context of social work education, the form of the service-learning project, and the reflected benefits.

RESULTS

The Ears to the Soul Program at Matej Bel University in Slovakia

Social work programs in Slovakia started their new development after the Velvet Revolution 1989. The System of Fields of Study in Higher Education in Slovakia defines the basic regulation and profile of the graduate. It contains the fields of study in which Slovakia institutions may provide higher education and their descriptions. The basic requirements for practice education in social work are defined in the Minimum Standards of Practice Education in the Social Work Study, developed by the Association of Educators in Social Work in Slovakia (Association of Educators in Social Work in Slovakia, 2014). According to these standards, the minimum number of hours of practice education in a bachelor's course is 180 hours in a master's course 120 hours.

Like other educators at the University in Slovakia, they faced the challenge of adapting social work education during the COVID-19 crisis. As the first institutions to close to protect service users were the facilities where students had been conducting their practical training, the University had to find alternative ways to provide practice education for students who still needed to complete it. Although service providers were necessary, the University's security measures officially prohibited student involvement.

In cooperation with a regional volunteer center, the University launched the "Ears to the Soul" program based on service-learning principles. Developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the program aimed to help lonely and isolated individuals maintain social connections and share their feelings. Students were paired with specific clients, ensuring a personalized approach and deeper mutual understanding. The program's educational goals for students included developing communication competencies, empathy, and personal and social responsibility - key skills for social work graduates.

Before the program's implementation, university faculty collaborated with the volunteer center to create operational guides, student training materials, and necessary documentation. During the program, students were selected through an application and interview process, then participated in online training covering program guidelines, client interactions, and problematic situations. Assigned client-student pairs engaged in regular telephone contact, with students initiating the calls. Students recorded their interactions and received regular supervision and support from faculty tutors to reflect on and enhance their communication skills.

The program's final phase involved a concluding group supervision session, client-student relationship termination, student self-reflections, and client evaluations. Evaluations indicated the program effectively addressed target group needs and held significant potential as a form of social work education. Students reported that the model successfully integrated practical experience, communication skill development, and the application of theoretical knowledge. (Brozmanová Gregorová, 2024)

Community-Based Research Experiment during the Ongoing War at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy in Ukraine

The first School of Social Work in Ukraine was established in 1994 at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy with international support (Boiko & Kabachenko, 2016). From the beginning, the first graduate program in social work

encourages students to focus not only on the practice but also on researching and developing professional knowledge of social work.

In line with the Global Standards on Social Work Education and Training (2019) and the National Educational Standards for Social Work (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2019), the graduate program in social work has a solid research component. According to the curriculum, the minimum number of ECTS credits for research-focused disciplines is 23 (690 hours) and 20 (600 hours) for the final thesis based on the research (Naukma, 2020). The primary goal of the research component is to learn how to do research in social work to improve social services for vulnerable populations by doing their studies in the community.

Likewise, other educational institutions, such as the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, had challenges because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Gusak & Volhyna, 2021). Besides, the Russian military invaded Ukraine in February 2022. So, students could not do their regular social work training following the regular curriculum. On the one hand, they experienced the stress of pandemic and protracted war alone. On the other hand, they met additional challenges in continuing social work education and providing services for vulnerable populations in local communities. For this reason, the University launched a community-based research experiment to complement their service and educational activities.

The University employed a service-learning approach to do community-based research (CBR) to address the existing challenges caused by the war. The service aim of the CBR was to help service providers cover the gap between the needs and available services for the vulnerable population during the ongoing war. By then, students had practiced in social services, and some were employed part-time as social workers. The educational goal was to develop students' research skills by working on their research projects. Students mastered their competencies in developing study design and research instruments, data collection, and analysis. Furthermore, the additional educational goal was the development of competencies in the community needs assessment.

Students focused their community-based research on services to vulnerable populations, students' mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, adaptation of first-year students to online education, etc. We will provide an example to illustrate the implementation of service-learning principles into the research component of the graduate program.

Case example: Evacuation of people with dementia from war-affected territories and access to medication

Student #1 studied dementia-friendly communities and was employed part-time by the Charity Foundation "Nezabutni," providing services for people with dementia. At the beginning of the entire Russian military invasion of Ukraine, student #1 was not able to continue her studies because of the destroyed infrastructure. Also, many people fled from Ukraine or were in bombing shelters most of the time.

A preparatory phase of the research raised a discussion between the student, thesis supervisor, "Research practicum" course instructor, and "Nezabutni" staff on how to change the study design and address urgent challenges. They identified the gap between service provision for dementia patients and existing services. So, the

preliminary research design and instruments were developed, and the roles were discussed.

Within the implementation phase, student #1 did a rapid needs assessment and identified challenges: (1) evacuation of people with dementia from war-affected territories and (2) access to medication. Student #1 discussed results with the "Nezabutni" staff, thesis supervisor, and other students during classes. Existing governmental and nongovernmental institutions were not able to respond to urgent needs. We refocused research on exploring existing private agencies providing evacuation services and medications to people with dementia. "Nezabutni" helped to recruit respondents and collect data. The thesis supervisor and other students helped to analyze the data during the "Research practicum" classes.

In the final stage, student #1 prepared her master's thesis and defended it successfully. She also presented research results to participants. Considering the service implications, a network of private institutions providing services for people living with dementia was established. Also, many people living with dementia were evacuated and received medications.

"Donate a book to the Municipality Shelter for homeless in Lilo settlement, Tbilisi" Project at the Ilia State University in Georgia.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the first Social Work degree programs were established in Georgia. The social work programs were developed at two universities in 2006. Graduate, undergraduate, and post-doctoral programs in social work count more than 500 graduates at the time of the writing of this article.

The social work master's program at the University is developed by the International Standards on Social Work Education (Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training, 2019), alongside the experiences gained from partner universities in the USA. The program has both theory and practice components. In particular, the program curriculum includes courses for micro, mezzo, and macro practice and the practice teaching component, comprising about 20% of the entire program's European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). The program has a practice conception that includes all the details of organizing student fieldwork. The primary goal of the practice component is to offer a quality of practical experience through intensive practice education. The practice component comprises four courses offered to students in parallel with field education.

The first practice course, "Social Work Practice Seminar 1," is a general practice course taught in the first semester and aims to develop student practice skills in authentic contexts in direct contact with individuals. The second-semester students must take the second practice course, Practice Social Work Practice Seminar 2, "Homelessness, Social Housing, and Poverty." In this course, students are given theories and methods concentrating on homelessness. In addition, they continue their practice work, which concentrates on working with individuals and their families. Social Work Practice Seminar 3, "Children Rights, Harm Reduction and Reproductive Health," concentrates on addiction, reproductive health, and harm reduction. The student starts his/her second field education. Social Work Practice Seminar 4, "Violence in the Family: Justice and Social Perspective," is concentrated on issues of

gender-based violence, women's issues, and domestic violence (Master of Social Work Program, 2019).

Students must also submit social projects/service-learning projects in the second, third, and fourth semesters. These projects are concentrated on the specific topics of the social work practice seminars: homelessness, Children's Rights, Harm Reduction, Reproductive Health, and Family Violence. These projects accomplish the University's third mission: to engage with society and address growing societal-economic challenges.

Below, we will discuss one of the service-learning projects accomplished by students in the course seminar "Homelessness, Children's Rights, Harm Reduction." The project's title is "Donate a book to the Municipality Shelter for the homeless in Lilo settlement, Tbilisi." The project comprised different stages, and its purpose was to increase awareness about homelessness among children, connect children with shelter, and create a library at the shelter.

Students met with the director of the Municipality Shelter for the Homeless at the first stage of the Homeless and discussed the possibility of a service project in their context. The director mentioned that the shelter did not have a library and that library resources needed to be developed in the shelter. The students decided to organize activities to assist the shelter in developing its library resources.

In the project's second stage, students arranged informational meetings with school children of one of the public schools in Tbilisi. Teachers and pupils received information about shelters and social housing and issues related to homelessness and poverty. After this meeting, pupils expressed their willingness to participate in the social action "donate a book to the shelter ."This campaign facilitated pupils' empathy and charity towards homeless people. Pupils were asked to record welcoming videos for beneficiaries and send messages expressing their kindness. For instance, these messages were: "Do not worry, we can build a future together," "I send you warmth," "Read the books, you will feel better," and "Your life is good, do not worry, we are with you." These videos and posters were presented at the final event that was organized in the shelter.

In the third stage, students started an informational campaign called "Donate a book to the shelter" on social networks, particularly Facebook. They created several posters and distributed them among their social network members. As a result of this campaign, more than 500 books for adults and children were collected.

At the final stage, students invited the general director of the National Parliamentary Library of Georgia to provide a literature night at the shelter. The director talked about literature and the role of books in human life. The students treated the beneficiaries with sweets and drinks.

The service-learning project helped create a unique experience for the students as they all reported a more meaningful and productive class experience. Service-learning projects empowered not only community members but also students themselves. They felt more competent when working with complex social problems in authentic contexts. In other words, students became change agents who, in collaboration with community organizations and community partners, planned and accomplished social projects in the real context.

DISCUSSION

The need to implement service-learning in social work is driven by various factors, including its connection to the growing demand for volunteers within the social services sector. Effective community development hinges on citizen participation, and to align with modern educational trends in social work, students are given opportunities to develop their practical skills, shape their civic awareness, and prepare for the job market. Integrating service-learning into social work education improves university collaboration with community organizations, bringing theoretical education closer to real-world needs and modern teaching concepts. It also promotes the idea of volunteering and civic engagement among students, contributes to community and social service development, and enhances the quality of life for social service recipients.

One significant advantage of this approach is that social work students gain theoretical knowledge and valuable insights into local social issues and their solutions while actively participating in community projects, activities, and services. In summary, there are numerous benefits for all stakeholders involved in service-learning projects in the field of social work. For educators, it results in professional growth and enrichment through the experience of leading courses and organizing service-learning activities. Furthermore, it aligns with the University's mission and enhances its reputation.

Social work students expand their knowledge base on civic participation and community development, connecting theory to practice and academic subjects to real-life community opportunities. Their participation in community events fosters active citizenship, self-esteem, mutual understanding, and commitment. Organizations involved gain potential volunteers, assistance in running their operations, and the means to improve community life. This approach offers a new perspective on problem-solving and organizational activities.

Service-learning provides a framework for students to define their roles in service, innovation, and community engagement. It fosters the development of well-rounded citizens who are aware of their rights and their responsibilities to the community. It represents a departure from traditional paternalistic approaches, empowering students to collaborate and participate actively alongside others in service and projects.

The dominant approach in social work education is competency-based. Although the potential for enhancing key competencies among social work students through service learning is a widely researched topic worldwide, it remains relatively uncharted in the regions where we present case studies (Brozmanová Gregorová et al., 2019). One contributing factor is the limited systematic adoption of service-learning in tertiary education within these regions, involving only a handful of universities. It is imperative to intensify efforts to raise awareness among university educators regarding this pedagogical strategy and facilitate its implementation within universities.

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ПОТЕНЦІАЛ СУСПІЛЬНО-ОРІЄНТОВАНОГО НАВЧАННЯ В ПІДГОТОВЦІ ФАХІВЦІВ ІЗ СОЦІАЛЬНОЇ РОБОТИ: ДОСВІД ТРЬОХ КРАЇН

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Анотація. Дослідження дає відповідь на питання про потенціал суспільно-орієнтованого навчання в підготовці фахівців із соціальної роботи в контексті сучасних викликів професії. Суспільно-орієнтоване навчання – це стратегія викладання та навчання, яка поєднує послуги з освітою для розвитку знань, навичок і громадянської активності студентів під час вирішення проблем і викликів громади. Дослідження відображає теоретичні основи та приклади інтеграції суспільно-орієнтованого навчання в освіту із соціальної роботи в Словаччині, Україні та Грузії. Досвід показує, що стратегія суспільно-орієнтованого навчання може розвинути специфічні компетенції, необхідні для виконання соціальної роботи на практиці, і має потенціал для відповіді на поточні виклики соціальної роботи на ранніх етапах професіоналізації соціальних працівників.

Ключові слова: суспільно-орієнтованого навчання, підготовка майбітніх фахівців із соціальної роботи.