



Aspects of the Application of Social Work in Education and Students' Practice in the Profession of Social Worker

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Abstract

There are very few theoretical researches concerning the application of social work in education in Greece. The emergence of a number of remarkable aspects of this complex issue, concerning the profession of social worker, consists of the major objective of the present study. The whole project was designed giving emphasis on the assumption that the field of education is a critical professional intervention field. The methodology was based on qualitative research, empirical research and literature review. The study gives results regarding the implementation of the profession of social worker, focusing on the uniqueness of Greek reality. In conclusion, the study highlights the remarkable range of factors that interact and compose the image of the educational context, it underlines the special role of students' practice in social work and it reflects the particular way of intervention in the social needs that arise in educational reality, utilizing the incentives provided. The optics arising from this theoretical study could potentially be used in the design and the implementation of the appropriate training programs. Also, this study can be a motive for conducting other similar studies in this field.

Keywords: *Social Work; Education; Students' Practice*

Introduction

The intervention of social work in the field of education is a remarkably interesting scientific field (Woods, 2015). The specific sector, as a place of employment but also as an internship provider, can provide a number of valuable stimuli (Kallinikakis & Kasseri, 2015). Both in general education and in special education, it provides the opportunity for social work interns to come into contact with a complex and special subject. Internships in education help students to form a useful image of the field (Fourlong, 1990). The adoption of an image based on data related to everyday life, as it is actually formed according to the greek data, can significantly help social work interns. School social work as a term, but also as a scientific field, is complex. The approach of the professional's object and goals in the specific field are particularly difficult to determine. This is due to the wide range of intervention, as well as the complex

nature of the organization and operation of greek education. In addition, the different aspects of the social workers in the equally different configured school environments (different profile, depending on the type of students and the learning difficulties they show, as well as the other educational staff with whom the social workers are asked to cooperate) make the determinations even more complex in the subject of social work within the field of education (Meagher & Parton, 2004).

The purpose of this study is to approach and describe the multiple spectrums that surround the internship of social work students in the field of education. The dimensions of social work interns constitute a particularly valuable area of the social work profession. However, there are limited reports on this issue, especially in Greece. The present study is therefore a rudimentary attempt to approach and report on the subject. A significant number of social work students undertake their professional internship in this area, gaining a wealth of experience. On the one hand, the educational stimuli that students have the opportunity to receive, on the other hand, their valuable contribution to the work provided by professional teachers in special education and education in general make up the context in which internship in the social work profession operates. It is a win-win situation, where the internship provider and the social worker trainee offer and receive at the same time. In this process, interesting scientific issues arise, which are useful for those involved or for those who wish to engage in research in the field of social work internship.

Methodology

The present study was based on the principles of qualitative research and Grounded theory, as well as the participatory observation of the researcher which arose due to his involvement in the general process of the social work internship in the educational field. The literature review of theoretical sources related to social work in the field of education made it possible to capture the complex aspects of this field. The research sample consisted of 14 social workers who work in the field of education. Semi-structured guided interviews and open-ended questions were conducted with professional social workers working in special education with the aim of highlighting their unique way of perceiving the educational reality.

Results

Thematic dimensions regarding social work internship in the field of education

Social work in the field of education (general and special education) is multidimensional. Its separation can be done according to several criteria, one of which is the field of intervention and activity of the social worker.

The family environment, as a field of intervention for social work, its composition, the way it interacts in the daily life of the student is a key area of investigation. The dynamics that take shape within this nexus of relationships, as well as the degree and type of influence that ultimately shapes socialization of students constitute basic elements of study and intervention for social work.

Another interesting area of intervention is the individual student himself. Detection assessment and prioritization of needs, student profile, strengths and weaknesses, development of a counseling relationship and gradual steady intervention of the professional are some of the basic elements managed by the social workers in education (Kallinikakis, 1998.) Self-concept-self-image, sense of reduced ability to achieve goals, how they perceive their place in society, the wider attitude that students adopt towards their classmates, their teachers and society in general are part of what defines the profile of students and the scope of practice.

Another field of intervention is the type of body in which the teachers and other supporting staff who work and move around the school operate, as well as in other places where the student of Primary or Secondary Education of General or Special Education lives. The dynamics that develop are very different in each area. Different goals are set and different problems arise in every school unit. The differentiation in the "type" of students found in each school leads to a unique environment in which social work interns are called upon to carry out their internship.

Teachers who interact with students on a daily basis are an area of interest. The professional role adopted by the social worker in collaboration with the other educational specialties marks a key element in the social work internship. Possible frictions between professionals but also possible excellent climate collaborations offer important stimuli and experiences which influence and determine to a certain extent the professional path of the social work intern.

Community awareness and community intervention in general is a different area of the specific practice area. Social worker is called upon to raise awareness and mobilize the local community in achieving the removal of social exclusions. In this area, the organization's collaboration with other more or less related services can be included, in an effort of coordinated intervention. In this web of relationships, the social work interns play an important role. They train by learning on a practical level from the available agencies and the work they can offer and at the same time they observe the way in which their position within this environment evolves. Thus, for example, dead ends, bureaucratic issues, inefficiencies and dysfunctions that will appear in trying to work with other agencies can initially frustrate social work interns, but ultimately, all the above will at least help them understand the facts that make up the environment in which they will be professionally active in the future.

Another distinction that can also be noted has to do with the type of "problem-specificity" in which the social worker is called upon to intervene. This means that, depending on where the social work intends to act, orientation of the profession can also be separated. For example, the management of problems related to racist attitudes differs due to the diversity of students (cultural differences), delinquent behavior, incidents of violence, support for people with disabilities, improvement in the development of social skills, counseling support for people with learning disorders or special categories students (in crisis situations, e.g. unemployed parents, bereavement management) (Allen-Mears, Washington & Welsh, 1999). Another fundamental distinction has to do with the type of education provided (special and general education). That is, special education school units (in which there are students who have intelligence at levels below normal limits) and general education schools, with students with learning disorders, behavior and adjustment problems. The connection of the two spaces aims, among other things, for the common benefit. On the one hand the awareness of the students of the general schools, on the other hand the removal of the ghettoization that the students of the special schools suffer from. The lack of "contact", even visually, of non-disabled students with disabled students in all phases of their schooling leads to a lack of awareness and familiarity with the "different" (Trevillion, 2007). Students are asked not to be discriminatory or treat disability as something foreign. Both in the school environment and when they finish their education, when they have no representations of it at all (except by chance based on personal experiences).

In addition, the Institution for Interdisciplinary Assessment, Counseling and Support in Greece is part of those sectors. This Institution is a particularly valuable place for social work internship. There social work interns are invited to participate in an interdisciplinary evaluation team and to collaborate on a systematic basis with other specialties (preschool, primary and secondary education teachers, psychologists, speech therapists). As unique professionals, part of their responsibilities include that they participate in the process of assessing educational needs, but also get in contact with the student's family environment. Therefore, they participate in a process of cultivating and developing a counseling relationship with the family in problems inside school as well as outside school (e.g. managing free time, relationships with other peers).

Apart from the Institution for Interdisciplinary Assessment, Counseling and Support, social workers in education, in accordance with the provisions of article 39 of the relevant law 4115/2013, carry out their work in the newly established School Education & Support Networks. These are networks consisting of special education, general public and private education schools regardless of grade. Their purpose is, among other things, the cooperation and coordination of the work of school units (special & general education) for their response to the special educational needs of students and the integration and inclusion of students with disabilities in general education schools. These networks represent a challenge and an opportunity for social work and professionals, as well as the role they will play in this space. For the first time, the possibility of intervention of social workers in general education schools is provided, giving the possibility of dealing with issues concerning the dysfunction of students in school units. These issues include bullying, abuse, delinquency, stress and pressure management and general issues of social functioning of students (with and without learning disabilities). These can be areas of intervention and obtaining educational "benefit" for intern social workers. Social workers are expected to be invited to the school council of the general schools of the relevant School Education & Support Network, where they can make recommendations on matters of inclusion of students with disabilities in the general school, dealing with crises and school violence, relations between members of the school community, socio-economic problems of the students, as well as on matters of development of extracurricular leisure activities in the school environment and social support of students and their families (L.4115/2013, art.39:476). Consequently, the possibility of expanding the scope of social work is provided without overlooking the initial difficulties that are expected to arise due to various factors, such as bureaucracy and financial crisis.

A particularly noteworthy and at the same time interesting issue is the relationship that develops between the social work intern and their trainer, through which the social work intern receives many stimuli that gradually shape their professional profile (Henderson & Pochin, 2001). They learn both from the "correct" professional behaviors they see the professional adopt or they learn just as much from the "mistakes" of the professional. The greek reality does not provide the privilege of having specially trained or certified internship instructors. This leads to receiving stimuli from the students that are very responsive to the data of modern reality. Issues that arise, problems of cooperation, organization and dysfunction, ethical issues, can contribute positively to the training of social work intern.

The social work interns at the initial level are invited to "get to know" the area in which they will be active. This means that they are informed about the institutional theoretical material that frames, but also determines the operation of the specific institution. In particular, in addition to the theoretical training they obtain through university education, they will be helped acquire the required information about the powers, duties and obligations deriving from the operating rules. Thus, they will be able to base their professional steps on institutional bases (apart from the ethical rules that characterize the profession of social work), avoiding wrong behaviors or oversights due to verbal instructions only. At the same time, they will be able to get to know the general climate of action and the philosophy of the specific body, as well as the way in which it is structured. To be able to evaluate and propose solutions or new ways of intervention, an understanding of the existing environment is a prerequisite. In addition, at the same primary stage the interns become familiar with the organization's structure in relation to the other professionals employed there. They understand the dynamics of the relationships that develop between other teachers and place themselves in this whole web of relationships and interactions.

In a second stage, the observational role of the interns is expanded. They engage in one or more areas of intervention, in collaboration and under the guidance of the instructor and supervisor of the internship. On a practical level, they participate in the planning and taking of the social history. They shape according to the particularities of the institution that prepares the internship and, by taking advantage of the educational "benefits" of the interview they train in taking the social history. They engage in a more advanced basis in the development of the professional relationship with the served students and their family or friendly environment, they participate in the detection, assessment and prioritization of needs and they detect the difficulties, as well as the possibilities of intervention that are

presented. The training of the social work intern develops in a context that includes the intervention stages of social work (Kandylaki, 2001): a) Development of the relationship with the client, based on trust, unconditional acceptance, uniqueness and confidentiality b) Collection of information. Detection and identification of all data forming the profile of the interested party c) Assessment of the situation. A process based on the right of the individual to participate in decision-making on issues that concern them and in planning the way of doing business d) Mainly intervention. Professionals and clients participate (the former mainly in an observational and advisory role) in the effort to achieve the goals that they have determined and co-decided in advance e) Evaluation of the overall progress. Assessment of the points that developed as originally planned and identification of the objectives that were not achieved, as well as the reasons why this happened f) Termination of the cooperation. The students in the final phase and especially those with whom the professional and social work intern has developed a "deeper" counseling relationship should ideally have adopted an attitude of self-reliance and independence in managing their needs. A particularly difficult process that requires a lot of effort. An additional difficulty is the ability to "measure" the self-reliance and the ability to "stand on one's own two feet" or the degree of improvement or development of one's social skills.

Conclusions

The practice of social workers in the field of education is an interesting specialty. Difficulties in the scientific investigation of the subject due to the lack of literature and the avoidance of social workers to record their experiences, as well as the organizational dysfunction of the parts involved (services and professionals) should not be a brake. The evidence and research material that exists through the experiences of social workers can lead to beneficial scientific results.

The students who implement their internship in education, from time to time express a multitude of issues that concern them. One of these is related to whether there is enough internship time for their professional training. Others are related to the mistakes they are likely to fall into and the "cost" of these to the detriment of the served. A third issue that often concerns social work interns is whether they have the right to interfere in the daily life of the served and the work of the school they are in and then to interrupt the cooperation in a partially "inelegant" way, due to the end of the prescribed training time, even though they update and prepare the "ground" as the theory predicts. Another theme that is often expressed has to do with the power and authority that a professional of the genre has and how it is managed. To what extent do they "know" what is right and good for the client and why they represent rational thinking (Ragin, 1994). If both bibliographically and ethically they consider and co-decide with the client about their future and the priorities of the goals that will be set, the boundaries between who knows better what is and what is not good are indiscernible (Andersonetal, 1994). Also, it is difficult to draw the boundaries between the social worker's status as a "guest" in the internship area (the internship organization is not absolutely obliged to accept a student, therefore it is considered a "guest" in the area) and of the learner who has the right to provide a fundamentally adequate level of activity.

The specific concerns-dilemmas are reasonable to a degree and have been mentioned in the literature (Deci, 1980; Harlow & Hern, 1996; Solomon, 1977) as ethical issues which constitute useful scientific material. At the same time, they highlight a particularly remarkable level of awareness and critical thinking of social work interns, which in any case reflects the existence of the sense of responsibility and professionalism. After all, the philosophy of implementing the internship focuses on gaining experiences that will be useful in the future and will have a catalytic effect on the professional profile that the intern will develop in the future as a professional, etc.

The field of education offers unique stimuli and possibilities in the training of future professionals. The contact with the students, the teachers, the school unit in general, the family environment and the local community of which the student population is a part and in which they live make up a unique network. Within this environment social work students verify or challenge the

application of theory and develop a solid foundation upon which to determine their future career path. Difficulties that arise on many levels in everyday life offer additional understanding of reality, the possibility of understanding whether one is destined to adopt the profession of social worker or not.

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