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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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## CHALLENGES FACED BY SOCIAL WORKERS IN FIELD PRACTICE WITH SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS

Sosyal Hizmet Uzmanlarının Sosyal Hizmet Uygulama Öğrencileri ile Saha Uygulamasında  
Karşılaştıkları Sorunlar

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### ABSTRACT

One of the most important and indispensable elements of social work education is social work practice. For this reason, it would be beneficial to identify the problems that prevent students from being active and productive in the practice period and to offer solutions. This study aims to identify the challenges faced by social workers when working with social work students during field practice and proposes solutions to address these issues. Employing a qualitative research design, the experiences of 140 social workers serving as institutional supervisors were examined. The investigation centered on three key open-ended questions, with face-to-face interviews being conducted with the social workers. The results revealed that the primary difficulties encountered by social workers in supervising students in practice include issues such as absenteeism and non-compliance with institutional rules, challenges associated with open-plan education programs, and instances of indifference and reluctance displayed by students during their practice periods. To prevent these problems, the social workers came up with suggestions, such as academic supervisors monitoring students more frequently, students having learning motivation and being idealistic, developing students' communication skills. The findings obtained from this research will contribute to planning a more effective and productive practice period and having a qualified social work education through increasing awareness about problems encountered during the practice process.

**Keywords:** Field practice, social work practice, social work students, social worker

## ÖZET

Sosyal hizmet eğitiminin en önemli ve vazgeçilmez unsurlarından biri de sosyal hizmet uygulamasıdır. Bu nedenle öğrencilerin uygulama sürecinde aktif ve verimli olmasını engelleyen sorunların tespit edilerek çözüm önerileri sunulmasının faydalı olacağı düşünülmektedir. Bu araştırmanın amacı sosyal hizmet uzmanlarının sosyal hizmet uygulama öğrencileriyle yaşadıkları sorunları tespit etmek ve bu sorunlara yönelik çözüm önerileri geliştirmektir. Nitel araştırma desenine göre yapılan bu araştırmaya sosyal hizmet uygulama öğrencilerine kurum danışmanlığı yapmış 140 sosyal hizmet uzmanı katılmıştır. Çalışmada üç ana soru üzerinde odaklanılmıştır. Araştırmadan elde edilen bulgulara göre, uygulama sürecinde sosyal hizmet uzmanlarının en çok devamsızlık ve kurallara uymama, açık öğretim programları ile ilgili sorunlar, ilgisizlik ve isteksizlik ve eğitsel danışmanlarla iletişim sorunu yaşadıkları görülmektedir. Bu sorunları çoğunlukla uygulama öğrencileri karşılıklı açık iletişim kurarak ve beklentileri belirleyerek, eğitsel danışmanlar ve diğer kurum çalışanlarıyla birlikte hareket ederek, uygulama süreci ve yeri hakkında önceden bilgi vererek çözümledikleri belirlenmiştir. Bu araştırmadan elde edilen bulguların, uygulama sürecinde karşılaşılan sorunlarla ilgili farkındalığı arttırarak, daha etkin ve verimli bir uygulama sürecinin nasıl planlanabileceğine ve sosyal hizmet eğitiminin nitelikli olmasına katkı sağlayacağı düşünülmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Saha uygulaması, sosyal hizmet öğrencisi, sosyal hizmet uygulaması, sosyal hizmet uzmanı

## INTRODUCTION

In social work education, it is not possible to separate theoretical and practical knowledge from one another, because they complete each other. The first stage of the social work profession is to have an effective and productive practice period. The importance of social work can be understood from its definition. According to this definition, "Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion and the empowerment and liberation of people." (IFSW, International Federation of Social Workers, IASSW- International Association of Schools of Social Work, 2014). In other words, the field practice of social work education is a component of social work education wherein students see real social work practices and deal with cases under the guidance and supervision of social workers in various institutions or organisations (Tanga, 2013).

As stated in the United States' Council of Social Work Education's Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards in 2008, social work not only affects the socialisation of a student but also contributes to the prominence of the role of a practitioner (Wayne et al., 2010).

As a social science, the discipline of social work is constantly evolving and changing. Thus, practices carried out in institutions and organisations are constantly undergoing change and development as well. It is possible to keep track of this process with the training taken both during and after undergraduate studies. At this point, the assignation and handling of real cases under the supervision of both the academic supervisors and the institution supervisors provide an advantage to students' professional development.

Today, social work practices and education have gained more significance because of the importance attached to individual differences by postmodernism and the increase in the variety of problems. Numerous studies are carried out at the national and international level to ensure that both the theoretical and practical training of social work meet contemporary needs (Pak et al., 2018).

Social work has been the subject of various studies in the literature, and these studies emphasise different problems encountered in practice environments. It is stated that the most common problem among these is the practice students' lack of knowledge in both theoretical and practical areas (Cha et al., 2006; Rehn & Kalman, 2018; Dominelli & Hackett, 2011). Besides, there is an emphasis on the importance of legislative knowledge as well as theoretical knowledge, and it is stated that one of the most crucial solutions for students to feel better in the professional field is to have a command over the legislation (Rehn & Kalman, 2018). In addition to the lack of knowledge, it is observed that there are problems regarding students' indifference and reluctance to learn, student advisers' lack of supervision (Dominelli & Hackett, 2011), students' non-adherence to rules and students being undisciplined (Dominelli & Hackett, 2012).

Today's social work educational approach has a philosophy that focuses on the student, gives weight to the development of practical skills, is sensitive and values differences and is based on the ethical principles of social work (Ping, 2012; Ferguson, 2018). Therefore, the information obtained from the theoretical education of social work is very effective and essential in forming the basic framework for the practice of the profession (Pak et al., 2018). In this respect, it is of utmost importance to increase the knowledge and skills of the student in the theoretical educational process and to contribute to the transfer of the acquired knowledge to the practical process.

In Tanga's (2013) study regarding the problems encountered in social work practice, the insufficiency of guidelines or materials for the practical process, the lack of coordination between school (academic) and institutional supervisors, the lack of information about the institutions where students practice, the decrease in the quality of supervision work especially when academic and institutional supervisors have to deal with a large number of application students and not all social work students having practical opportunities in main social work institutions come to the fore.

In the literature, the lack of motivation and the insecurity of the practice students were among the other problems encountered (Dominelli & Hackett, 2011). It was stated that doing the practice voluntarily, fondly and willingly contributed to the clients coping with their basic problems both in practical and in professional life (Tippa & Mane, 2018).

The most important system that enables students to transfer the theoretical and legislative knowledge they acquire in the education process to the practice environment is the supervision system. It is stated that actions such as supervision meetings, homework and case discussions held with both academic and institutional supervisors contribute to the permanence of the acquired knowledge and the development of skills (Rehn & Kalman, 2018). However, it is emphasised that it is essential for students to act within the framework of the standards, rules, ethical principles and responsibilities that are the basis of the social work discipline in practice environments (Dominelli & Hackett, 2012; Tippa & Mane, 2018).

This study aimed to examine the problems social workers experience with social work students in field practice. In Turkey's social work literature regarding problems that social workers encounter with social work students in the field, there is no evidence of any previously conducted research. It is crucial that the practice period, which is the first step into the social work profession, is effective and productive for both the members of the profession and the individuals who benefit from the service. It is believed that finding solutions to the problems encountered in this process will contribute to the quality of social work education. In addition, this research allows social workers to express their solution suggestions and expectations regarding the practice period. With this study, it is expected that future social work field practice will be carried out more systematically.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study was prepared and conducted following a qualitative research design. Qualitative research generally carries out data collection methods through observations, interviews, content analysis and in-depth interviews (Yildirim & Simsek, 2013: 46). This study collected data through the interview method. The study used the phenomenological approach, which is one of the qualitative study methods. In the phenomenological approach, it is essential to think about the desired result and to produce a solution based on events, situations, experiences or concepts (Ergun, 2005). Regarding these concepts, the individual presents or expresses his/her knowledge and experience about the event (inefficiency in practice, lack of theoretical knowledge, etc.). The researcher can choose any concept to understand or reveal an event or notion (Erdogan, et al. 2014). This study will analyse the problems faced by social workers who work with social work undergraduate students and their suggestions for solving these problems.

### **Data Collection**

In the study, the following questions were asked to the social workers (participants) about what problems they encounter with the students in social work and what they do to solve them. Also the questions were evaluated by academicians for the suitability of to the purpose of the study. These questions are:

- (1) What is the biggest problem you encountered with the practice students throughout your career?
- (2) If you experienced a problem, were you able to find any solution to this problem? Did you get any help from someone while finding a solution? and
- (3) Do you have any solution suggestions to prevent the problems you are experiencing?

The data for the research was collected between January and March 2017. The information was obtained by taking notes during interviews, which lasted an average of 20 minutes each.

## Participants

The participants of the study include 140 social workers who have served as institutional supervisor for social work practice students for at least two years.

According to the data of the Turkish Association of Social Workers (SHUDER), the total number of social workers working in the public sector was 4975. This study reached the participants through the convenience and snowball sampling methods and obtained the data through face-to-face interviews. Then, these data were coded and the problems experienced were determined. The perceptions and events are presented as is, in their natural environments and in a holistic way.

In qualitative research, the election of participants is related to the research design and framework. Sometimes “diversity” and at other times “uniformity” are important (Punch, 2005). In this framework, in the election of the participants, the study tried to achieve diversity through conducting the most objective interview with social workers who have worked with social work practice students as institution supervisor for at least two years. For this purpose, the study reached 140 participants.

Each researcher, who is one of the authors of the study, conducted interviews with approximately 35 participants, reaching a total of 140 participants. Maximum variation was sought by including social workers from various fields of expertise. The main aim of the research was to uncover the most common challenges experienced by social workers with social work students and to propose solutions to these issues. Since the participants’ demographic and personal characteristics were not correlated with the challenges they faced, this information was not included in the study.

## Data Evaluation

In the data evaluation, the coding system was applied by using the content analysis technique. Content analysis is mainly used for analysing the written and visual data of the focus (sample) group. The purpose of content analysis is to find the relationship between the concepts that will clarify the data obtained from the participants (Erdogan et al., 2014). Themes are usually created in the analysis of the collected data, and these are subjected to a comparative analysis. “Thematic coding is the classification of observation and interview data according to concepts, titles and themes.” In thematic coding, the comparison and abstraction of the contradictory and overlapping content obtained is in the foreground, and the emphasis is on the repeating expressions (Geray, 2006). In the content analysis process, firstly the participants’ answers and the recorded interviews were transferred to the Microsoft Word word processing software, and in the second stage, the interview texts were coded in Microsoft Word with the annotation function; then the themes were created by combining the coding in separate tables. The codes and themes created were shown to two researchers who had previous qualitative research experience, and they reached a consensus regarding the codes. In order to increase the reliability in the presentation of qualitative data, direct quotations from the participants’ expressions were presented.

## Ethical Issues

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

## FINDINGS

The findings section includes the problems participants faced with the practice students, how they resolved these problems and the distribution of solution suggestions related to the problems.

**Table 1. Problems encountered with social work practice students**

Themes related to the problems encountered	Number of people (n)
Absenteeism and non-compliance	32
Problems with open-plan education programmes	30
Indifference and reluctance	26
Communication with academic supervisor	17
Lack of information on the legislation	13
Extreme self-confidence	11
Inability to put theoretical knowledge to practice	9
Not familiarising with the institution	7
Dress-code disorder	6
Communication problem with client	5

Table 1 focuses on the most relevant problems that participants encounter with the practice students. Accordingly, during the practice period, participants mostly experienced problems regarding absenteeism and non-compliance (32), problems with open-plan education programmes (30), indifference and reluctance (26), dialogue with academic supervisors (17), lack of information on the legislation (13), extreme self-confidence (11) and the inability to put theoretical knowledge into practice (9). Some of the statements of participants regarding the problems they experience are as follows:

*“So sometimes there can be absence. Else, I am satisfied with the practice students. If I should mention the problems I rarely encountered in 24 years, absenteeism, a little reluctance to participate in professional studies and sometimes dressing can be problems. Among these, the most common problem is absenteeism. For example, I experienced this yesterday. The student was absent for a few days and then did not come. The student will probably fail. However, in the past years, we could not say anything to the hardworking students. They know their timing, when to come and go and their job. After a while, we run them as a social worker, but some students cannot commit themselves fully. If a student has some problems and if I observe the other student slacking, I tell them.”*

*“We don’t have any serious problems, but for example, the students are easy-going; when they go to school, there are no rules for work. For this reason, they may have trouble in complying with official institutional rules and working hours. These problems mostly occur with open-plan education students. Formal education students do not have these problems. The lack of academic supervisor for open-plan education students is a problem in itself. While we cannot say that we do not want to work in this department even though we are civil servants, students say that they do not want to work in that department because it is too intense. They neither come to the institution, nor do they inform us. The students do not inform anybody, including the academic or institutional supervisors.”*

*“Overall there is no problem. We want the students who come here to practice to become qualified and strive for this. They should take responsibility, be interested and insist on learning from me. They should take notes to make what they have learned permanent. Very few students take notes. If the student is competent, I even give them the chance to meet with the client. However, it is necessary to take notes to describe the procedures and gain knowledge.”*

*“Communications of both academic and institutional supervisor must be continuous and reliable to control and monitor students. For example, sometimes we do not get to know the academic supervisor of the student even though they have been practicing for a year, and we do not always get information about what is required and what should be done during the educational process.”*

*“Students do not usually come here to learn. They come because it is mandatory. We will become colleagues in a year. Maybe we will work in the same institutions, but they are not aware of this. When they come here, they have insufficient knowledge and do not know what to do, yet they can be very pretentious and act like know-it-alls.”*

*“At the beginning of the practice, we see that there is a lack of knowledge among students. However, we know that they have received enough theoretical information and that there are lessons. They cannot transform the theoretical knowledge they have learned into practice. Maybe they just try to pass the exams, I do not know why. Some students I met, for example, did not even know the content or scope of Legislation 2828 (Social Services Law). I have encountered similar problems many times. For example, I think they either do not know or have forgotten which report or which law we use for the elderly or disabled. Sometimes I witnessed that students did not even know the child protection law.”*

*“All of these students are senior students and may not even know which institution they came to practice in. Social work students have to adapt themselves with awareness for the practice and the willingness to practice. For example, I saw that students were not curious about the institution before they came to it. They are not aware of what is happening in the institution and what kind of services and activities it has.”*

*“I’m not saying this for all of the social work students who come to the practice, but generally they don’t pay attention to the way they dress, it doesn’t matter if they are male or female. Now, if we are to provide an effective and trust-based service to the other person or the client in our profession, we should also pay attention to our appearance.”*

*“I give students the opportunity to meet the client, but students can do almost anything to avoid getting in touch with the client. I think our students, who cannot communicate with the client, generally work on their theoretical knowledge only to pass the exams. I find it normal that some of our students who come to the practice cannot contact the client in the first weeks, but unfortunately, sometimes this can continue until the end of the term. I also see that they are afraid or anxious to meet with the client. There are also those who are concerned with doing something wrong or not being able to anything.”*

As can be seen, student-based problems such as absenteeism and non-compliance with the rules, reluctance, lack of information and extreme self-confidence may be encountered during the practice period, as well as institutional problems such as the inability to communicate with academic supervisors. It is thought that the problems emphasised by social workers in this study also negatively affect the practice process of the students.

**Table 2. How the problems with the practice students are resolved**

Themes related to how the problems encountered are resolved	Number of people (n)
Establishing mutual open communication with the practice student and setting expectations	46
Acting together with academic supervisor and other institution employees	41
Providing prior information about the practice period and place (orientation)	18
Emphasising the importance of the privacy policy	12
Popularising the practice and teaching how to make an effort to develop skills	12
Completing the lack of information on the legislation	11
Stating that they should take care of the dress code	8
Guiding them to fulfil the lack of theoretical knowledge	6
Emphasising the value of being humble	4

Table 2 shows the solutions social workers suggested to the problems they encountered with the practice students. Accordingly, it is seen that social workers resolve the problems mostly by communicating openly with the practice students and establishing their expectations (46), acting together with academic supervisors and other institution employees (41), providing prior information about the practice period and place (orientation) (18), emphasising the importance of the privacy policy (12) and popularising the practice and teaching how to make an effort to develop skills (12). Some of the statements of the social workers about how they resolve the problems are as follows:

*“We start by talking and reaching an agreement with the social work students who come to the practice from the first week. I can say that I do not have much trouble, because we continue in this fashion. These students are required to do the practice on a voluntary basis and with the thought of fulfilling a role in this profession in the future. They must be respectful, honest and devoted to their clients and supervisors. I do not think we will encounter any problems if they act in accordance with these things.”*

*“Students are a little more careful when they are spoken to. Students who ignore the warnings are directed to another unit. We talk more about overtime work. We experience such problems mostly with open-plan education social work students. We cannot meet with their professors as they do not have any academic supervisors. The principal or the vice-principal here are informed; they have a meeting to partially solve the problem.”*

*“We talk to them (the students). There are other peers here, too. We have to treat everyone equally. Therefore, this place has established rules. The student has to do this. It is also a fact that each student’s capability is different. In other words, there is no such thing as getting the same productivity from everyone. What we do here is this: We have the opportunity to work side-by-side next year with students who are practicing with me this year, as colleagues. Second, there is not much of a subordinate–superior relationship in our relations with the practice students. There is always respect. I see students as social workers—we work that way. Therefore, the dialogue between us is professional. Mostly, we continue and give responsibility in this manner. They really act like social worker. When you value them, they feel worthy too.”*

*“I will meet with their academic supervisor and my colleagues. There are three points here. I first meet with the student himself/herself, and if there are still problems in this process, I meet with my colleagues. Gradually, if this problem goes beyond what we can solve and exceeds us, I talk to his/her academic supervisor. After all, we are not in a position to make decisions on our own here. We also inform the administration.”*

*“If there is a problem, I can handle it alone, because I see students as my colleagues. They are all senior students. That is why I try to deal with the problem one-on-one. As a solution, I always try to inform students about legislation and practice. This situation is directly proportional to the student’s desire to learn. The student must first be monitored by his/her academic and institutional supervisors, be willing to learn and practice and if he/she acts in accordance with the ethical rules of social work, of course, there is nothing that cannot be solved. Also, I tell them that the more prepared they are, the better their professional life will be.”*

*“I usually deal with students’ problems alone. It makes more sense to go over the problem. I think it is unnecessary to spread the problem and complicate it. In general, I explain that the student should show interest in the practice; if he/she does not show interest, it will be easier for him/her to forget, and therefore, I emphasise the need to take notes.”*

*“Social work education is a profession where the practice is important as well as the theory. Therefore, it will be easy for them to put theoretical information to practice when they obtain the full knowledge of the most basic laws. The desire to willingly practice and learn will allow the process to be more fruitful.”*

*“Another issue is that I recommend the practice students to gain information about the way institutions function, their regulations and discipline. I especially draw attention to privacy and the right to privacy. I deal with the problems I experience, sometimes by talking to the student individually and sometimes by consulting with my colleagues.”*

Considering the results obtained from the research, it is seen that establishing open communication between students and institutional supervisor (social workers) and determining expectations at the beginning of the practice period are very important in solving problems. In addition, academic supervisors and other institution employees also contribute to the resolution of problems. Also, it is seen that getting the student to like the practice and teaching them how to make an effort to develop skills is effective in problem-solving.

**Table 3. Solution suggestions for the problems experienced with the practice students**

Themes related to solution suggestions	Number of people (n)
Students must be monitored frequently by academic supervisors	33
Students must be idealistic and motivated to learn	25
Students should improve their communication skills	22
The number of practice days should be increased, or the departments should be closed in the open-plan education social work departments	14

Increasing students' awareness	11
Confidentiality of cases should be considered	9
Practical solutions should be produced	9
Institution rules must be followed	7
Students should learn the basic legislation	6

Table 3 shows the solution suggestions for the problems social workers face with practice students. Accordingly, it is seen that social workers suggest solutions such as academic supervisors frequently monitoring students (33), students being idealistic and motivated to learn (25), students improving their communication skills (22), increasing the number of practice days in open-plan education social work departments or closing open-plan education social work departments (14) and increasing students' awareness (11). Some of the expressions of the social workers regarding their solution suggestions are as follows:

*"We do not have much communication with academic supervisors. Maintaining this communication and working in coordination are my primary suggestions. The student should show interest, be self-confident and serious while practicing, then there will be no problem."*

*"When the students arrive, we provide information about the working rules of this place, how to behave, how to establish relationships with clients, times of entry and exit and the dress code. In this context, if problems arise, we talk and share this with the student appropriately. We must treat them well. When we become colleagues, if they say we treated them badly, that would upset me. Problems should be stated without offending anybody. In other words, ethical rules should be followed in communication with the student. Thus, fewer problems will occur. Here, we take the first step for students to have a good education. We are trying to raise awareness. In order to avoid such problems, first, if the institution the student will go to and the unit he/she will work in is certain, it is necessary to do a detailed investigation, for example, which employees they will work with, what the working conditions of the unit are, what they should pay attention to and what the entry and exit hours of the institution are. In other words, students should not have the perception that they can come and go as they wish; the practices that the student follows here are very, very important and are the first step for his future career. They should come to practice consciously. Their awareness should be high."*

*"The student should be able to express himself/herself, be self-confident and strive to improve himself/herself. He/she should be able to express his/her problems to the institutional supervisor clearly. It is very important that the institutional supervisor is not offensive and adjusts his/her style accordingly. The student should pay attention to the*

*rules and sensitivities of the institution. I think open communication should be established and a common language should be used in solving problems.”*

*“As formal education students have more practice days than open-plan education students; it is possible to maintain integrity when following-up on cases. Problems are easier to solve. However, it is impossible to follow-up on cases with open-plan education students as the practice is just one day a week. I personally think that these departments should be closed. And if they continue to come, I recommend increasing the number of practice days for continuity, case follow-up and compliance with official institution rules.”*

It is believed that the solution suggestions at this stage will be beneficial for social work practice students to make a good start to their professional life. At the same time, very important issues regarding what the institutional supervisors should pay attention to during the process were emphasised. It is thought that these suggestions will provide important outcomes especially for the practice students in terms of completing the practice in a successful way and developing their knowledge and skills.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This research was conducted to determine the problems social workers experience with social work practice students. The literature states that practice students will be professionally incompetent if they do not display the performance desired by social workers and this may cause problems in practice (Baum, 2010). In this study, according to the evaluation of social workers, the problems encountered during the practice process are absenteeism and non-compliance with rules, problems with open-plan education programmes, indifference and reluctance, communication problems with academic supervisors, lack of information on the legislation and the inability to put theory to practice. Similar to the findings of our study, it is stated that the problem for most students who participated in the practice in Tanga's (2013) study was the lack of theoretical knowledge and not being able to establish healthy communication with social workers. Weitzman and Beder (2000) also state that problems are encountered in practice when students do not fulfil their roles and functions, do not understand the limitations of these roles and cannot take responsibility.

According to the findings obtained in this study, it is seen that social workers mostly have problems with practice students related to absenteeism and non-adherence to rules. It is thought that this problem may be due to the students not having enough information about the seriousness of the practice process, the importance of its outcomes and the different dynamics of the institution where they practise. At this point, the following inferences can be made about the reasons for the problems experienced: (1) The differences between the entrance and exit hours of the institutions (some institutions are more flexible in terms of working hours and some institutions are more rigid) may cause students to have problems with attendance. (2) There may also be problems in complying with the

dress code. The dress code rules may vary depending on the institution's quality. The students lacking a formal dress code suitable for the institution may be perceived as impolite by clients, and clients may think that the students do not take them seriously. It can be thought that students experience issues, as they have difficulties in adapting from the regular and sporty clothing style in the university environment to the formal dressing style in the working environment. (3) In some institutions, the lack of a working environment and opportunity to make students feel like they belong to the institution (for example, not providing a desk or computer, limited professional interview rooms or the lack thereof) may hinder the student's attendance and decrease their motivation. (4) Due to the confidentiality of cases in the institutions, students may not be accepted as observers in meetings (sometimes because the client does not want it and sometimes the social worker does not approve); this may negatively affect students' attendance, interest and desire. In the literature, it is stated that the rapid encounter of students with difficult cases in practice causes them to feel unprepared (Walker & Gant, 2021).

In the study, social workers stated that they had various problems with practice students from the Social Work Departments of Open-Plan Education Faculties. These problems are students' serious lack of theoretical knowledge and lack of knowledge about the social work institutions, practice days and hours being quite insufficient, frequent absenteeism of the students and the inability to communicate with the academic supervisors who follow the students' practice period. The researchers were not able to predict these problems that the social workers stated at the beginning of the research process. These issues in practice are important topics discussed in relation to social work education in Turkey in the present state.

The literature states that due to the nature of social work, because it is a practical discipline as well as theoretical, social work education cannot be given with open-plan education, the number of students accepted is very high and it is not possible to supervise the high number of students, practice days are extremely insufficient and social work education provided through the open-plan education programme in Turkey is against the standards of international social work training (Alptekin, 2016).

Another problem faced by social workers is the inability to communicate and cooperate adequately with academic supervisors. It is thought that this problem stems from the fact that academic supervisors have to counsel many students. It is frequently emphasised in the literature that a high number of students reduces the quality of supervision and creates an obstacle in case discussions, and this situation is not adequate to transfer theoretical knowledge to practice (Tanga, 2013; Dominelli & Hackett, 2011).

Social work students' lack of legislation knowledge, which is among the problems mentioned by social workers in the study, is also emphasized in the literature (Rehn & Kalman, 2018). Students' lack of knowledge about the importance of the legislation can be associated with their lack of conscious awareness about learning the profession during their university education.

The second finding of the research is regarding how social workers resolve the problems they encounter with the practice students. Accordingly, social workers try to solve the problems by establishing mutual and open communication and setting expectations, acting together with academic supervisors and other institution employees, giving information in advance about the practice period and place (orientation), emphasising the importance of the privacy policy, popularising the practice and teaching how to make an effort to develop skills. It is emphasized in the literature that it is very important for the practice process to receive a sufficient level of training on the application before the practice (Walker & Gant, 2021).

The third finding of the study, which is the solution suggestions of social workers regarding their problems with practice students, is that students should be frequently monitored by their academic supervisors, they should be idealistic and motivated to learn, they should improve their communication skills before the practice, the number of practice days of the open-plan education faculty social work departments should be increased or open-plan education faculty social work departments should be closed and students' awareness should be increased.

Different findings have been found in the literature regarding how to solve the problems experienced in the practice environments. While Cha et al. (2006) emphasised the importance of theoretical knowledge of basic concepts and theories of social work in the practice of the most effective social work, Rehn and Kalman (2018) especially drew attention to the importance of legislation knowledge. It is stated that for social work students to achieve success in the practice they should do it voluntarily, fondly and willingly (Tippa & Mane, 2018; Theresa et al., 2006). Further, it is emphasised that the practice students' acting in accordance with the institution's rules and ethical standards is of great importance in solving the problems (Dominelli & Hackett, 2012).

It is thought that the approaches of social workers in practice settings are very significant in solving the encountered problems. In his study, Unbehaun (2005) emphasises that the social worker who is the institutional supervisor should have qualitative characteristics, such as being an adviser, guide, helper and social work educator, as the problems of the clients in the field of social work are multi-dimensional and complex.

In addition, social workers play an active role in transforming theoretical knowledge to practice. It is believed that good communication between the academic supervisor and the institutional supervisor and both parties sharing the responsibilities will contribute to the solution of the problems.

Social work is of great importance to the development of social work students' cognitive and emotional awareness. It is a known fact that the supervision given by both academic and institutional supervisor in the practice is effective in the development of students (Mavili Aktas, 2011). Besides, some studies indicate that good supervision is required to perform a reliable practice (Sahin, 2005; Guldali, 2014). In his study, Baser (2018) emphasises the importance of minimising the feelings of

stress, anxiety and inadequacy and supporting the students so that social work students complete a fruitful course and practice period.

Social work enables students to learn about many issues related to the nature of social work and gain a more comprehensive understanding (Baum, 2010). In this respect, social work practice is an indispensable part of social work education.

For an effective practice process in the light of the data obtained from the research,

- Social work students who participate in the practice are recommended to first overcome their shortcomings in their theoretical knowledge.
- It is recommended that students possess and have a good command of the basic legislative knowledge of social work and the regulations of the institutions they practice in, to the best of their abilities.
- Students should be aware of their responsibilities towards the institution they practice in and their clients and advisers and act within the framework of the ethical principles and responsibilities of the social work.
- There should be continuous interaction and communication between the institutional and academic supervisors during the practice process. It is thought that it would be beneficial for academic supervisors to share the knowledge, skills and values the students' are expected to acquire during the practice process, the required reports and the rules to be followed (importance of attendance and compliance with entry–exit times) with the institutional supervisors.
- Academic supervisors should plan an orientation study for students before the practice starts, and a briefing should be conducted on the importance of social work practice, how to behave in practice environments, how to communicate with both social workers and clients, formal correspondence rules, the hierarchical structure, expectations of social workers and ethical principles and rules.
- Academic supervisors are recommended to make institution visits regularly.
- In order for the supervision meetings to be effective and productive, it is recommended to assign a certain number of practice students to the academic supervisors and enrich the supervision meetings with case discussions.
- The practice students should be informed by the institutional supervisor about their expectations, what rules should be followed, the functioning and dynamics of the institution, the hierarchical structure of the institution, the characteristics of the client and the socio-cultural structure of the environment in which the institution is located.

- The social worker should take a facilitating role by sharing his/her professional knowledge, skills and experiences in the student's transformation of theoretical knowledge to practice.
- For open-plan education students' to have a productive and reliable process, it is recommended to increase the practice time and that students receive supervision from their academic supervisors.

### **Limitations**

Social work encompasses various fields of practice such as child and youth welfare, elderly care, women's well-being, etc., and the challenges encountered in these areas can vary. This research, however, did not differentiate between these fields, as it involved a diverse group of individuals, and thus focused on common issues.

The demographic (age, gender, years of experience, etc.) and personal characteristics of social workers were not correlated with the challenges they experienced with social work students in the field of practice.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### **Informed consent**

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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