Historical and Contemporary Synopsis of the Development of Field Education Guidelines in BSW, MSW and Doctoral Programs

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The Future Needs of the Profession:
An Exploratory Study from Practicing Social Workers' Point of View

Chonody, Teater and Jensen

Abstract

Survey data were collected from 152 practitioners, which consisted of three open-ended questions inquiring about practice issues facing social workers today, anticipated changes for the field, and needed changes for social work education. Results of the content analyses revealed that current practice issues included curricula changes to better prepare students and challenging working conditions. Anticipated changes in the profession centered on technology, and realistic practice scenarios were suggested as a necessary educational shift. Implications for social work education and practice include helping students understand complexities associated with real-world experience and clinical challenges, enhancing student learning around practice modalities, and executing translational research.

Introduction

Social work as a profession has continued to evolve since its development during the Settlement House Movement and the creation of social welfare programs. In particular, the profession has expanded and gained more social legitimacy and recognition through formal education and accreditation by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), which sets and monitors the achievement of specific educational outcomes with assessment measures designed for curriculum development and program evaluation, and through licensing regulation, which further professionalized social work by regulating its practice parameters. In addition, National organizations, such as The American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (AASWSW) and The National Institute on Mental Health (NIMH), have strengthened the field of social work through the development of transformative goals that advance social work practice, education, and policy and influence public perception (Barth, Gilmore, Flynn, Fraser & Brekke, 2014; Bibus & Boutte-Queen, 2011; Holden, Barker, Kuppens & Rosenberg, 2017. Notwithstanding its progression and achievements, known challenges lie ahead for the profession and its natural state of fluidity. Some of these challenges are: a) continuing to attract qualified faculty and students to the profession; b) a need for additional enhancements to the social work curriculum to provide effective practice preparation for students; c) continuing to solidify practice as empirically grounded; d) increasing federal funding for social work education; e) gaining greater trust from the public; and f) continuing to further define purpose and identity to enhance the public profile of the profession (Brill, 2001; Dulmus & Sowers, 2012; Gibelman, 1999; Holosko, Winkel, Crandall, & Briggs, 2015; Lightfoot, Nienow, Moua, Colburn, & Petri, 2016; Okpych & Yu, 2014).

For example, the challenge of advancement in social work curriculum, including better integration of evidence-based practice approaches, to provide effective practice preparation for students sits firmly within the larger objective of enhancing education and knowledge to meet the needs of the future, including the integration of technology. As these challenges are addressed and these ongoing goals are met, greater development in social work theory can be achieved. These challenges and goals sit largely within schools of social work, but the leadership within CSWE and the accreditation standards that are set also propels them forward. Relatedly, the challenge of continuing to attract qualified faculty and students to the profession rests in part on creating better marketing to the public on what social workers do as well as establishing a more unified voice for the profession. In turn, if the profession can be enhanced in the eyes of the public, then greater trust can be gained from them. Meeting these goals would help increase the appeal of this work to prospective students and future faculty members. Organizations such as the AASWSW, NASW, and CSWE are responsible for creating increased public awareness about social work and

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helping to dispel myths associated with the field. Nonetheless, practitioners and faculty members can also educate others about social work and represent the field and its mission through their actions.

Economic and social justice is at the heart of social work, and strengthening advocacy to address these issues is an ongoing goal. National organizations and leaders in the field also support these efforts. In particular, the AASWSW aims to promote excellence of the profession by encouraging scholarship, influencing public policy, and "celebrat[ing] excellence in social work and social welfare research, education, and practice" (Barth et al., 2014, p. 498). The AASWSW goes beyond any one social work organization and acts to promote the accomplishments of social workers who make important contributions to the field and the mission of social work, which seeks to create a better society for all. It has the unique composition of practitioners and scholars who strive to lead and advance the profession. Their first project was the Grand Challenges of Social Work Initiative (Barth et al., 2014), which includes stopping family violence, eradicating social isolation, and promoting smart decarceration (see for http:// grandchallengesforsocialwork.org/grand-challenges-initiative/12-challenges/ a full list). These challenges are broad, and indeed grand, but as a whole, they aim to increase public awareness regarding social work; advance social work science, practice, and education; and improve funding for social work research and education (Barth et al., 2014).

For the Grand Challenges to be achieved, support and work across the discipline is necessary (Williams, 2016). That is, researchers, academics, and practitioners must all seek to address these challenges. However, most of the literature on this topic (e.g., Williams, 2016) primarily focuses on the way that research and evaluation are important but does not specifically speak to the role of social workers in the field. This is an oversight given that they are the boots on the ground seeking to make individual, community, and policy level changes in the work that they do in agencies across the country. This work may not be captured by academic research, and thus, their achievements are often unrecognized. Moreover, their voices should be

an integral part of setting agendas and guiding research and educational endeavors as they hold key information to these processes, which educators may be far removed from.

While these objectives are at the heart of the social work profession, contemporary studies should aim to further explore the current trends emerging in the field and the extent to which social work education can best prepare future generations of practitioners. The review of the literature did not yield any studies that explored professional needs from the perspective of practicing social workers. Thus, the current study sought to address this gap by inquiring about social work practitioners' views of the field. In particular, this study aimed to explore the following research questions:

1. What do practicing social workers see as the most important practice issues facing social work today?
2. What changes do you practicing social workers see occurring over the next 10 years in the field of social work?
3. What do practicing social workers see as needed in social work education to meet the changing social landscape?

Method

This exploratory, qualitative study employed survey methodology to answer the above research questions. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained prior to data collection.

Setting and Sample

Practicing social workers in the U.S. were recruited to participate via an online survey, which included demographic questions, a standardized scale, and open-ended questions. Findings from the quantitative portion of the survey, which explored attitudes toward evidence-based practice (EBP), are reported elsewhere (Teater & Chonody, 2017). The current analysis is focused on open-ended questions regarding the current state of the field of social work and what practitioners see as key issues the profession will face in the next 10 years.

The survey was distributed electronically to social workers via social work listservs (e.g., BPD, MSW-ed), the authors' university databases, and posted on social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter). Participants were also asked

to share the link with others who might be interested in this research study. The use of snowball sampling and social media does not allow for an accurate response rate for this study given that the number of social workers who were exposed to survey recruitment efforts is not known, and participants were not asked how they learned about the study. Completion of the survey was considered consent for participation, and 152 social work practitioners participated.

Data Collection

Demographics variables were collected to contextualize the sample, which included gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, region of country, holding a social work license and type, number of years in practice, social work position, and primary work environment. The authors developed the following three open-ended questions to explore practicing social workers' views of the practice issues facing social workers today, anticipated changes for the field, and needed changes for social work education to meet the evolving landscape: a) "What do you see as the most important practice issues facing social workers today?"; b) "What changes do you see occurring over the next 10 years in the field of social work?"; and c) "What is needed in social work education to meet the changing social landscape?" The answers to these questions would shed light on the field from the unique lens of practitioners, and thus inform the literature on the ways in which the field is shifting from those who are currently practicing instead of from the often narrow focus of academics' or researchers' perspectives.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated in SPSS, version 24, to determine percentages, frequencies, and measures of central tendency for the demographic variables. The data from the open-ended questions were analyzed using content analysis (Lune & Berg, 2017). First, two of the researchers read all of the responses and began creating notes about emerging themes. The manifest content was examined, and each researcher generated independently categorized responses to each of the three questions. Second, the researchers reviewed their themes to compare results for each question. Slight shifts in the themes were made, and some responses were

re-categorized after discussing the response and reviewing the themes. Third, the third researcher reviewed these results, and the themes were discussed again. During this process, some responses were re-reviewed and additional small shifts in categorization were made, which reflected greater immersion in the data and understanding of the content. Lastly, all three researchers worked together to create the final categories for the data by grouping words and phrases that represented similar ideas together to garner a representation of the findings from the data.

Results

Demographics

The largest percentage of practitioners identified as women (85.6%), White/Caucasian (83.4%), and had a mean age of 42.4 years (SD = 13.7). Nearly 73% of the sample was either from Mid-America or the Northeast. Nearly 78% of practitioners held an MSW/MSSW degree, with over 80% of practitioners holding a social work license, of which 61.8% held a LCSW (i.e. clinical license). The mean number of years of practice was 13.9 (SD = 11.5). The largest percentage of practitioners held a "direct practice" role (58%) and worked primarily in a "nonprofit" work environment (32%). Table 1 (see p. 55) provides further details on sample characteristics.

Current Practice Issues

A total of 114 practitioners completed this item (missing = 38) resulting in 210 coded responses. Content analysis revealed seven themes for the most important practice issues facing social workers today (see Table 2, p. 56), which included education, working conditions, limited resources and access, working with clients, relevance of the profession, social problems and social justice, and EBP.

The largest theme for this question was education as it relates to practice (24.3%), which included subthemes for curriculum changes, the need for greater supervision, and additional skills and methods for practice. Practitioners had a variety of suggestions on social work education needs to make adjustments to the content and method of instruction. In terms of curriculum, one practitioner suggested that a key issue is "expanding our openness to new ideas and

approaches which include neuroscience and body centered work." Curriculum changes are needed to meet the demands of practice, and one practitioner suggested, "social workers need to be prepared for the real world." Additionally, the training in graduate programs needs to meet the clients where they are so that:

> Social workers feel able to truly connect with those with whom they sit. Training social workers not in static models but in how to actually listen to the client and appreciate the fact that they are doing the best they can given the circumstances of their lives […] having compassion and the ability to really listen to the client's world and not translate it into some model of practice or theory of development.

Additionally, a call for greater specificity was raised when one practitioner stated, "I feel that most schools are not focusing on advanced practice skills. There is so much to learn and each practice class becomes a survey course." Another participant states that "access to in-depth, actual trainings (rather than an overview) of current evidence based practices (e.g., EMDR) [is a key issue]." For another practitioner, some degree of frustration appeared to be expressed in terms of the time needed to learn a new technique, stating, "large caseloads don't allow for much time to become familiar with new practices."

The need for quality supervision was raised both as a necessary element for beginning social workers as well as ongoing learning. One practitioner places this issue as a top priority, stating that "access [to] appropriate, affordable and valuable supervision at the independent practice level" is a pressing issue. Adding to this sentiment, another practitioner expressed:

> I am concerned that social workers graduating today think they are fully prepared. It concerns me that agencies often do not provide supervision and social workers are just beginning to understand how to use the minimal knowledge they have gained in social work school.

Relatedly, the need to have a wide array of skills was also expressed, the third subtheme, and according to one practitioner, the need for "the clinical ability to assess, while always self-reflecting and developing…[and] continually assessing an ever-changing client situation and context. [Accepting] that multiple layers within multiple contexts [exist] without trying to fix

people" was an important practice issue in social work.

Working conditions emerged as the second theme (21.4%), which included subthemes focused on the need for greater income and safety; suggested more variety in opportunities for practice; and the need for ways to address burnout, including improving self-care. One practitioner summed this up by writing "[the key issues are] low salary, poor working conditions, poor benefits, and poor safety/security." Another practitioner pointed to the "lack of money and support to keep practitioners satisfied" as one of the most important practice issues for social work. The financial aspect of the work was accompanied by frustration about expectations. One practitioner stated, "not enough time for what we can do in the scope of a 9 hour work day, since most of us are working overtime with no pay or work compensation." Expansion of social work practice arenas was raised as a current practice issue whereby one practitioner called for "increasing opportunities for work in a variety of settings." The issue of burnout was also at the forefront for some participants:

> I think burnout is huge! We can all learn to practice effectively, but we lose a lot of social workers due to burnout and not learning to care for ourselves. Our practice is a selfish one and I think it would help if self-care was more integrated instead of a 'oh self care' at the end of a course. It's not enough. We burnout because we are also not compensated fairly for what we do—and it takes a toll.

Combining working conditions with burnout, one practitioner stated, "burnout due to high case loads in local mental health center and inability to specialize while at these agencies" is a key practice issue for social workers.

The third theme, limited resources and access (17.1%), was focused on issues related to "doing more with less," "struggling budgets," and understaffing of agencies. This quote sums up this theme: "[The key issues are that] health insurance reimbursement has hindered practice with the non-profit associations along with funding cuts and limited grant opportunities." Adding to this idea, another practitioner points to the "economic impact on clients, including organization and their ability to provide services." Another practitioner raised the problem with state funding, stating that a lack of resources is a key practice issue

"especially in conservative states like Texas." Additionally, one practitioner pointed to one practice area in particular and stated, "a practice issue is that with less mental health resources, we are seeing a higher acuity (more trauma, less resources, etc.), and shorter-term treatments." This quote echoes the idea that social workers today are expected to do more but with less. Combining several of these themes, one practitioner poses these questions: "What's the definition of clinical social work? Who gets third party reimbursements?" Relatedly, a relevant practice issue is the "requirement of billable hours," which one practitioner compares to "doing social work on commission, which feels unethical and not beneficial to our clients."

Working with clients (14.3%) was the fourth theme and included subthemes of challenges associated in working with specific populations (e.g., older adults) or problems (e.g., substance use), ways to address the "complexity and comorbidity of mental disorders and [their] implications," and issues related to establishing the "therapeutic relationship" and "boundary setting." One practitioner suggested that "appropriate and adequate response and follow through in the treatment of older adults" was an important issue, while another pointed to "youth intervention, specifically dealing with depression in youth" was important. When discussing "the reduction of complex problems," one practitioner points to "the need for major work [on these issues], not band aid efforts." Other important practice areas related to the therapeutic relationship included "liability…[associated] with new technology advancements that could breach security and confidentiality" and "having compassion and the ability to really listen to the client's world and translate it into some model of practice or theory of development."

The fifth theme related to relevance of the profession (10%) and included both regulation and legitimatization of the field. Regulation for the field was focused on "comprehensive licensure" nationally, which was also related to how social workers are viewed by other professionals and the general public.

> The identity thing is constant, I think because the vastness of practice areas where social work is practiced, and bias among our peer professionals who seem at times stuck on antiquated and poor informed ideas, such as

'oh, don't they mainly have to do with signing up people for welfare benefits?' This is a common recurring problem.

Echoing this idea, another practitioner suggested, "using EBP as a basis for practice intervention [will] legitimize the profession… [and that] social workers need to be engaging in more research at every level, not just the PhDs."

Concerns about social problems and social justice issues (7.6%) were also raised, and subthemes included stigma (e.g., mental health/comorbidity, LGBTQI), "cultural humility," and systemic problems that need to be changed "to be more socially just." To address practice issues, the "[social work must have] relevance in the face of macro level crises (i.e., refugee crisis, violence toward the African American community, environmental crisis), And yet the US profession of social work is focused too much at the clinical, what's wrong with the individual, level." One practitioner stated, "[There is a] need for social justice advocacy in an increasingly angry, hateful world." Another practitioner expanded on this idea by including "the social problems of racism, racial profiling, immigration policies, anti-Muslim sentiment, public health problems, such as HIV/AIDS, [and] an aging America." Stigma was also raised for many vulnerable and oppressed populations, including those with mental health and/or substance use disorders, people who identify as LGBTQ+, and other social issues. Cultural humility was also suggested as a practice issue and the need for more awareness of multicultural issues.

The final theme for this question was EBP (5.2%), where practitioners brought up a range of ideas including ways to integrate evidence into practice, the need to measure the impact of our work, and "balancing evidence based 'cook book' practices with clinical judgment." One practice issue identified was the need for "standards of practice, including identifying interventions that are effective." Another pointed out that resources are part of the issue, stating:

> Social workers are not afforded appropriate resources. We are expected to have large caseloads and yield 'good enough' results. It would better serve our clients to have more time to devote to treatment planning for each client–being able to use EBP more–and if we were compensated more for our efforts.

Another practitioner raised the issue of access

by suggesting that "access to training at low cost or no cost especially when it comes to EBP" is an important element.

Changes in the Field

A total of 112 practitioners completed this item (missing = 40) creating 140 coded responses. Six themes were identified for the changes that practitioners expected for the next 10 years in the field of social work (see Table 3, p. 55), which included practice issues, funding, telehealth, professionalization of social work, education, and greater demand for social work services. (See Table 3, p. 55)

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Billing was a common subtheme, with one practitioner stating, "…[we] continue to have to do more with less due to insurance dictating therapy, both type and time available, based on statistics not client needs." Another practitioner added:

Hopefully, increased focus on client care and decreased focus on billing. This would require the government and insurance companies to acknowledge the importance of mental health care and provide the financial backing needed to properly fund and operate mental health clinics.

Similarly, practitioners were calling for changes to the way that social work is practiced and suggested that "new therapy models" should be used, as well as "moving more towards mindfulness based approaches," "much more integration of neurobiology in our clinical work," and "inclusion of consumers in program development." The final subtheme for practice issues centered around challenges in the field, such as "continued decline in quality due to a lack of accountability," and included comments like "I worry that the value of relationship over efficiency has been lost" and "I envision a greater demand for services and we as a field need to learn how to advocate more strongly to get the money/services/meet those needs."

Funding (14.2%) emerged as a theme where practitioners suggested that "fewer resources" and "loss of funding" will be the reality of future social work practice. One practitioner wrote that social work will need to "respond to the constant changes in funding streams, changes in welfare and health care," while another practitioner pointed to the need for "more permanent resources for clients." Access to services was also a concern, particularly for rural clients, substance use treatment, and services for veterans. The third theme found was related to greater development and use of telehealth (13.5%). One practitioner wrote, "I see social workers needing to adapt to the ever-increasing online culture–providing more telehealth services (counseling via webcams) and online consulting rather than in-person services." Practitioners also pointed out that "more use of technology and remote access to services" and "online and Skype sessions" could be used to reach more clients. "Practice outside the office" is the future of social work, and greater use of "apps and computer oriented education" will be part of practice.

Similar to funding, the professionalization of social work (12.8%) emerged as a theme. Again, legitimization and regulation were the key subthemes, with practitioners seeing a future whereby social workers enjoy greater "respect for their profession" and "are elevated to the same stature as other professions (e.g., nurses, doctors)." Another practitioner suggested the profession needs to "reconcile the regulation of social work practice, which appears to limit the amount of work for BSW practitioners…[and] licensing is not the complete answer to quality of practice, even at the graduate level."

The fifth theme was related to ways in which education needs to shift to meet the demands of the field (9.5%) by revising curriculum, including greater focus on diversity, increased ethical training, additional training on critical thinking, and elevating social work education to garner respect for the profession. One practitioner pointed out:

I see an exponential proliferation of online education in the field of social work as a means of engaging adult learners into these classroom settings and graduating new generations of social workers that have clear critical thinking skills and optimal writing abilities.

Another added, "hopefully through social work

education, social workers will be able to be revitalized and contribute an area of expertise that no other discipline has."

The final theme was greater demand for social work services (9.5%), which included more jobs; greater integration within organizations, particularly the school system; and more social workers in specific areas of practice, such as gerontology. "Increased demands for services, decreased amounts of time to deliver them, changes in age related demographics and specialty needs for older clientele" were pointed out as key changes for the field. Others suggested "I see a need for more multi-lingual social workers" and "an increase in social workers entering politics."

Social Work Education

A total of 109 practitioners completed this item (missing = 43), which resulted in 180 coded responses. Three themes were found on what is needed in social work education to meet the changing social landscape (see Table 4) and included changes to what students should know, how students are educated, and the way that students are taught. B – b (See Table 4, p. 56).

Changes to what students should know was the largest theme (54.4%), and the following subthemes emerged: clinical content and micro skills, macro/advocacy/policy-content and skills, diversity/social justice content and skills, research, and the realities of practice. Practitioners again pointed to the need for more EBP in clinical training, but they also suggested that students needed to learn "more intervention strategies," including "CBT" and "behavioral" approaches, as well as "innovative practices post hospitalization." Specifically, one practitioner suggested "more education on how to handle comorbid disorders such as substance abuse and bipolar or depression." A second participant advocated "continual inclusion of ever advancing EBP, allowing for adequate practice from generalist (micro, mezzo, macro) and clinical perspectives, and fostering of individual and ethical practice styles for each student." Additionally, some practitioners called for greater emphasis on the basic therapeutic skills, such as "human compassion, knowing how to truly listen and caring, not curing," while another added, "… because the social landscape is so diverse, social workers must have the humility–and we must

learn to teach this–to trust clients to be experts on their own lives."

While practitioners primarily focused on changes to clinical practice, macro practice came up a great deal, including advocacy for "more macro courses" and teaching "EBT macro practice." In addition, practitioners suggested macro related activities are necessary, such as "getting students more active in the political process," "developing stronger skills in advocacy to educate the general public on the needs of our clients and challenge biases," and "grant writing skills to be able to access funds to keep our services going." Diversity needs included greater training in general, but practitioners also suggested "more courses in social justice, oppression, and marginalization" and greater "focus on privilege." Other practitioners suggested the need for "increased…cultural empathy and inclusiveness in the curriculum" and "tools for successful communication across lines of cultural and class differences." The need for greater research training and evaluation skills was indicated a few times, as was the need to teach students about the realities of practice, such as "the push for reimbursement/payment," "heavy caseloads," and "workplace politics." In particular, one practitioner suggested that a needed change is "the ability of social workers to incorporate research in practice rather than relying predominantly on self report."

The second theme was related to the way students are educated (26.1%). One subtheme that emerged was the need for structural changes, which included greater opportunities to specialize, creating higher expectations and standards for students, and eliminating the advanced standing option. One criticism offered is that "social work is so broad" and "some more specialized training in various blocks of practice (case management, psychotherapy, policy, etc.) would be beneficial" for the field. A few practitioners raised concerns about student quality, stating that programs need to "raise the bar" and instill "good screening of the people accepted into social work programs." The second subtheme was focused on the need for a change in perspective, which was primarily centered on teaching students about how the world is changing; but practitioners also believed that students should be greater advocates for the profession of social work, stating, "a broader perspective of world views" is needed. Similarly,

one practitioner stated that curriculum should incorporate "more updated practices that work in our changing world." The third subtheme, faculty changes, mainly indicated a need for "educators who continue to keep their hand in practice" and "instructors remaining up to date with current research and trends." Lastly, the subtheme of addressing student needs included decreased tuition, more continuing education, and greater education on self-care. One practitioner touches on several of these issues, stating, "Schools need to reduce their tuition or find additional grant/ scholarship opportunities for students, enhance their continuing education and career services offerings."

Finally, changes to the way instructors teach (19.4%) included greater supervision and mentoring; community engagement and service learning placements; and class activities, such as more role plays, increased dialogue about differing viewpoints, and guest lectures from practitioners from different fields of practice. One practitioner stated that students need "actual good clinical supervision to improve [their] ability to transfer theory to practice." Another practitioner suggested that educational changes should include "mentoring from experienced social workers to prepare students for the realities of this work." Finally, practitioners called for greater community-based learning, with one practitioner pinpointing the need to "ensure that field placements are appropriate!! Not just placing students because it's a placement. That hurts the students learning and experience." And another added there is a need for "more community engagement and service learning to allow students to implement and critique their implementation of their learning." Others specifically pointed out the need for students to garner a greater understanding of what practice is really like before they graduate. This statement by one participant sums up this subtheme:

> Realistic situations [need to be] incorporated into the curriculum. Nothing prepares you for the realness of life after you graduate…you are going to have to be able to think on your toes like you never had before…social work is messy and a person will not be successful if they have been sheltered.

Another added:

> I think social work internships have to be reevaluated. I've had the experience of being both an intern AND several interns' supervisor over the course of my career… and I can say for sure that the 'social work simulation' provided to interns do not accurately reflect what they'll be seeing as practitioners."

Discussion

Our findings echo concerns that have loomed over the profession for a long time. That is, the lack of recognition and professional respect that social workers often feel working in the field, alongside the ongoing issue of poor working conditions, low pay, lack of resources, and heavy caseloads. While shifts have occurred in the field, especially for those holding a graduate degree, ongoing efforts to continue to advance the profession are still needed. Licensure has helped move social work to gain greater legitimacy, but national title protection for both the title and practice of social work as well as better pay are necessary. All 50 states and the District of Columbia (D.C.) have varying types of social work licensure that can include licensing individuals from an associate to a master's degree in social work, yet only 36 states have title protection for social workers (NASWCT, 2019). In some states, for example New York, the licensure title is protected (LMSW; LCSW), but not the title of "social worker" (Worsley, McLaughlin, Beddoe, & Teater, in press). Licensure differs significantly by state, with some states offering both a generalist type social work practice license (e.g., LSW) and a clinical practice license (e.g., LCSW), but others offer only licensure for master's level social workers (see www.socialworkguide.org/licensure/). The lack of a consistent national regulatory body or set of guidelines of the profession of social work across the US has been argued to have implications for solidarity within the profession, public perception of social work, and identification as a social worker (Lightfoot et al., 2016; Worsely et al., in press).

Collaborative associations between social work organizations, including both professional and scientific, are helping to advance the profession, and the leaders of these organizations are working together to "apply the collective strengths of the profession and are setting the profession on a very positive trajectory" (Robbins et al., 2016, p. 388). In fact, current and historical

efforts over the past 30 years have created a stronger presence at the national level and facilitated a higher profile for the profession (Robbins et al., 2016). To further this trajectory, Brekke (2014) proposes a new definition of social work which would seek to advance social work as a discrete scientific discipline with its own knowledge base. That is, social work should be defined as an integrative scientific discipline that is comprised of a profession of trained social workers who work across the practice continuum with a specific focus on vulnerable populations. Allowing for this dual purpose of the profession elevates its position to other social sciences, such as sociology or psychology, without losing focus on the mission to help others. Through this type of shift, the profession not only gains greater acceptance as an evidence-based practice, but also elevates the profession in the minds of the public (Brekke, 2012; 2014).

Relatedly, practitioners offered a range of educational needs that should be addressed in training students to work in the field now, as well as how curriculum will need to change to meet future demands. In terms of current practice, respondents were critical of social work and its inability to "think outside the box." Some felt that social workers too often get stuck using the same methods for every client, which does not work, and they need to be willing to learn new strategies. To address some of these practice concerns, curricular changes were suggested, such as tackling the ongoing disconnect between practice, policy, and research and the lack of integration of academic learning into practice. Field practicums are often thought of as the place where this integration of knowledge and skills occurs, and as such, it is designated as the signature pedagogy. Perhaps a shift in thinking needs to occur. For example, Larrison and Korr (2013) argue against the notion that field is the signature pedagogy for social work and present a framework for social work education that focuses on approaches to teaching and learning that socialize students into the profession. That is, training students to think and perform like a social worker and develop a professional self is the main goal of social work education, and "professional self-development…[is] integral to these educational processes (Larrison & Korr, 2013, p. 198). Further, this framework seeks to incorporate practitioner knowledge and action as

an essential component of the educational process, and while field is critical for social work education, it is actually the implicit and explicit curricula that facilitates the development of a professional social work self; this is the signature pedagogy of social work (Larrison & Korr, 2013). An integration of pedagogical approaches is required to create competent social work practitioners. Students require greater connection between "conceptual and empirical material, cognitive and affective processes, and practice behavior that point[s] out the interrelationships between these various dimensions rather than address them separately" (Robbins et al., 2016, p. 392). The use of carefully designed simulations could be used for this purpose, as well as a way to evaluate educational outcomes, and could become the future of social work education.

Practitioners in this study were concerned about clinical content and knowledge integration for micro practice, but they also pointed to the need for macro-based knowledge, including more practical activities related to the political/policy process as well as additional content on advocacy and policy issues. Echoing practitioners' concern that macro practice is not emphasized enough in social work education, Lein, Uehara, Lightfoot, Lawlor, and Williams (2017) point to the need for social workers to gain greater skills in this area, but note that the profession as a whole also needs to develop increased space for policy analysis and research if we truly want to have an impact on policy development. Macro practice often takes a back seat to micro practice likely for practical reasons, such as a greater pool of students interested in working directly with clients and fewer faculty with expertise and practice experience in this area, but also because of the general emphasis on micro practice over macro practice at the individual state level as evidenced by an examination of state definitions of social work (Hill, Fogel, Plitt Donaldson, & Erickson, 2017). Nonetheless, the social work profession should have a significant voice in the policy and political arena, as these are essential to creating a paradigm shift in social services and the general population's perspective on those who are vulnerable and oppressed, including those living in low socioeconomic statuses, LGBTQI+, women, children, people experiencing homelessness, and older adults, just to name a few.

In addition to the need for more respect as a social worker, practitioners noted that the changes they see happening to the field in the next 10 years will be greater demand for social work services, especially gero-specific practice, and the importance of technology, including the increased role that telehealth will play. In an editorial by Robbins, Robbins, Coe Regan, Williams, Smyth, and Bogo (2016), Smyth points to the lack of technological literacy as a key issue holding back social work as a profession; and given its ubiquity throughout society, digital literacy is required for social work practice, not an optional specialty. However, schools of social work often do not train their students for the reality of this practice issue, and the current competency regarding technology leans toward ethics (see Curington & Hitchcock, 2017 for an educational toolkit on the use of social media in social work practice). While ethics are of course important, this competency says nothing of the reflective skills necessary for digital literacy. According to Smyth, "we can only lead in this century if we are educating social workers on [technology], which includes, but isn't limited to ethics" (Robbins et al., 2016, p. 391).

Practitioners were also hopeful that new types of services would be offered that incorporated a diversity of practice approaches, such as mindfulness, preventative care, greater focus on empowerment, and increase in EBP. Greater research is needed to create evidence-based practices that address treatment and prevention both within and in collaboration with other disciplines (Lein, Uehara, Lightfoot, Lawlor, & Williams, 2017). Research and education are iterative in nature, yet a clear way to assess environmental changes and how this creates shifts in the profession as well as education and research is absent from social work. "For research and education to be relevant, we must proactively anticipate social and environmental changes and make relevant complementary adjustments in response" (Lein et al., 2017, p. 68). Similarly, Lein et al. (2017) call for greater evidence-based practice whereby a mode of communication exists between practitioners and researchers, yet they point more directly at national organizations to bridge this gap instead of looking toward community-based efforts that can help disseminate information, or the challenges within higher education for academic researchers to write and disseminate research findings to practitioners (Teater, 2017). A free and easily accessible database for social workers to learn about new interventions is not a new problem, as currently the majority of intervention research is published in academic journals that require library affiliation for access (Teater, 2017).

Practitioners' focus on curricular changes is important, but perhaps greater faculty-student interaction is one of the ways in which social work education needs to evolve. As Kezar and Maxey (2014) purport, increased interaction with full-time faculty members is typically of higher quality and greater depth, which in turn helps to facilitate professional development through mentorship; however, overreliance on adjunct faculty, which typically have less student interaction, can stifle the nurturing of these important relationships. It is imperative that faculty raise the question—are we educating our students for the realities of practice within our community as well as within the broader social context? In an editorial, Lein et al. (2017) point to the need to "focus on innovations in programs, models of education, partners that make social work more responsive to big societal needs and make our schools of social work more sustainable" (p. 68). Yet as the authors call for academic, researcher, and organizational leaders to create this change, one group is glaringly absent—the voice of practitioners. While the authors suggest that a "systematic understanding of our labor force and our practice environment is critical to forecasting" social change, they do not elevate the unique perspective of those who are currently practicing and how they see the field within the context of social change (Lein et al., 2017, p. 68). This is a missed opportunity given that many researchers and academics are often removed from practice (Teater, 2017) and the realities of how things have changed since they left this work for academia. They also can provide key information on ways that education is not preparing current students for practice realities. Field instructors work closely with students and may be able to recognize patterns of deficiency across these experiences—essential information for social work programs.

Limitations

The findings from this study should be

considered within the context of its limitations. First, our sample is not representative of practicing social workers given our recruitment methods and sample size. Thus, the results are not generalizable. While our sample is not representative of all social workers, the themes point to both ongoing issues in social work as well as how the future of practice may look and often echo issues posited by academic leaders and researchers. Their voice is important in shaping the ways that curriculum is meeting the demands of the field. Future research should seek to gain a larger sample of practicing social workers to garner more information regarding their practice experiences. Regional differences as well as various fields of practice likely influence the way in which respondents have and would answer these questions; thus, a larger sample would allow for comparisons and the ability to draw broader conclusions. Second, the open-ended questions used for this analysis were part of a larger survey, and participants did not have the opportunity to clarify and expand on their ideas. The themes of this research could be used in future qualitative studies whereby focus groups or interviews with practitioners were used to explore their perspectives more deeply. In turn, these findings could support a larger study of practitioners utilizing quantitative methods to gather their chief concerns, views on the future, and ideas about social work education.

Conclusion

The findings from this study illustrate the unique perspective of practicing social workers and provide areas of growth for social work education particularly how students are trained for the field. The development of a professional identity and the ability to integrate and apply this knowledge in practice situations is quintessential to education as well as maintaining a strong work force. In addition, rigorous education and standards for social workers helps elevate the profession in the eyes of the public as well as prospective students and faculty. Our findings add to the literature by providing specific ideas about the profession and point to the need for more research in this area.

Note: [a]Sample sizes are different on each variable due to missing data.

Table 1: Demographics Characteristics of Sample

Variable	Mean	SD	%	n[a]
Gender				
Female			85.6	119
Male			14.4	20
Age (range = 23 to 74)	42.4	13.7		137
Ethnicity/Race				
African American			3.7	5
Asian American			1.5	2
Biracial/ Multiracial			5.2	7
White/Caucasian			83.4	112
Education				
MSW/MSSW			77.9	106
DSW/PhD			12.5	17
BSW/BSSW			8.1	11
Region of the Country				
Northeast			35.9	47
Southeast			17.6	23
Northwest			3.8	5
Southwest			6.1	8
Mid-Am.			36.6	48
Social Work License (yes)			80.2	101
License Type				
LCSW			61.8	68
LMSW			14.5	16
LSW			10.9	12
Other			9.1	10
LISW			3.6	4
Number of years in practice (range = 1 to 50)	13.9	11.5		140
Social Work Position				
Direct practice/ frontline			58.0	80
Other			19.6	27
Director			13.0	18
Supervisor/ management			9.4	13
Primary Work Environment				
Nonprofit			32.1	44
Higher education			16.8	23
Government			15.3	21
Medical/ palliative			12.4	17
Private practice/ consulting			11.7	16

Table 2: Current Practice Issues (*n*=114)

Themes/Subthemes	%	*n*[a]
Education	24.3	51
Curriculum changes		
Supervision		
Skills and methods		
Working conditions	21.4	45
Income and safety		
Lack of opportunity		
Burnout		
Limited resources and access	17.1	36
Working with clients	14.3	30
Specific populations		
Complex issues and needs		
Relationships, boundaries, confidentiality		
Relevance of the profession	10.0	21
Regulation		
Legitimization		
Social problems/social justice	7.6	16
Stigma		
Cultural humility		
Systemic problems		
Evidence Based Practice (EBP)	5.2	11

Note: [a]Sample sizes for the themes do not match the number of responses on the question due to multiple themes in one response.

Table 3: Changes to the Field (*n* = 112)

Themes/Subthemes	%	*n*[a]
Practice Issues	40.5	60
Changes in services offered		
Increase EBP		
Insurance, billing		
Neuroscience		
Challenges		
Expansion of social work functions		
Funding	14.2	21
Resources		
Access to service		
Telehealth	13.5	20
Professionalization of social work	12.8	19
Legitimatization		
Regulation		
Education	9.5	14
Curriculum changes		
Elevation of social work education		
Greater demand for social work services	9.5	14
Gero-specific practice		

Note: [a]Sample sizes for the themes do not match the number of responses on the question due to multiple themes in one response.

Table 4: Social Work Education (*n* = 109)

Themes/Subthemes	%	*n*[a]
Changes to what students should know	54.4	98
Clinical content and micro skills		
Macro/advocacy/policy-content and skills		
Diversity/social justice content and skills		
Research		
Realities of practice		
Changes to how we educate students	26.1	47
Structural changes		
Perspective change		
Making faculty changes		
Addressing student needs		
Changes to the way we teach	19.4	35
Supervision/mentoring		
Community engagement/service learning		
Class activities		

Note: [a]Sample sizes for the themes do not match the number of responses on the question due to multiple themes in one response.

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