

# ZÁKLAD PRAKTICKEJ VÝUČBY V PROCESĚ VZDELÁVANIA SOCIÁLNYCH PRACOVNÍKOV – SKÚSENOSTI RZESZOWSKEJ ŠKOLY INŽINIERSTVA A EKONOMIKY

## ESSENCE OF ON-THE-JOB TRAINING IN THE PROCESS OF EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL WORKERS – EXPERIENCE OF RZESZÓW SCHOOL OF ENGINEERING AND ECONOMICS

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### **Abstrakt**

*Praktické vzdelávanie je veľmi dôležitou súčasťou v poľskom vzdelávacom systéme budúcich sociálnych pracovníkov. Cieľom tohto vzdelávania je konfrontovať študentov s ich znalosťami a zručnosťami získanými v praxi, rovnako ako im poskytnúť nové vedomosti, zručnosti a postoje, ktoré budú veľmi užitočné v ich budúcej profesionálnej kariére. Cieľom tejto práce je analyzovať faktory ovplyvňujúce proces realizácie praktického vzdelávania študentov sociálnej práce a predpokladané efekty tohto vzdelávania. Hlavnými faktormi sú: sylabus, osnova vzdelávacieho programu, študentov postoj k praktickému vzdelávaniu, postoj inštitúcie/organizácie k praktikantom a praktickému vzdelávaniu. Príspevok tiež obsahuje pokus odpovedať na otázku: Ktoré faktory by sa mali zlepšiť a ako by sa malo zlepšiť praktické vzdelávanie, aby bolo efektívnejšie.*

### **Kľúčové slová**

*Sociálna práca, sociálny pracovník, praktické vzdelávanie.*

### **Abstract**

*On-the-job training is a very important part in the Polish education and training system for future social workers. The aim of such training is to make the students confront their knowledge and skills acquired with the reality as well as provide them with new knowledge, skills and attitudes that will be extremely useful in the graduates' future professional career. The aim of this paper is to analyse the factors influencing the process of carrying out on-the-job training for social work students and the anticipated effects of such training. Among other things, the factors include the following: the syllabus, the training programme in general outline, the student's attitude to on-the-job training, institutions'/organisations' attitude to trainees and student training. The paper also includes an attempt to answer the question: Which factors should be improved and how on-the-job training should be improved to be more beneficial.*

### **Key words**

*Social work (field of study), social worker, on-the-job training.*

### **Introduction**

Social work is defined today as professional activity, focused on environmental work, strengthening human capital and effectively extracting, starting, activating the potential in local environments and its inhabitants. In the Act on social aid of 2004, presently binding in Poland, it has been described as: “professional activity, aimed at helping children and families in strengthening or recovering the ability to function in the society by performing appropriate social roles and creation of conditions favourable for this objective”<sup>158</sup>. Contemporary social work, due to fast social transformations, emergence of new social problems and expanding circle of people and entire groups endangered with marginalization and social exclusion, must constantly broaden and modify the range of services, forms and methods of social work, in order to respond to the current needs of the society as well as possible. In connection with the

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<sup>158</sup> Act on Social Aid of 12 March 2004 on social aid (Journal of Laws of 15 April 2004, No. 64, item 593 as amended)

above, the professionalism of social work must be strengthened by professional education of future social workers. This training is a great responsibility of universities which, in creating its curricula of studies at the major of social work, should take into account, on the one hand, social transformations which have a huge impact on new demand for services, forms and methods of social work, while on the other hand, requirements of the contemporary labour market. According to Jacek Piekarski "in the days of various social changes, expansion of the scale of needs in the area of social services, and hence the growth in demand for highly qualified staff of social workers, the educational offer must change. This offer should consider not only cognitive and research commitment of sciences having their application in social work but also the needs of training professional skills and encouraging people to active operations, competent in their domain"<sup>159</sup>.

## 1. The essence of on-the-job training

A social workers can be, in Poland, a person who has graduated from a college for workers of social services, higher education studies at the major of social work or (until 31 December 2013) has graduated from higher education studies with the specialty of social work at the majors of: pedagogy, special pedagogy, political science, social policy, sociology and family science<sup>160</sup>. In Poland, in accordance with the standards of education at the major of social work – the first degree studies, a condition to obtain the qualifications of a social workers is execution of on-the-job training that should not last less than 8 weeks<sup>161</sup>. The principles and the form of on-the-job training is determined by the unit of the university conducting education. The Regulation of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy of. 25th January 2008 on specialization preparing for the profession of a social worker implemented in higher education schools, specifies that the on-the-job training cannot be shorter than 240 hours<sup>162</sup>. Hence, it can be seen that on-the-job training in the legislative provisions in Poland is a very significant part of the education process of future social workers.

On-the-job training should be a key element of preparation of future specialists, also within the scope of social work, because it enables students to acquire experience in specific professional situations. On-the-job training gives the possibility to confront theory with professional reality. It can constitute a starting point for the learning process, where theoretical knowledge results from professional experience and is their generalization. As early as in the 1950s, B. Suchodolski emphasized that it is the on-the-job training which facilitates acquisition of conviction as to the purposefulness of theoretical knowledge<sup>163</sup>. A significant importance of on-the-job training is also mentioned by D. Fish, who understands it as the source of knowledge about conditions, expectations and tasks, which should be implemented in a given workplace, as well as the possibility to verify own hypotheses and a motivating factor. On-the-job training referred to by D. Fish is also a source of experience, which is very important, an opportunity to gain knowledge on own potential in a given profession<sup>164</sup>. On-the-job training is described in a very interesting and apt manner in the article by N. Bednarz "the on-the-job training may also be the area for application of theory and then it is a measure of suitability of theory. On-the-job training, giving the opportunity to

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<sup>159</sup> Piekarski J., *Problem wiedzy w profesjonalnej pracy socjalnej (Problem of knowledge in professional social work)*, [in:] *Profesje społeczne w Europie. Z problemów kształcenia i działania, (Social professions in Europe. Problems of education and action)* Marynowicz – Hetka E., Wagner A., Piekarski J. (ed.), Katowice, Wyd. Śląsk, 2001, p. 229.

<sup>160</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>161</sup> [http://www.bip.nauka.gov.pl/\\_gALLERY/24/01/2401/84\\_praca\\_socjalna.pdf](http://www.bip.nauka.gov.pl/_gALLERY/24/01/2401/84_praca_socjalna.pdf)

<sup>162</sup> Regulation of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy of 25 January 2008 on specialization preparing for profession of a social worker implemented in higher education schools.

<sup>163</sup> Suchodolski B., *Wychowanie dla przyszłości (Education for the future)*, Warsaw, Wyd. PWN, 1959.

<sup>164</sup> Fish D., *Kształcenie poprzez praktykę (Training through practice)*, Warsaw, Wyd. CODN, 1996.

combine theory with practice, forces the need for continuous movement of the learners from observation of objects, phenomena to searching for methods of executing specific tasks. It enables formation of the ability to use the acquired knowledge in action. On the other hand, it involves development of thinking of the learners, with their reasoning, the skill of predicting on the basis of already obtained news" <sup>165</sup>.

Owing to the special character of the profession of a social worker, on-the-job training should have a very special place in each program of education at the major of social work. As we know, the objective of a social worker, is operation focused on providing assistance and support to units and social groups. This action is very often of an interdisciplinary character, it is oriented on many different group of clients, which requires a very broad knowledge, skills and developed, appropriate basics. On-the-job training of students of the social work major is an opportunity to become familiar with various environments, very often completely new for trainees, where this work is conducted, with new methods of work which a student knows only in theory and with so far unknown groups of clients, along with their problems, sometimes very complex. As stated by the authors of the item Practical Education in Social Work "on-the-job training enables risking going beyond the content of the curriculum, controlled and supported by a teacher and often becomes the basis for acceptance of a specific style of performing future professional work (...), the process of education can be linked to life and enriched with invaluable feedback, allowing to better specify the educational needs of students<sup>166</sup>". These needs are very complex, but most of them, according to experts in this field, can be included in four of the following categories:

1. Use of theory in practice. On-the-job training is an opportunity to use in action one of the known methods or a certain theoretical concept.
2. Learning through practice. This category includes development of practical skills, such as conducting an interview, gathering information and effective communication.
3. Learning about procedures of action of an institution. Learning, related to a specific institution, concerning procedures typical of its operations such as e.g. court procedures or procedures related to protection of children etc.
4. Education in the emotional scope. Identifying, responding and learning to deal with emotional effects of conducted interventions and the effect they have on the emotional situation of a social aid worker<sup>167</sup>.

On-the-job training brings undoubtedly great benefits to students, but also, which it is worth noting, to the university itself. Cooperation of universities with institutions accepting trainees may result in exchange of information, instructions for universities, what should be possibly improved, changed in the curricula, so that they meet, as well as possible, the requirements of the labour market and the actual demand of social aid institutions for graduates at the major of social work with specific competences.

## **2. From experience of organizations of on-the-job training at the major of social work in Rzeszów School of Engineering and Economics**

Rzeszów School of Engineering and Economic School has been educating future social workers at the level of first degree higher education studies (bachelor studies) already for seven years. In the beginning, education took place at the specialization of social work, at the

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<sup>165</sup> Bednarz N., *Praktyki zawodowe-za i przeciw (Professional on-the-job training - pros and cons)*, [http://www.fundacja.edu.pl/organizacja/\\_referaty/23.pdf](http://www.fundacja.edu.pl/organizacja/_referaty/23.pdf)

<sup>166</sup> Thomson N., Osada M., Anderson B., *Praktyczna nauka pracy socjalnej (Practical training in social work)*, Katowice, Wyd. Naukowe „Śląsk”, 1999, p.7

<sup>167</sup> Ibidem, p. 34

major of family science, however, for three years future employees of social aid institutions have been educated at the major of social work.

On-the-job training in and organization of the WSI-E studies is a very important element. Students of the social work major execute on-the-job training within eight weeks, according to standards of education for the social work major specified by the Polish Ministry of Higher Education. Detailed assumptions, objectives and ways of documenting on-the-job training and the manner of controlling are determined in the Framework Program of On-the-job training of WSI-E.

On-the-job training is divided into three years of the studies. On-the-job training is executed with the following breakdown: three weeks during the second semester, three weeks during the fourth semester and two weeks during the sixth semester. A significant fact is that the program of on-the-job training is designed in such a way that it corresponds to the level of knowledge of a student, which results from the assumptions of the studies curriculum for a given semester. Although students starting on-the-job training have various levels of knowledge and experience, it is important to emphasize and assume, in accordance with Jeff Hopkins from the University of Keel, a significant fact that there are many common elements typical of all kinds of on-the-job training. These are:

- people who become clients of social aid, being in specific life situations,
- problems which these persons bring with them,
- place where on-the-job training takes place,
- process of providing assistance,
- professional identity,
- personal attitude towards the needs of others <sup>168</sup>.

Students of WSI-E execute on-the-job training according to the following guidelines. On-the-job training during the second semester is observational in nature. It is a kind of introduction of a student to the issues of providing services related to social work. Its main assumptions are :

- Familiarizing a student with the whole of activities of the selected institution.
- Familiarization with conditions of functioning of an institution and with the specificity of its operation: the structure and the organization of an institution, the kind of provided services, the forms of work in an institution, the specific character in demographic-economic and the psychological-social aspect of people using the aid institutions, the degree of satisfaction of the needs of people using the aid in a given institution, environmental functions.
- Familiarization with formal-legal bases of functioning of an institution.
- Observing activities undertaken in an institution, assistance therein under supervision of a supervisor of on-the-job training in an institution.
- Observing worker-client relations in the practice of everyday life
- Cooperation in recognizing individual and social needs of people requiring support.
- Modelling skills with regard to integration of theoretical and practical knowledge.
- Modelling skills of effective communication in organization, cooperation with other specialists, work in an interdisciplinary team.
- Modelling desired interpersonal attitudes and emotional commitment to the process of professional preparation.

Through such a form of on-the-job training, a student acquires the basic knowledge about daily aspects of social work and acquires basic skills concerning diagnosing, conducting

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<sup>168</sup> Ibidem, p. 36

interviews, preparation of reports. A student becomes familiar with various groups of clients, their needs and services offered for them.

On-the-job training during the fourth and the sixth semester is on-the-job training of observation-assistant nature. A student, during the fourth and the sixth semester, already has a deeper knowledge about social work, and thus the scope of on-the-job training is already much broader. As the name indicates, a student not only observes functioning in a given institution but also gets actively involved in the actions conducted there, under supervision of a supervisor on behalf of an institution, however, he or she has already a greater freedom of action. Main assumptions of observation-assistant on-the-job training are:

- Deepening knowledge of methods and forms with regard to social work.
- Active participation of an organization in activities taken in an institution, under supervision of a supervisor of on-the-job training in an institution.
- Active involvement in professional activities understood as the ability to discuss current matters significant for institutions' functioning.
- Establishing contact with persons and families using social aid provided by an institution /as far as possible/.
- Cooperation in recognizing, fulfilling and activating individual and social needs of people requiring support.

In WSI-E, a student makes, on his or her own, selection of an institution, in which he or she intends to do the on-the-job training. However, it is recommended that on-the-job training was implemented in an institution which, with regard to performed functions and undertaken tasks, is most similar to the social work major. Recommended institutions are: social aid centres, regional social policy centres, family assistance centres, emergency intervention institutions, social aid homes, orphanages, community centres, adoptive-care centres, special and integration institutions for children and adults, centres for foreigners, hospices, non-governmental organizations implementing tasks of social aid, social work units at hospitals and health care plants, court probation officers' teams at District Courts, social integration clubs, social integration centres. A very important condition for selection of a place of on-the-job training is the fact that, in the place of on-the-job training a social worker must be employed, who, at the same time, should be the supervisor of the trainee during on-the-job training.

From the experience of organizing on-the-job training by WSI-E, it seems that the students most often execute on-the-job training in such institutions as: Municipal Social Aid Centres, District Social Aid Centres, Social Aid Homes, Senior Homes, Community Centres, Orphanages. The choice of students results, on the one hand, from the greatest availability of institutions as defined by their number in Podkarpackie Province, that is the area from which the students come and from the openness of the directors of these institutions to trainees. This openness or its lack result from the specific nature of a given institution and the nature of work, and its clients, which allows or does not allow to accept, for on-the-job training, a given number of trainees, and sometimes too many trainees might disturb the peace of clients in a given institution.

Rzeszów School of Engineering and Economics cares for the best possible implementation of on-the-job training, cooperates with many institutions and non-governmental organizations, which accept students for on-the-job training. This cooperation consists in constant dialogue and annual consultations which aim at familiarization of the institution with their place in a comprehensive structure of education of a student, responding to any inquiries from the institutions accepting students for on-the-job training, discussing any problems that appeared recently in connection with on-the-job training in an institutions,

obtaining valuable feedback, from the point of view of the university, which enables to better specify the educational needs of students. On-the-job training thus brings undoubtedly great benefits to students, but also to the university itself. Cooperation of the university with institutions accepting trainees results in exchange of information, instructions for universities, what should be possibly improved, changed in the education curricula, so that they met, as well as possible, the requirements of the labour market and, at the same time, the demand of social aid institutions for graduates of the social work major with specific competences.

A very significant person in the implementation of on-the-job training is the substantive coordinator on behalf of the university. The supervisor plays the main role in the implementation of on-the-job training, therefore it is important that it was a person accordingly prepared for this job. A coordinator must know the special character of social work and institutions offering support in this respect. At the same time, he or she must have developed abilities in the scope of interpersonal communications to have appropriate contact both with students and with institutions accepting trainees. He or she should also demonstrate enthusiasm, involvement and creativity. At numerous universities, unfortunately, it can be noticed that the coordinators of on-the-job trainings are accidental persons, not prepared substantively to perform this function, which, in consequence, is reflected in the quality of on-the-job training itself. During on-the-job training the students have the possibility of constant contact with him or her, and he or she is also in constant contact with institutions accepting students for on-the-job training. The coordinator, in the event of any problem during on-the-job training, helps students to solve it. Similarly, an institution accepting students for on-the-job training may contact the substantive coordinator.

Implementation time of on-the-job training is a difficult period both for a student and an institution accepting him or her for on-the-job training. A student finds himself or herself in a new situation and place, often, at the beginning, he or she is exposed to stress related to new responsibilities, activities or contact with a social aid client, known previously only in theory. The institution must ensure that the trainee implemented the program of on-the-job training, had proper conditions in this respect, and, by the way, that it did not "make trouble" for himself or herself, for a client and for an institution. All difficulties cannot be, of course, avoided, but through good and systematic contact between the university and the institution, they can be minimized.

From several years of experience of Rzeszów School of Engineering and Economics in organizing on-the-job training for students of social work major, it seems that, in general, both the students and the institutions are satisfied with the course of on-the-job training. However, there is a group of problems which keep reoccurring, to a smaller or larger extent, during their annual implementation. From the opinion of the students, it seems that most often they find it inconvenient that they get a workload which is too small for them, which, in turn, is caused by fear of an institution of excessive exploitation of students. This problem is often discussed with institutions accepting students for on-the-job training, however, it is very difficult or practically impossible to create a universal formula, which would allow precisely to specify the optimal level of obligations of the trainee. Another problem often mentioned by the students is too high a load with typical office work such as: photocopying documents, preparation of postal correspondence, supplementing documentation. Unfortunately, as for now, in the Polish circumstances of exercising the social worker profession, these activities, if necessary, must also be performed by social workers themselves, despite the fact that they have little to do with real social work. The above issue should be explained to students by the supervisor even before the start of on-the-job training. The third signalled problem is no permanent place for the trainee in the space of a given institution, understood as no permanent desk or room. The existence of the above problem is confirmed by the institutions themselves,

but this is not due to ill will of employees of a given institution, but unfortunately due to the problems related to premises in a given institution.

Despite problems and inconveniences reported by the students, students are, however, happy with on-the-job training, they admit that as a result of experience gained in their course, they became even more sure that they chose a proper educational path, which would enable them to find professional fulfilment. This fulfilment depends to a great extent on the student, but great responsibility is vested also in us, organizers of on-the-job training: universities and institutions accepting them for on-the-job training. Academic teachers must make the effort so that the knowledge transferred by them was as adequate as possible to the needs of a student, the reality of on-the-job training and the actual social work. Social workers, on the other hand, should not defend themselves against theoretical analysis and critical examination of their everyday work. Theoretical education and practical training are not independent elements in the process of education of future social services<sup>169</sup>. According to Robert Harris, these two elements have a place in preparing the students for the future profession. However, if we think about the real cooperation, we will have to go above the division into theory and practice and look at them as means for leading to a common goal<sup>170</sup>. This goal are professional social workers, whose competences should correspond to the needs of today's changing society.

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<sup>169</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 82

<sup>170</sup> Harris R., *Education and Training: What is the Balance?*, University of Hull, 1988