

Do the Internships of Social Work Students Contribute to Their Professional Identity?

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Abstract

The text deals with the current topic of the professional identity of social workers, focusing on the phase in which professional identity is formed during undergraduate studies. The work seeks an answer to the question: How do third-year students (higher vocational and BA level of study) interpret their professional identity after completing a two-month internship? This question assumes that student work experience contributes to the formation of their professional identity. The work focuses on the importance of practical training during studies in the process of forming the professional identity of future social workers.

The main theme of the theoretical part of the paper is identity as an initial concept for understanding professional (personal) identity, which plays a significant role at the start of the professional development of an educational institution. The subject of the empirical part of this work will be the search for the answer to the main research question: How does the two-month internship in the third year of students' studies affect their notion of professional identity? In other words, how does a student become a social worker who understands their professional identity and its relevance in coping with the practical demands of the social work profession?

The article responds to the changing needs and innovations in the tertiary education of social work students as well as to the demands of social work practice (employers), which is calling for a change in the professional training of future social workers

in the context of changing conditions for the performance of social work and social services, both in theoretical and practical training. Practical training requires flexible, creative, and adaptable social workers in whom an anchored professional identity can help manage the high job requirements and lead to increased resilience in coping with the demands of practice.

Key words: identity as a socialisation process, professional identity, individual (personal) professional identity, teaching methods – reflection, self-reflection, practical education.

Přispívá odborná praxe studentů oboru sociální práce k jejich profesní identitě?

Abstrakt

Text se zabývá aktuálním tématem profesní identity sociálních pracovníků se zaměřením na fázi formování profesní identity během pregraduálního studia. Článek hledá odpověď na otázku: Jak studenti třetího ročníku (vyššího odborného a bakalářského stupně studia) interpretují svou profesní identitu po absolvování dvouměsíční praxe? Tato otázka předpokládá, že pracovní zkušenost studentů přispívá k formování jejich profesní identity. Článek se zaměřuje na význam praktické přípravy během studia v procesu formování profesní identity budoucích sociálních pracovníků.

Hlavním tématem teoretické části studie je identita jako výchozí koncept pro pochopení profesní (osobní) identity, která hraje významnou roli na počátku profesního rozvoje vzdělávací instituce. Předmětem empirické části práce je hledání odpovědi na hlavní výzkumnou otázku: Jak studenty ovlivňuje dvouměsíční praxe ve třetím ročníku studia v jejich pojetí profesní identity? Jinými slovy, jak se ze studenta stává sociální pracovník, který chápe svou profesní identitu a její význam při zvládání praktických nároků profese sociální práce?

Článek reaguje na měnící se potřeby a inovace v terciárním vzdělávání studentů sociální práce i na požadavky praxe sociální práce (zaměstnavatelů), která volá po změně profesní přípravy budoucích sociálních pracovníků v kontextu měnících se podmínek výkonu sociální práce a sociálních služeb, a to jak v teoretické, tak praktické přípravě. Praktická příprava vyžaduje flexibilní, kreativní a adaptabilní sociální pracovníky, u nichž ukotvená profesní identita může pomoci zvládat vysoké pracovní nároky a vést ke zvýšení odolnosti při zvládání požadavků praxe.

Klíčová slova: identita jako process socializace, profesní identita, individuální (osobní) profesní identita, metody výuky – reflexe, sebereflexe, praktická výuka.

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Introduction

In my working life, I have a fundamental need to belong somewhere professionally. At the start of my career, I was a social worker in a residential facility, in various social services in contact with clients and in a managerial position. For the last ten years, this clearly and firmly articulated professional identity as a social worker has also included the role of teacher at a higher vocational school of social work. Over the years, I have come to realise and continue to realise how significant and important a role I play as a teacher and how strongly I can influence my students' perceptions of social work. I often ask myself: "How much responsibility do I have in the process of shaping students for their future profession?"

I am sure that this is a key role, and if it is not systemically well grasped, we as teachers can miss an important chance to guide students in identifying with the profession in their work. We are the first ones who can fill students with enthusiasm, appeal to the need for confident social workers in the field, show them a close relationship with the profession, and build a relationship with it throughout their professional life. I assign equal importance to practical education, where we are joined by experienced mentors and social workers from practice who often have a significant influence on students in the process of "becoming a social worker", especially through their example, lived values, and practical skills – practice gives students practical experience that they value highly.

Professional identity is a controversial topic in the field of social work. Social work is a multiparadigmatic and multidisciplinary field, which makes it all the more difficult to find a clear identity for the profession, the direction of the field, and its prestige. Prestige can become motivation for deciding to pursue a career in social work and embarking on the path of forming one's own professional identity. In my opinion, we are also missing an alliance among social workers who have the courage, creativity, and willingness to proudly identify themselves with the field, referred to by Růžicková and Musil (2009) as collective identity. Therefore, I see the topic of professional identity as crucial in terms of the future development of the field, and I am aware of the commitment I have as a teacher and tutor of practical training.

This article focuses on important moments – practical experience – that influence professional identity, and I hope that the research investigation in the second part of this paper will contribute to a discussion on the importance of building the professional identity of social work students in schools and help it to be grasped by management and teachers in a conscious and structured way, to be conceptualised in such a way that education is set up to ensure that students enter the world of work from school with a clear vision of who they are and how they are to develop this concept further and not let it die out.

1 Theoretical foundations

The concept of *identity* was chosen as the theoretical starting point, first in general terms, then from sociological and psychological perspectives. The reason for this choice is to understand what identity actually is in a person's life and what influences it. In the context of identity, the following subchapter will focus on the *identity of the field*, in this case the identity of the field of social work. The topic of the next subchapter is *individual professional identity*, which can be seen as the final stage of identifying with the social work profession and accepting "being a social worker" as one's own. The chapter on *reflection and self-reflection* as useful tools for self-development is also important, as it makes it possible to work with the topic of professional identity systematically, in the long term, and ideally even after leaving the education system, when each social worker must take responsibility for their own professional development. The final chapter focuses on the importance of practical training in the process of the formation of professional identity.

1.1 Identity

It is difficult to choose one concise and all-embracing definition of identity. Identity can be seen in different contexts, e.g. what it represents, its history, how it is manifested, and how it changes. There are various strategies to formulate the theoretical concept of identity of which many other concepts and types of definitions are then derived. For these reasons, it is difficult to answer the question of what identity actually represents and what identity actually is.

The notion of identity is one of the fundamental concepts of our time and it would be hard to find a person who has never encountered this concept. From the perspective of developmental psychology, identity was traditionally considered a task in adolescence, a kind of theoretical construct without practical application. However, as a result of rapid changes in recent decades, there is now an increasing emphasis on lifelong **identity construction**. Identity is taking on a more personal meaning for an ever-increasing number of people concerned with their self-worth and relationship to themselves (Macek, 2003).

Identity can be viewed from many levels, with one being sociology, where Berger and Luckmann (1999, p. 172) declare that "identity remains incomprehensible without being located in a specific world". The concept of social identity is also viewed through the lens of a sociologist by Holubová (2016), who presents a dilemmatic view of the forms of identity – "static versus dynamic and individual versus collective identity" (Holubová, 2016, p. 31), subsequently adding that this division can be set in the context of symbolic interactionism and social constructivism. The social/sociological context is complemented by Vágnerová (2010), who explains that *social identity* focuses on

the interaction between the individual and culture; it is formed on the basis of an individual's belonging to a community that is important to them. *"Social identity connects us to other people, while personal identity sets us apart and makes us unique"* (Vágnerová, 2010, p. 255).

In this way, Vágnerová foreshadows the psychological view of identity. A similar idea comes from Erikson (in Macek, 2003), according to whom the acquisition of identity means becoming aware of one's own uniqueness, wholeness, personal stability, perspective on oneself over time, and a sense of social value.

Brumeister (1997) also introduces the idea of the concept of internalised identity. The concept of *identity* consists of an interpersonal aspect (a set of roles and relationships), a potentiality aspect (a concept of who one could become), and a value aspect consisting of a set of values and priorities. Klenovsky (2010) makes a similar point about the importance of identity in an individual's life when he stresses that "the achievement of identity is related to the acceptance of a commitment. In the case of a profession or any occupation, we can speak of identification with a profession only when the individual internally commits to its demands" (Klenovsky, 2010, p. 225).

Švaříček (2011) takes a similar view, describing identity as follows: *"I perceive identity as our own understanding of who we are and who we think other people are. Identity is more a construct of our conscious action and the result of self-reflection than a set of given or innate characteristics"* (Švaříček, 2011, p. 247). For this reason, Melucci (in Švaříček, 1996) believes the word identity is inappropriate because it does not refer to change. Rather, we should speak of *identisation* to express processuality, self-reflection, and self-construction. The development and process of identity is also discussed by Lukas and Švaříček (2007), who emphasise that in the development of identity (in general) this process is influenced by several other circumstances that construct identity. The authors discuss prior learning experiences, interaction with the environment, personal assumptions, and self-reflection.

1.2 Professional identity

If identity is seen as a state of human consciousness in terms of who we are and who we are not, then an individual may view professional identity as understanding or *identifying* with their profession. In this context, the person is aware of the demands placed on them and what is expected of them in the profession they have chosen. This moment (sometimes a longer process) is an important prerequisite for the successful and responsible practice of a particular profession.

Dobrow and Higgins (2005) explain professional identity as a constant system of qualities, attitudes, motives, and experiences that enable people to define their professional role and to pursue objective and personal goals. In short, professional identity

can be described as the feeling of being a professional, i. e. the perception of oneself in this role.

The topic of professionalism is also taken up by Žydzūnaitė and Crisafulli (2013), who state that “professional identity is quite often considered synonymous with the concepts of professional self-realisation, professionalism, professional socialisation or mission, adding that these concepts are often confused and cannot be understood as synonyms, even though they are closely related” (Žydzūnaitė and Crisafulli, 2013, p. 6).

The education system also plays an important role in shaping professional identity. If the subject of this article is the professional identity of social work students, it makes sense to focus on undergraduate education. Educational institutions generally play a large role in the process of the formation of professional identity. McNamara et al. (2011) support this idea when describing the importance of the education system. “Each formalised educational system in which an individual is present is also a socio-cultural context, and its social structure and professional culture therefore influence the development of the adult learner’s professional identity.” This important fact is also addressed by Mantei (2010, in Žydzūnaitė and Crisafulli, 2013), who draws attention to the importance of the study period. “The development of a professional identity therefore begins already during the course of studies. The student identifies himself in the context of a future profession or career field. The knowledge and skills acquired during their studies are the premise of their internal identification with the given profession” (Žydzūnaitė and Crisafulli, 2013, p. 5).

Klenovský (2010) also emphasises the role of education when he states that “professional identity is not a given thing, but a process of continuous creation and transformation even during the period of study. It needs to be constructed and confirmed at the level of applied science, especially during the period of study in tertiary education” (Klenovský, 2010, p. 226). Tamm and Šámalová (2010) speak of education as a socialisation process that creates the opportunity to acquire the appropriate *professional culture* and adopt the necessary *professional ideology*. Thus, more than any other factor, education creates a bridge between the identity of the profession and the professional identity that social workers themselves will carry into the field of social work.

There is another fundamental issue related to the topic of the professional identity of social work students: the identity of the field/profession. Social work is still in the phase of searching for its own professional identity, which makes it difficult to address the topic of individual professional identity in a field that does not have an explicitly defined identity as a social work profession (field). Nevertheless, the process of individual professional identity is ongoing. Social work as a field is constantly challenged by the basic question: “Is social work a profession or not?”

Defining the characteristics of a profession and searching for their content fulfilment was the topic for the authors Weiss-Gal and Welbourne (2008), who defined eight traits of a profession: public recognition, a monopoly on certain kinds of work, profes-

sional autonomy, a knowledge base, a system of professional training, the existence of professional organisations and ethical standards, prestige, and remuneration for its performance. Šámalová (2019) therefore puts the identity of the profession in direct connection with the importance of education and educators. She says that educators *“are directly involved in shaping the changing content of social work identity”*.

Šámalová (2019) elaborates the topic into other perspectives and describes which external influences affect educators in forming the professional identity of students who are future social workers. These factors ultimately influence the process of constructing the identity of the field. According to her, this is standardisation in education, which is the responsibility of the Association of Social Work Educators and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. Despite great efforts to describe the explicit curriculum of social work education, the resulting education is inconsistent, unrelated, and unclear to students and employers. The second factor is **competency competition** with other helping professions and finding one's place in multidisciplinary teams.

Another area related to this factor is research. Students are guided (encouraged) to strengthen their competence to carry out research activities, on the basis of which they can justify their work and the importance of the profession. Another influence is the structure and content of the curriculum, which raises the question of an explicit and implicit curriculum. While the explicit curriculum clearly lists the subjects and content of the curriculum, the implicit curriculum is left to the discretion of the individual educator. Šámalová (2019) returns to this topic in the form of another factor, i.e. the personality and educational background of individual teachers, who in this context have an unquestionable major influence on the formation of students' professional identity. Teachers are expected not only to be competent in the content of the subject, but also, in terms of the implicit curriculum, to be able to work with reflection, self-reflection, and the theme of professional identity. This begs the question of how this process is set up and organised and how teachers are guided, shaped, and made competent to do this.

And the topics of the construction of self-identity, reflection, and self-reflection are often mentioned, among others, in the context of the educational process, including professional practice.

1.3 Reflection and self-reflection as a tool in the formation of professional identity

Reflection and self-reflection are quite clearly part of the educational process on the side of the teacher, the tutor, and the student. Maňák et al. (2008) speaks of self-reflection as part of the teacher's teaching style, a tool for developing the student's potential, including in the context of setting the curriculum (explicit and implicit).

The notion of reflection in educational theory was first introduced by Dewey (1933, in Pišová, 2005), who defined it as “the active, sustained, and careful consideration of

any belief or assumed form of knowledge in the light of the premises that support it and the further conclusions to which it leads" (Dewey, 1933, in Pířová, 2005, p. 62).

In the 1980s, Donald Schön (1983) came up with a concept of reflection that he called reflection in practice. Schön (1991) distinguishes between two types of reflection: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action is closely linked to knowing-in-action in the conception of the individual, and according to Schön (1991), the everyday work of the professional depends on it. Every practitioner equipped with the necessary competencies has some knowledge, often has to make decisions, and uses skills that are intuitive to them (sometimes conscious, at other times unconscious), which is why, although they use them routinely in their practice, they often cannot describe them. At the moment when the professional can define them, the level of reflection can be transformed into knowledge-in-action.

Švec (1999) imagines reflection as an approach that is an important part of the professional preparation of future teachers (Švec, 1999). Smékal (1998, in Švec, 1999) perceives reflection as "awareness of one's situation and position in confrontation with how we think others see us. In other words, it is the ability to adequately and critically realise the significance of what is happening to us in the world." (Smékal 1998, in Švec, 1999: 72).

Švec and Smékal describe the situation of students who are future teachers, but their view can also be applied to students who are future social workers. However, in the context of the undergraduate training of students in helping professions, it is necessary to distinguish between reflection and self-reflection.

Švec (1999) argues that the distinction between reflection and self-reflection is not always clear and that the two concepts blend together to a certain extent. According to Smékal (1998, in Švec, 1999), self-reflection is "the confrontation of our real and ideal self-images. In self-reflection, we have a kind of inner dialogue with ourselves – we split into the observing self and the observed self" (Smékal 1998, in Švec, 1999: 72). The author further states that the methods most often used to stimulate self-reflection in students include keeping a student journal, self-reflective conversation between the student and the teacher, self-reflection using metaphor, written records of problem situations, and video recordings of student activities (Švec, 1999).

Reflection and self-reflection are also an important moment in practical training, including in the field of social work. Holasová et al. (2007) state that through reflection and self-reflection, the student learns and becomes aware of work practices during and after practice, processes newly acquired information, and clarifies their attitudes, including what they have done well professionally and what they should do differently the next time.

1.4 The importance of practical training in the process of forming professional identity

Practical training is an integral part of any preparation for a future profession. Today, it is no longer easy to find a field of study or a programme that does not include a practical part within tertiary studies. Because of its specific nature, practical education would deserve an exclusive approach in terms of how to set it up, organise it, and, even though it is practical training, think about how to anchor it theoretically and what activities (methods and didactic tools) to use. Navrátil (2007) pays attention to this area by mentioning that “practical education does not provide mere insight, but a clash with reality. It emphasises professional socialisation, the development of skills, and the development of professional judgement, in the form of work experience for students, which ensures the development of the skills needed to cope with the demands of their future profession” (Navrátil, 2007: 10).

In practical education, didactic methods and tools are used in education, and Navrátil (2007) states that “unlike theoretical education, practical education is those activities in the professional training of social workers that require applied learning, such as direct observation, skills training, and supervised service delivery. These are the activities that most specifically prepare students at higher vocational schools and universities for the future profession of a social worker and are thus also the most similar to the real image of this profession” (Navrátil, 2007, p. 11).

The importance of practical learning is also discussed by Navrátilová (2010), who presents practical learning as a process “in which an inexperienced student becomes a student with mastered skills for performing social work practice” (Navrátilová, 2010: 41). This idea is anchored in Schepner’s (1999) concept of the five didactic levels of learning : (1) mediation of information – the student works with new knowledge; (2) reflection and further development of the professional role, learning new methods; (3) self-education, self-reflection, and self-knowledge; (4) biography and life plan – the student reflects on their life and the impact of practice on professional and personal life; (5) transcendence and spirituality – practice brings many situations associated with human suffering, misery, and death. Students are exposed to questions concerning their own spiritual concepts.

From the list of didactic levels in the context of the present topic, all the levels seem to be useful and could be an inspiration when setting up the concept of social work students’ practice, as they describe important milestones on the path to becoming a social worker, i. e. the development and formation of a student’s professional identity.

2 Description of the empirical part

2.1 Research problem

I perceive the initial research problem for the empirical part as the students' unclear professional identity after their two-month internship in the third year and their low level of ability to name their professional identity, including seeing the difference between the identity of the profession (discipline identity) and their own professional identity. I also perceive the undergraduate education itself (both theoretical and practical) as problematic, when educators set up a not fully conscious system and process of constructing the student's own individual professional identity during their three-year studies. Several questions can be asked:

- Is formation in relation to professional identity a conscious task and goal on the part of educators?
- How do educators contribute to the goal of forming a professional identity and how do they plan/phase this process into the three-year degree programme?
- What tools are chosen for the conscious process of constructing professional identity?

I see these factors, i.e. the significant role of educational institutions at the tertiary level, as essential for the formulation and development of the identity of the profession, including the topic of raising the prestige of the social work field.

2.2 Research objective and research questions

The aim of the research is to discover how the personal professional identity of a social work student is formed in the context of practical education.

The main research question is: How do third-year students (higher vocational and BA level of study) interpret their professional identity after completing a two-month internship?

Two subquestions make the main research question more specific:

- Subquestion 1: What do students perceive and interpret as essential in the process of forming their (personal, individual) professional identity? Me as a social worker.
- Subquestion 2: What do students perceive and interpret as essential in the process of forming their ideas about the field of social work? My idea of the social work field.

2.3 Research design

The research investigation is designed as a descriptive causal investigation. The descriptive design offers relatively great possibilities because no research on the same topic has been undertaken in the Czech Republic to date. The causal intent can also be fulfilled, especially in the area of correlation, e.g. between the construction of professional identity and the change of motivation or in the case of the influence of the teaching methods used in the formation of professional identity, etc.

The research design used was a qualitative strategy. According to Disman (2000), the aim of qualitative research is to understand the deep meanings that respondents attribute to their life situations. The basic research technique chosen was qualitative secondary data analysis. The answers to the main question above, as well as the sub-questions, are the result of qualitative content (secondary) data analysis. Janák (2018) states *“that qualitative research in text and document analysis is not about counting the occurrences of certain linguistic expressions, but about understanding the overall system of which the text being analysed is a part. The researcher is interested in the circumstances of the creation of the text, its purpose, and how the text functions (acts) in a certain social environment. Even within the qualitative paradigm, several different methodological approaches to analysing written texts have developed over time”* (Janák, 2018, p. 25).

Primary data emerged in the preparation and reflection after practice, in written form, with students formulating their thoughts in writing in the Contract and Practice Report. They then reflect on this with their tutor in pre- and post-practice consultation. Students are encouraged to reflect and self-reflect in preparing the Practice Report. One of the objectives that students had to fulfil during their two-month placement in the third year was selected for the analysis. The objective is as follows: *“To be able to express my relationship to the social work profession. After the internship, I will reflect on how the two-month internship influenced my attitude and relationship to the social work profession.”*

The sample selection was deliberate – it was a group of 18 female students (one study group), approximately the same age (22–24 years), studying Charity and Social Work, full-time studies, third year of studies. The students conclude their practical training with a two-month internship – the final internship during their undergraduate studies (higher vocational and bachelor’s degree).

The data was processed qualitatively using the inductive method. As the first step, the reflection part was printed with students’ reflections and self-reflections on the objective presented above from their Practice Reports. The data was anonymised and simply numbered 1–18. Subsequently, the data was analysed (Charmaz, 2006) using two coding methods:

1. a line-by-line coding of the text that encourages specific study of the information and thus begins the process of conceptualisation;
2. intentional coding to allow the data to be sorted and the resulting categories named. In coding the written reflections, it was possible to gain a specific idea and understanding of the phenomenon under study and the meanings that actors attributed to certain events.

3 Results

The result of the secondary analysis is a chronological retrospective of the four stages into which the students intuitively divided the process of forming their professional identity. Both the objective and the research question are directed towards the period after the completion of the internship in the third year; however, the previous periods were obviously significant for the students and therefore the phases before the period that was observed were also captured. Each stage captures areas of personal experiences and key moments that the students reported/interpreted as important moments in the process of forming their professional identity. As mentioned above, the students grouped their reflections into four different time periods. The presentation of the results will replicate these four phases and will present what the students found significant, including a short analysis.

1. Phase: Perceived professional identity of female social work students before starting their studies.
2. Phase: Perceived professional identity of female students during the first and second years of their studies.
3. Phase: Perceived professional identity of female students after completing the final two-month internship in the third year.
4. Phase: Perceived professional identity as a future prospect.

3.1 Before the start of the studies – “What was I actually thinking at the time?”

This is the period that precedes the actual decision to study social work. In this phase, the students describe their lack of knowledge of social work, their personal experiences with social work, and people and situations that influenced them, and defend their motives for studying social work.

Some students first describe their awareness of the social work profession in very general terms. Quite intuitively, they return to their childhood or secondary school years and describe the state of their knowledge of/experience with the field of social work,

often up until they enter tertiary education, as *a tabula rasa*. "I knew almost nothing about social work, except that it existed." (5) "Before I came to this school to study charity and social work, like many people who don't have direct social work experience, I didn't have much awareness of social work." (10) "Before coming to this school, I didn't know who a social worker was." (12). The students do not express any significant relationship to the profession of social work and do not mention themselves as the representatives of the future profession at all.

There are also statements in the responses about a more specific awareness of social work. "In secondary school, I started to get a little interested in different fundraisers; I wanted to know where the money was going, so I did some research on organisations, and that's probably where I started to understand what social work could be." (5) "In my house, we often watched the news on TV, and sometimes I would hear something, and then I would think about it and find out more information." (18) There were also responses about experiences with social work in childhood, and the students tended to describe situations that gave them an insight into what social work actually was. "We used to go to my grandmother's retirement home and there was a social worker there." (5)

It also appears as a significant personal experience as a social work client. "From a very early age, I had experience with a social worker and the social surveys she conducted with us." (3)

The students also mention role models among people they were close to, thanks to whom they gained "some" relationship to social work as an inspiring factor. "I have always been close to social work, thanks to my mother, who works in social services." (8) "My sister was also a social worker." (6) "My elementary school teacher told us what social work was; it was interesting and I told myself that I would be a social worker." (1)

Even at this stage, a deeper relationship to the profession was forming and the students recalled how they defended their decision to apply for social work. Their statements are directed at their personal values. "I wanted to work with people, and this profession is a great opportunity to do something good for people and spend time with them." (5) The meaning that social work students attributed to the profession was also a significant moment in their perception of social work and was a deciding factor in their choice of profession. "When I was deciding what to study, I thought it was meaningful work." (1)

In this phase, the students are expressing themselves more towards the profession of social work and have not yet perceived themselves as future social workers, as there is not a single mention of it in their reflections. In this phase, themes are offered for the educational process that could be processed as entrance strengths, inspiration, and experience that can become a significant motivator for further learning demands. The question for educators is whether these issues are being dealt with deliberately and conceptually.

3.2 The first and second years of study – “I can’t believe it!”

In this phase, the students mention what made them understand and appreciate social work after they began their studies in social work and how dynamic and extensive the process was. This process can be divided into two parts: theoretical education and student practice. In terms of theory, the students described various theoretical topics that they try to link to practice. The students did not mention the reverse procedure (practice to theory). It can be said that by looking at the *necessity of social work* in society, the students subsequently get to *approach clients*, and to *discover themselves*. The two components of professional identity – the perception of oneself as a social worker and the formation of a relationship and understanding of social work – are beginning to interconnect. They mention the need in society as follows: “In my studies, I learned that the profession of social work is misunderstood in society, which I found very paradoxical considering how necessary the profession actually is.” (7) “During my studies, I learned about the history of social work and even delved into other disciplines such as psychology, law, and sociology, which are an integral part of studying social work as a whole. I felt as if I was starting to see the world from a different perspective.” (3) We were learning so many things, I think it was really too much, it was impossible to take it all in, I missed the connections and I already know that I have forgotten a lot.” (14) The study also shifted their perception of the world around us. “I became more aware of the people around me and their needs.” (7)

Internships rank very high on the students’ evaluations of activities. “The internships were very rewarding and taught me more about the different target groups.” (7)

At the end of this phase, the students declared the meaning of social work. “I would like to understand social work comprehensively one day. For now, after completing two years of the programme, we perceive it as a profession that has meaning and potential.” (4)

What the students perceived as challenging in their two-year learning process was, above all, setting boundaries. “Setting boundaries is particularly difficult for me; I’m a bit worried that if I’m nice to everyone and try to please them in everything, I’ll soon burn out. I see that as a great risk in working as a social worker.” (1)

The students also expressed their opinion on what social work is and its characteristics: “Throughout my studies, I’m constantly reinforcing the idea that it’s a really hard job, which I didn’t really see before when I was studying another subject, so that was quite surprising, because I always thought it was an easy job.” (2)

In this phase, the students become more specific about the content of social work and gain practical experience, which seems to be essential for understanding social work. Surprisingly, they still describe themselves to a small extent as important tools and units in the process of quality social work. Other than perhaps the student who mentioned boundaries and fear of burnout, I find no significant self-reflection on themselves as future social workers. However, a certain overload of theoretical information

may seem significant, as it detracts from the space to devote to the development of a reflective approach and increasing students' ability to use it appropriately.

3.3 After completion of the final two-month internship in the third year – “I think we know now”

In this part of the reflection on practice, the students were the most descriptive, specific, and willing to think more deeply. They expressed what they thought about the profession of social work and how they perceived themselves, thus revealing an embryonic notion of a personal professional identity. However, their statements still show a certain respect for their field of study. It seems that the topic of professional identity from the perspective of the field of study is still distant; students are in a waiting position and still do not take social work as a field as “their own thing”. “I think that social work is undervalued and I often wonder whose fault that is.” (14) “I have been waiting for the moment social work would convince me, but I am still waiting after practice.” (5) “It annoyed me that when dealing with a lawyer or psychologist, the social worker assumed a subordinate position. I wasn't too happy about it, and I thought I should have studied law instead.” (6) “After the internship, my opinion of social work hasn't changed much, and I don't really know how I feel about social work.” (3)

The pandemic situation and increased demands on the provision of social services have also had a major impact on how the social work profession is perceived among the students. This extraordinary situation has convinced the students of the prestige of the profession. “I realised even more at this time that social workers are very much needed; I think the prestige of the profession will increase thanks to the pandemic.” (12) “Because of COVID, I wasn't really involved in social work. I did all kinds of things, but I don't think much of it was social work.” (1)

There were also positive formulations and the *discovery of new possibilities in social work*. “The internship showed me how interesting social work can be. I had seen mainly micro social work before, but during this internship I saw and understood that it would be good to develop and pursue social work on the macro level.” (2) “The internship has strengthened my belief in the success of social work.” (18) “I learned that not everyone can do social work, that you cannot treat social work as a stereotypical job.” (6)

An advocate of the profession also emerged among the students. “When someone asked me earlier why I was studying this particular field if it was so ‘unimportant’, I answered with general arguments. Now I counter with my own experiences, which have shown me why social work is so important.” (6) “I think that this field is very important and society should know more about it, have more insight into it – that would be good for social work.” (18) “I often think about why social work is such an undervalued profession, but when you think about it, you have to realise that no one can do without social work.” (12)

The more reserved the students were in describing their attitude towards the social work profession, the more possible it was to see an active inner process of becoming a social worker (individual professional identity). "My attitude and relationship was already clear before this internship and the pandemic crisis only reinforced what I already thought. I made the right choice. I am grateful for the social workers in the field and I hope to be equally useful one day." (12) "The internship has confirmed that I want to work as a social worker with families; I think I can do it." (6) "I am glad I am studying at this school and this field, which I have chosen in spite of everything." (7)

The students also demonstrated that they think of themselves through the lens of a professional. "It also showed me the importance of having personal themes worked out so I could work well with my clients' themes." (4) "I no longer feel the need to save all clients according to my idea of what ideal parenting should look like." (2) "This internship has taught me to leave the responsibility to the client. It is a liberating feeling." (17)

The students also described a professional role model in the person of a mentor or social workers at an internship as important in the process of forming their own professional identity. "I was lucky enough to have a mentor; she was an ideal social worker for me, and I would like to be one myself." (2)

As prominent students, they also shared what they had learned in their internships. These were many competencies that they considered in themselves and from which they derived their position/role as future social workers. "I realised the importance of knowing the legislation." (4) "I understand more about the target group, and now I will be more confident." (7) "I have learned to communicate more and I have found that I have good organisational skills." (8) "I tried coordinating volunteers, which is also something a social worker can do." (10)

The two-month internship seems to have provided the students with many answers to their professional questions: What is social work and how do I think about it? And what kind of social worker am I/will I be? I still perceive in the students' conception a certain blending of these two questions and a less than clear ability to differentiate their meaning. Nevertheless, the level of reflection and self-reflection has deepened and we can say that we are on the right track. Critically, however, we can ask the question: Is it enough? Shouldn't practical experience in three years of study produce stronger results?

3.4 Outlook for the future – "And what's next?"

The last phase allows for some imagination about their further development; the students discussed their professional future and engaged in reflections on various topics, sometimes in relation to their profession, while other deliberations included self-reflection.

The internship confirmed the importance of social work and its future necessity. "I realised that social workers are really important in society and I think they always will be." (13) Again, they also made it clear that social work has a purpose, which can be strong motivation to work as a social worker after graduation. "I realised that it's not important what kind of work we do, but whether it is meaningful to us. I think I will often remember it in my work." (16) "The internship motivated me. What we had to do during this difficult period will stay with me long after graduation." (10) The students were also aware of important moments during the internship that targeted their values and may be long-lasting in character. "I realised that the family I have means everything to me and that I've always taken them for granted. Then when I saw that not everyone is as lucky as I am, I appreciated my family all the more. This realisation was very strong for me and I will carry it inside me for a long time." (14)

The internship helped them to have the confidence to perform as a social worker. "I was offered a job after my internship. I think I am ready to work in some type of service." (15) "The internship was great encouragement for my future studies. It solidified my conviction to do this job and I know I still have a lot to learn; I hope I will be a good social worker." (3) I think I will be proud to be a social worker in the future." (7)

However, they also mentioned things that they did not do well or areas that they needed to strengthen. "The internship showed me what I still need to learn to be able to do this work. I may be at the end of my studies, but I still feel as if I'm at the beginning." (9)

Conclusion

The question posed by this paper is: How do third-year students (higher vocational and BA level of study) interpret their professional identity after completing a two-month internship? *The aim of the research is to discover how the personal professional identity of a social work student is formed in the context of practical education.* The main research question is: How do third-year students (higher vocational and BA level of study) interpret their professional identity after completing a two-month internship?

Two subquestions make the main research question more specific:

- Subquestion 1: What do students perceive and interpret as essential in the process of forming their (personal, individual) professional identity? Me as a social worker.
- Subquestion 2: What do the students perceive and interpret as essential in the process of forming their professional identity in their field of study? *My idea of the social work field.*

In the chapter Presentation of Results, I pointed out a certain misunderstanding of the difference between the concept of one's own individual perception of professional

identity and the relationship to social work as a field. This unclear distinction is also an important conclusion of my research investigation and thus a challenge for educators to clearly define the process of the formation of professional identity with the explicit naming of both topics in the whole curriculum, both in theoretical and practical lessons.

The theme of reflection, self-reflection, and feedback is also essential to the summary. The ability of the students to reflect on their practical experience as a means of forming their professional identity can be regarded as a satisfactory outcome. However, I am concerned that the students are not clear about the difference between reflection and self-reflection. I also see it as a weakness that this topic is only encountered sporadically in the case of one objective in the field of practical education. There is a lack of continuous long-term reflection, self-reflection, and a clearly defined system supporting the theme of professional identity (both professional and personal), not only in the context of practical education, but in the context of the entire study. Institutional support could logically be sought in the standards of the Association of Social Work Educators (ASVSP), which state: "Professional practice is an integral part of the study of social work; it provides students with experience in performing social work and enables them (the students) to acquire a professional identity." The standard then considers the learner's attitudes to be the target competencies, specifically: *"they become aware of themselves as a social work tool"* (ASVSP, 2014). These are general recommendations but require elaboration into specific teaching tools, methods, and techniques. This step is left to the creativity of each educator. Discussions among all stakeholders in the educational process (members of school management, faculties, teachers, tutors, mentors, students, supervisors of practice, etc.) on how to set up, organise, describe in curricula, and link theory and practice would be appropriate and desirable, I dare say indispensable and inevitable for further development. However, I consider the role of the ASVSP and its mission in the education process to be important. *"Our main goal is to improve the quality of social work education, thus contributing to the improvement of the supply and performance of social work services in the Czech Republic. The Minimum Standards for Social Work Education, on which the member schools base the education they provide, are a fundamental tool for maintaining the main objective"* (ASVSP, 2014).

As a further topic for summary and a challenge for further thinking about setting up professional practice, it is useful to think about the theoretical anchoring of practical education. It is possible to draw inspiration from Navratilova's dissertation (2009), in which the author presents three approaches to practical education, namely evidence-based practice, a reflective approach, and a competence approach. The author herself states that it is advisable to link these approaches ... "each of the approaches presented can be used integrally for social work education ... understanding the background and main premises of these concepts can facilitate the use of each aspect in social work education" (Navratilova, 2009: 204).

In conclusion, there are three key issues for the further development of the education of social work students:

1. Is the awareness of professional identity formulated as a goal of education (theoretical and practical) explicitly or implicitly?
2. Are students guided in developing a professional identity using appropriate teaching methods?
3. Do students understand the different levels of identity and their connections?

The results of the research can contribute to the introduction of innovation in education and to the development of a modern style of teaching that reflects the conditions of a changing society and the associated demands placed on social work. The current standards for social work education were conceived in the 1990s, and it is clear that they no longer meet current trends in professional training in terms of content, but also teaching methods and organisational forms of teaching. Although expert meetings are taking place and there is some reformulation/updating of the standards, this change is more “cosmetic” in nature. The standard’s entire concept requires change, with an emphasis on the transformation of the competences of the social worker, but also a change in the competences of university graduates in general. Educational institutions themselves face the challenge of innovation with all that this entails – the concept of the curriculum, the content of the curriculum, the self-development activities of students, and practice, including changes in the approach of teachers. Finally, I would like to highlight the importance of organisations that provide internships, specifically in the area of developing students’ professional identity. During the study period, field mentors are essential role models in shaping students’ professional identities.

Finding answers to the above questions and finding solutions will not be an easy journey, but I am convinced that change is both necessary and inevitable. It is a great challenge for all stakeholders, and we must not shy away from it.

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