

Professional Internships and Social Work. A Review of Literature in Higher Education

Prácticas profesionales y Trabajo Social. Una revisión de la literatura en educación superior

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Abstract

The objective of this review of the literature was to analyze the scientific production on professional internships in social work from 2014 to 2018. The bibliographic search was conducted in Web of Science, the main collection database, obtaining a sample of 34 articles. The analysis of the documents focused on the year of publication, country in which the research was carried out, methodology used, type of participants and exhaustive analysis of the topics investigated. The results obtained show greater scientific production during 2017, being the countries of the United States and China which are at the forefront in the central issue that is the subject of this review. Furthermore, there is a predominance of studies with a qualitative methodological approach and where the main technique of data collection is the interview. As for the participants, it mostly corresponds to undergraduate students. Finally, this article was focused on four topics: learning, experiences, evaluation and cognitive and socio-emotional factors linked to professional internships in social work, being the latter two the ones found with the highest recurrence in high-impact indexed journals.

Keywords: higher education, literature review, professional internships, social work.

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Resumen

El objetivo de esta revisión de literatura fue analizar la producción científica en torno a las prácticas profesionales de la carrera de Trabajo Social desde 2014 a 2018. La búsqueda bibliográfica se realizó utilizando Web of Science, servicio en línea de información científica, en el área de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades, tras lo cual se obtuvo una muestra de 34 artículos científicos. El análisis de los documentos se centró en el año de publicación, país en el que se llevó a cabo la investigación, metodología utilizada, tipo de participantes y análisis exhaustivo de las temáticas investigadas. Los resultados obtenidos evidenciaron una mayor producción científica durante 2017, siendo Estados Unidos y China los países que se encuentran a la vanguardia en el tema en revisión. Asimismo, se constata un predominio de estudios con un abordaje metodológico cualitativo y cuya técnica principal de recolección de información es la entrevista. En cuanto a los participantes, en su mayoría corresponde a estudiantes de pregrado. Finalmente, esta investigación profundizó en cuatro temas: aprendizajes, experiencias, evaluación y factores cognitivos y socioemocionales vinculados con las prácticas profesionales en Trabajo Social, siendo estos dos últimos los que se presentaron con mayor recurrencia en las revistas indexadas.

Palabras clave: educación superior, prácticas profesionales, trabajo social, revisión de la literatura.

Introduction

At the present time, there is a large number of semi-annual and annual publications in scientific journals on the field of educational research, where the literature review is a crucial tool in the process of generating knowledge, as it enables the analysis and synthesis of information about an area of specialization in an organized manner, thus facilitating better understanding of the scope and existing results (Boote & Beile, 2005).

In this regard, the Bologna Declaration signed in 1999 set in motion a process of European cooperation that has radically changed higher education, affecting countries both in and outside Europe (European Commission, Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, EACEA, & Eurydice, 2018) by involving a new structure of higher education: transferable credits, learning outcomes, quality, and lifelong learning (Cid, Perez, & Sarmiento, 2011). Based on this declaration and the Tuning project in Latin America, competency-based education has emerged, which responds to the new requirements of society, providing an education that is flexible, open, and bi-directionally linked to the social environment (Álvarez, 2011).

Chile has not been excluded from this process of restructuring education, so curricular renewal has focused on quality assurance (Guzmán, Maureira, Sánchez, & Vergara, 2015), becoming a source of constant concern in the national agenda. The recent study carried out by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD (2019), indicates that Chile invests 5.4% of public spending on higher education and people who can access this level of education benefit significantly in various spheres, such as employability, financial compensation, and salary increases, among others.

In the context of university education, professional internships constitute a space in which the student reinforces and demonstrates their knowledge, skills, and attitudes (competencies) in a real context, which is why it is essential to study professional internships in various careers (Barrera & Hinojosa, 2017).

The studies by Grossman, Hammerness, and McDonald (2009) and Müller, Álamos, Meckes, Sanyal, and Cox (2016) in the field of initial teacher training suggest the need to move towards a curriculum based on practice, which implies:

- relating and integrating theory and practice;
- organizing study programs around a basic set of practices in which knowledge, skills, and professional identity are developed in the process of learning to practice during training;
- including the student in authentic learning experiences and which are, therefore, more related to the specific performance of their profession.

In this regard, Grossman et al. (2009) propose the learning of certain generative practices, also called *nuclear*, that a student in training should be able to handle, which have the potential to produce more complex performances as they integrate with each other and as more experience is accrued in the classroom. From the perspective of these authors, the three key concepts to understand the pedagogies of practice in professional learning are the following: decomposition, representation, and approach to practice. The first is intended to break down pedagogical practice, so it can be learned and assessed during the educational trajectory of the students being trained. The second concept firstly implies preparing future professionals in more controlled contexts with less authentic tasks, so they are gradually exposed to experiences of greater complexity and authenticity. Finally, the third concept involves providing students with opportunities to approach the performance of their profession in real contexts gradually, through testing and simulation, and then study how to improve this performance (Müller et al., 2016).

This model of generative practices in the field of initial teacher training could also be considered in the curriculum of other degree courses in which work is done directly with people (such as Psychology, for example). In the case of social work, various authors have argued that professional internships are part of the typical teaching of the profession, being a key element for student learning (Bogo, 2015; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010). Research in this area has systematically identified professional internships as one of the main components in which students can experience the development of theoretical-practical learning (Gursansky & Le Sueur, 2012).

Recognition of the importance of professional internships in social work confirms the widespread belief that the profession is based on practice-based learning, this being an essential aspect for the development of basic competencies in education and the preparation of future social workers, according to the specific competencies and the graduate profile (MacDermott & Campbell, 2016; Wayne et al., 2010).

From the viewpoint of the students, professional internships are the first instance in which they can integrate and apply theory, values, skills, and knowledge of the career under the supervision of a professional social worker and accompanied by the teachers at their university (Barretti, 2004; Dalton, Stevens, & Maas-Brady, 2009; Vayda & Bogo, 1991). Internships are, therefore, the space in which students put into action what they have learned in the classroom in terms of micro, mezzo, and macro skills, as well as professional values and adherence to codes of ethical conduct (Williamson, Hostetter, Byers, & Huggins, 2010).

This paper reviews the literature on the subject of professional internships in social work, in order to allow an approach towards the scientific production between 2014 and 2018 and thus contribute to the generation of knowledge regarding when, where, how, who, and what specifically is being researched in this area, in order to support a higher quality training process with the results obtained. This will allow the educational curriculum to be adjusted, placing an emphasis on more successive approaches to professional practice and valuing internships as an instance of meaningful learning for future social workers. This is expected to provide answers to the following questions:

- What do students learn in contexts of professional internships?
- What is the experience of students engaged in professional internships in terms of curricular strategies and methodologies used in these contexts?
- What elements do students highlight in the assessment of professional internships in social work?
- How are cognitive and socio-emotional factors presented in this training process?

Background

Internationally, the United States Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) states that all accredited programs require field placement, although the specific types and hours involved vary according to the program and course level. Likewise, this placement can be verified by means of practice, or through an internship, both sharing the same objective: to allow students to implement the skills they have learned during their studies (Williamson et al., 2010). In the internship or *practicum* students participate in field work under the supervision of professionals and teachers, enrolling in a practical course that includes goals, expectations, and associated academic credits. The practicum is essentially a form of community service, which provides students with the opportunity to participate in direct experiences of social work practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Therefore, considering the elements mentioned here, the concept of *professional internship* used in this paper is similar to that of the practicum, since it constitutes a place of socialization so that social work students become professionals (Williamson et al., 2010) by having the opportunities to integrate and apply the theories, values, abilities, knowledge, and competencies of the discipline, and the intervention actions that are carried out in professional contexts with the various subjects and groups of action (Bogo, 2006; 2015; Gursanky & Le Sueur, 2012; Teigiser, 2009; Vayda & Bogo, 1991). Thus, in professional internships students develop practical skills, apply theory to real situations, and “test their ability to be professional social workers” (Fortune, McCarthy, & Abramson, 2001, p. 111).

In addition, the study conducted by Williamson et al. (2010) established that practice of social work is essential to help students find themselves and improve their development, although while it is likely that many degree courses or schools understand the nature of the experiences that students have during their training, it is also extremely important to find out how they are processing their learning during that period.

In Canada, for example, professionals who educate and supervise students in professional internship settings are known as *field instructors* and act as role models, mentors, teachers, and advisors for the students taking the course, which allows them to generate skills for reflection (Barretti, 2007; Bogo, 2006; Homonoff, 2008).

In the case of Latin America, training in professional internships takes a mostly traditional technocratic approach, which involves first learning all the knowledge that supports an internship, before carrying out that internship under supervision, which demonstrates the effective application of previous learning (Sanjurjo, 2017). Because of this, revising the training work in practical subjects is essential to establish different devices during the educational process, in order to change the technocratic approach, which means that supervising teachers should support and rethink these training devices in higher education, based on decolonial¹, situated, and critical positions.

Carrera, Parreño and Ayala (2017) suggest that the professional performances of university students in their internships positively influence and encourage high levels of performance in this educational space, which allows a dialectical relationship between theory and practice. That is why better professional performance on the part of the students can be analyzed based on the improvement of the supervising teachers and the relationship between the degree course and the institutions or centers where the internship is done.

1. This implies adopting a complex analysis and social understanding of modernity, which allows a shift towards questioning and problematization of the logics of power and hegemonic models prevailing in the professional training of social workers (Parola, 2020).

In Chile, training is aimed at ideal performance in the different socio-cultural contexts, which requires students to be the protagonists of their learning processes, based on strengthening cognitive and metacognitive skills, the ability to act, knowledge, and regulation of emotional and motivational aspects (Arias & Lombillo, 2019). This implies that in the educational process the students and supervising teachers encourage and co-construct these processes, so each degree course has the responsibility to train its supervisory teachers and/or field instructors, as well as assessing potential locations according to their time and interest, which goes beyond the minimum teaching duties. In this regard, Kanno and Koeske (2010) argue that the quality of the teaching done by supervising teachers is very important for student satisfaction and their sense of efficacy in the context of their learning and experiences.

Therefore—and given the existing evidence in the literature reviewed—this paper emphasizes the importance of professional internships for social work students to achieve the necessary learning.

Methodology

The objective of this article was to analyze the scientific production regarding professional internships for social work between 2014 and 2018, by quantifying articles published according to their research themes, time of publication, methodology used, participants, country, techniques, and analysis of the content. The inclusion criteria to select the documents were as follows:

- They were published between April 2014 and October 2018.
- They were published in indexed journals in the Journal Citation Reports (JCR) of Web of Science (WoS).
- They belong to the main collection database in the area of Social Sciences and Humanities.

The search strategy used was $TS = (\text{practicum AND "social work"})$, finding 67 publications whose review focused on the title, abstract, and/or keywords. Subsequently, a WoS category delimitation was carried out: educational research, multidisciplinary humanities, and social work, the results of which produced a total of 51 publications that were in line with the research parameters.

As regards the exclusion criteria taken into account to choose the final sample of texts, those articles in which the search terms were only found in the title and keywords were discarded, since this was information that did not allow further study. Once these publications were ruled out, each of the summaries and/or full texts were reviewed to determine which aspects each study focused on.

The final sample consisted of 34 documents for their respective analysis, which, according to the classification of Montero and León (2007), corresponds to a retrospective *ex post facto* study.

We decided to work with the WoS database because it contains journals with a high impact factor, which reflects good practices and the importance of publications at the international and multidisciplinary level (Hernández-González, Sans-Rosell, Jové-Deltell, & Reverter-Masia, 2016).

Results

The exhaustive review of the literature regarding the subject of internships and social work produced four major categories into which they can be grouped: learning, experiences, assessment, and cognitive and socio-emotional factors, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Categories of analysis revealed in the literature review on professional internships in social work.

| Category | N° of articles | Year | Country | Methodology | Technique | Participants |
|---|----------------|--|-----------------|--|---------------------|---|
| Learning in professional internships | 5 | 2017 (2) 2018 (3) | Canada (1) | Qualitative (3) Quantitative (1) Mixed (1) | Interviews (2) | Undergraduate students (4) Master's students (1) |
| | | | China (2) | | Focus groups (1) | |
| | | | Italy (1) | | Interviews (1) | |
| | | | Ireland (1) | | Logs (1) | |
| Experiences of professional internships | 7 | 2015 (2) 2016 (2) 2017 (2) 2018 (1) | USA (3) | Qualitative (7) | Interviews (5) | Students (7) |
| | | | China (3) | | Experiences (2) | |
| | | | Israel (1) | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| Assessment of professional internships | 11 | 2015 (2) 2016 (4) 2017 (1) 2018 (4) | USA (5) | Qualitative (8) Quantitative (2) Mixed (1) | Interviews (8) | Students (5) Teachers (3) Managers/ coordinators (3) |
| | | | Canada (2) | | Surveys (2) | |
| | | | China (2) | | Experiences (1) | |
| | | | Colombia (1) | | | |
| | | | New Zealand (1) | | | |
| Cognitive and socio-emotional factors in professional internships | 11 | 2015 (1) 2016 (4) 2017 (6) | Australia (1) | Qualitative (4) Quantitative (5) Mixed (2) | Surveys (5) | Undergraduate students (8) Master's students (1) Managers (1) |
| | | | Canada (2) | | Interviews (4) | |
| | | | China (1) | | Multi-technical (2) | |
| | | | Korea (2) | | | |
| | | | South Korea (1) | | | |
| | | | USA (3) | | | |
| Palestine (1) | | | | | | |

Source: Prepared by the authors (2019)

In general, the analysis categories with the highest numbers of publications are those of assessment and cognitive and socio-emotional factors in professional internships for social work, each of which had 11 articles published between 2015 and 2018. The year with the highest number of publications was 2017, and the country with the largest number of papers was the United States, with 11. Similarly, we can observe that the predominant methodology is qualitative, with 22 studies that use it, and most frequent technique of data production is interviews, with 20 articles that use this. Finally, we can see that the study participants are undergraduate and post-graduate students.

Regarding the category of learning in professional internships, we can see that three of the total papers were published in 2018, with China being the country with the highest production of studies on professional internships for social work. On the other hand, the qualitative methodology was predominant in these studies and interviews were the main technique of data collection, while the participants were mostly undergraduate students.

Of the seven articles referring to experiences of professional internships in social work, there is relatively homogeneous distribution between the years and the countries in which these were published, where the United States and China account for the greatest scientific productivity in this regard. The predominant methodology was qualitative, with use of interviews being the main technique for data production, while the research participants were all students, without mentioning whether they were undergraduates or graduates.

With respect to the 11 articles related to assessment of professional internships in social work, most were published in 2016 and 2018 in the United States. These used a qualitative methodology and interviews as the main technique for data collection. Meanwhile, the participants in these studies were mostly students, although their respective levels were not mentioned.

Scientific production in relation to cognitive and socio-emotional factors in professional internships for social work students totaled six articles published in 2017, while the rest were published in 2015 (one) and 2016 (four). Of these, the United States was the country with the highest production in terms of this category of analysis. Qualitative methodologies were predominant and the most widely-used instrument was surveys; however, use of interviews was also evident. Meanwhile, the students in these studies were undergraduates.

Presentation of themes revealed in the review

Learning in professional internships for social work

Although there is a paucity of research on the learning patterns of students in this career (Ching, Siu, & Wallace, 2018), the literature review shows that it is firmly linked to the context of practice and that has a direct impact on their future performance as social workers, so it is essential for the learning environment to be positive and pleasant for the training process (Flanagan & Wilson, 2018).

For the students, the professional internship is an active learning process, creating and transforming experiences into professional knowledge, during which they experience real-world situations, develop practical skills, integrate theory into experience, and test their ability to be social workers (Qiang & Anne, 2017). Therefore, in order to facilitate the respective learning process, the institutional guides and teachers that accompany them must take on this stage with responsibility.

In this regard, given the complexity involved in the triumvirate of the institutional guide, student, and teacher, extensive literature has been produced regarding the techniques used to support student learning during these training periods, among which the following are mentioned: field notebook, supervision and constant communication with the key learning actors, metacognition, critical reflection, and the learning log, among others, (Abram, Hartung, & Wernet, 2000; Ayala et al., 2014; Bogo, 2006; Chui, 2009; Domakin, 2014; Fortune et al., 2001; Giddings, Vodde, & Cleveland, 2003; Kanno & Koeske, 2010; Knight, 1996; LaPorte & Sweifach, 2011; Maidment, 2000; Parker, 2007; Qiang & Anne, 2017; Wilson, O'Connor, Walsh, & Kirby, 2009).

This is based on the fact that developing broad and varied support strategies in professional internships aids the learning of students, who acquire knowledge by observing and being observed by institutional guides with professional experience. Savaya, Peleg-Oren, Stange, and Geron (2003) confirm this when they state that in the field of professional internships there is articulated and contextual learning according to the spaces in which they are developed.

In the teaching-centered model, the practice teacher is responsible for this, both in theory and in practice, while in the field-centered model a distinction is made between the theoretical knowledge taught in the educational institution and the practical knowledge acquired in the fieldwork. Present models thus underline the importance of more transparent processes that value and link teaching-learning in the classroom with experience in the fieldwork (Flanagan & Wilson, 2018), as is also proposed based on the curriculum centered on practice and the model of generative practices that emerges in the area of initial teacher training (Grossman et al., 2009; Müller et al., 2016).

As regards this topic, the research carried out by Bruno and Dell'Aversana (2018), shows that student learning is linked to the relational quality existing in the student-teacher duo, where it is essential for the latter to recognize the former as an active agent that has the capacity to develop their own learning and who is also imbued with unique experiences, needs, and desires, so it is essential to promote commitment, stimulate reflection, and develop a critical position and a sense of professional identity among the students.

Experiences of practice in social work

This topic is aimed at investigating the meanings and experiences that, in the various studies reviewed, the students attributed to the professional internships conducted in social work, understanding these as the distinctive pedagogy of the profession, directly related to the processes of academic training and learning acquired by the relevant actors themselves (Elliot, 1974; Martínez, 2016).

The studies by Eltaiba and Ndoye (2018) and Mishna, Bogo, and Sawyer (2015) address the difficulties that students have when facing this new scenario, which causes uncertainty, demotivation, and individual competitiveness.

Similarly, MacDonnell, George, Nimmagadda, Brown, and Greemel (2016) mention that, based on the perceptions of the students, the curricular strategies in the social work course should be reinforced to address issues of domestic violence in the contexts of professional practice, among other things, so that they can feel secure about their actions. In addition, Deck, Miller, and Conley (2017) state that it is also necessary to accompany and support students to clarify their professional interests, particularly when they do their internship, since it is a significant period of the learning process and which, therefore, requires constant support, as well as being a space for future job opportunities.

Lastly, in her study, Ranz (2017) states that in their internships students request methodological, computational, and personal advice, because these aspects provide them with practical-relational and theoretical value, facilitating situated intervention and promoting ethics and professional quality for users regarding complex and personal issues. This is why it establishes proposals for improvement, which include: establishing instances of field observation by teachers; providing more time for each assigned student; and developing assessments, protocols, and support models in accordance with educational changes (Bae & Park, 2016; Zuchowski, 2015).

Assessment of internships in social work

Assessment is one of the most important processes in helping higher education students with their learning, so it must be transparent and have explicit and clear criteria for all parties involved from the outset (Brown, 2005). Feedback, on the other hand, has been relatively little studied as a social process for the development of effective learning. In this respect, a study by Carless (2006) shows that the students' response to feedback as a central part of the assessment process is pervaded by three intertwined components: speech, power, and emotion, and, in order to improve the difficulties, misconceptions, and differing perceptions regarding assessment and feedback practices, it is necessary to implement evaluative dialogues between teachers and students to clarify the “rules of the game”.

In the same regard, a socio-constructive perspective on feedback proposes that this should be dialogical and help students develop their ability to monitor, assess, and regulate their own learning (Ajjawi & Boud, 2017).

In a study by Bloxham and Campbell (2010), the feedback on work based on questions from students and peer-to-peer discussion are valued as the basis to develop an evaluative dialogue with confidence between the actors, as well as to generate learning among classmates, to be aware of and understand the assessment standards for other students' work through informal interaction, and, finally, to share experiences in communities of academic practice.

As regards the assessment, this is a specific and effective action in the teaching-learning process, which allows one to be aware of the different perspectives of the actors in higher education, committing and assigning mutual responsibilities to students, teachers, and institutional guides, as well as the managers at different times (Chaviano, Baldomir, Coca, & Gutiérrez, 2016).

Similarly, according to Santos-Guerra (2001), assessment requires reflection on the action that one wishes to assess, observe, measure, and analyze, the purpose of which is to direct the transformation of the practices assessed so they can be improved, reinforced, and/or change the knowledge, skills and/or motivations required in the field of professional performance.

Both national and international universities have assumed institutional models and curricular renewal projects with an emphasis on teaching methodologies that situate the student at the center of the teaching-learning process (Améstica-Rivas, Llinas-Audet, & Oriol, 2017). For this reason, with the implementation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) a teaching methodology focused on competencies has been promoted (Quevedo-Blasco, Ariza, & Buela-Casal, 2015), the focus of which is on the training of professionals and learning by doing (González-González, Arquero-Montaño, & Hassall, 2014; Tejada, 2012). In this context, assessment of professional practices in social work is based on follow-up and monitoring of the generic and specific competencies stated in the study plans and respective subject programs, in order to address the present challenges of professional work, in line with the Tuning project (Cai, Bo, & Hsiao, 2018).

On the other hand, according to the studies by Salm, Johner, and Luhanga (2016) and Salm (2017), the factors that influence the assessment that students have of their learning in professional internships are mainly attributed to the teacher-student relationship, which is embedded in their experiences and in all areas of learning. Similarly, students achieve greater integration of generic and specific competencies when they take on responsibility, become aware, assess, and reflect on their training process in conjunction with the various educational agents or actors involved during their internship.

Asakura, Todd, Eagle, and Morris (2018) suggest that coordinating practices, and specifically the actions of teacher-supervisors, requires a much more complex set of knowledge and skills than simply pairing students with institutions where they can practice, based on availability and the interest they express. In this regard, the key challenges proposed by Ayala et al. (2018) are associated with the contexts and realities of the professional internship, the shortage of internships, and the saturation of the centers or institutions where they are carried out. Similarly, it is necessary to safeguard the profiles of the teacher-supervisors, that is, for the acquisition of the practice, recruitment, and retention of these professionals to take into account the minimum requirements and for them to be assessed constantly; in addition to the expectations and workload of the coordinators, teachers, and students being reduced during this period so that the learning is more profound. Lastly, the use of various methods of assessment and formative feedback during professional internships should be recorded, since these promote students' metacognition and they are also very effective in encouraging deep rather than surface learning (Brown, 2005).

Cognitive and socio-emotional factors in professional internships for social work students

Professional experience is pivotal in social work education for students. This statement, made by Williamson et al. (2010), is consistent with synthesis of the perceptions expressed by students and is based on the fact that internships allow the students to operationalize professional values and ethics, as well as developing their self-awareness as social workers, fortifying self-confidence.

Simmons and Fischer (2016) argue that social work students significantly improve their cognitive development during their internships in terms of breadth of cognitive complexity. In their study, the authors suggest that work in the field, that is, in a real situation under the supervision of professionals, has significant implications for the cognitive development of the student.

In this respect, cognitive complexity is understood as a more flexible way of understanding, analyzing, and making sense of the world, because cognitively complex people have the ability to adopt multiple perspectives and find it easier to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity (Bogo, 2010). These results are important because problem-solving and decision-making are crucial in the professional practice of a future social worker, which is why it is indispensable to develop cognitive processes that are consistent with these complexities.

In this regard, Harrison and Atherton (1990) contend that social workers need to think critically and make reflective judgments that go beyond simple solutions to problems that are generally somewhat complex. That is why it is positive to evolve in ways of cognitive thinking in the context of professional internships, since this enables the integration of theory and practice, as well as being useful because it marks the beginning of professional performance.

In this context, Perry's (1970) scheme of intellectual and ethical development has facilitated comprehensions of the categories of development of student thinking during the university education process, which may also be reflected in the process of professional practice of social work students, given that this model proposes an evolution of thought that advances as training progresses, but which does not always reach its maximum level of development. Thus, the first category is *dualism*, understood as an absolutist view of the world, where two contrasting options are conceived when faced with a problem: the correct and the incorrect, which means identifying which of them is correct, and which could take place in the first professional internship that the students carry out.

The next category is known as *multiplicity* and we can identify two positions within it: in the first, or *early multiplicity*, students accept that uncertainty and differences of opinion are legitimate, although they still believe that this is only temporary, so a student in this phase of thinking believes that people may not have all the correct answers, but it is possible to arrive at them. The transition to the second position in this category implies understanding that it is possible to be unable to find correct answers, but critical thinking has not yet been achieved, which is why it is difficult to take a specific position, a process that can be observed in intermediate professional internships. This phase is followed by *relativism*, which represents an important change in the thinking, since here thought is directly associated with the educational context, which can generally be observed in the final professional internship. In the view of Bogo (2010), relativism is the most uncomfortable position for a social work student, because it implies tolerating great uncertainty and ambiguity, in addition to being difficult to achieve while studying, with the internship specifically being the period in which a student begins to think professionally. The final phase of the relativism category, which Perry called *commitment*, has to do with ethical development: a student in this category commits to moral and ethical positions, integrating knowledge and values into decision-making during their process of professional internship.

According to Fleck-Henderson (2002), an interesting point of this model resides in the fact that cognitive complexity develops from the challenges that students face, as well as the support that is provided to them in the different subjects, but, above all, thanks to the internships, as these connect them with professional performance and, therefore, give them real experiences.

In addition to cognitive development, which has been a constant concern in initial training, emotional stability is now added as an important variable, particularly among students who are engaged in professional internships, while self-esteem is also important while studying social work degree courses. In this respect, Lee (2016) points out that this has a significant effect during the course of the degree, given that the higher the self-esteem, the more satisfied students are with the internship, the environment, and the content developed during their training

process, although they do acknowledge not having sufficient preparation in these aspects of training. In this same regard, Williamson et al. (2010) underline the importance of managing students' anxiety when faced with the supervision and performance of professional skills.

On the other hand, Harris, Yancey, Myers, Deimler, and Walden (2017), state that there should be concern about the flexibility of the curriculum in the training of social workers, given that some higher education institutions have incorporated religious beliefs, which they declare explicitly. In the opinion of Sherwood (2012), it is important to appreciate people's beliefs and values (regardless of their creed), as this should allow a better approach to social problems, based on their own views and experiences. In this regard, these authors stated that social work programs have not generally included this area in their training curricula, leaving future professionals unprepared in this respect and without the competencies to deal with their beliefs and/or those of the users. Similarly, Harris et al. (2017) underscore that the initial training of social workers prepares students to apply knowledge and skills, but a profession that values the comprehensive attention of individuals and self-determination should include religious beliefs in professional practice, maintaining ethical limits.

During the training process, students need guidance in order to become aware of how their own feelings, attitudes, and relationships are determining factors in the process of social work intervention and, in this respect, constant reflection on the duty and the use of this reflection to favor the beneficiaries are essential components for a professional in this area.

Given the complexity associated with any training process, subject teachers, institutional guides, and teachers for professional internships in social work, conscious of the difficulties inherent in student practice, should promote a totalizing view of the process of social work intervention among the students, intentionally incorporating self-awareness and the professional self to enable them to develop optimally and empower themselves as future social workers by performing quality work (Urdang, 2010).

That said, in accordance with the findings of Carless (2006) and in relation to the socio-emotional factors with the assessment of professional internships in social work, Boud (1995) states that this is profoundly emotional and impacts the self-perception, commitment, and effective learning of the students. Likewise, the asymmetric power relations inherent in assessment are at risk of invoking negative emotions that may become barriers to feedback and learning (Carless, 2006).

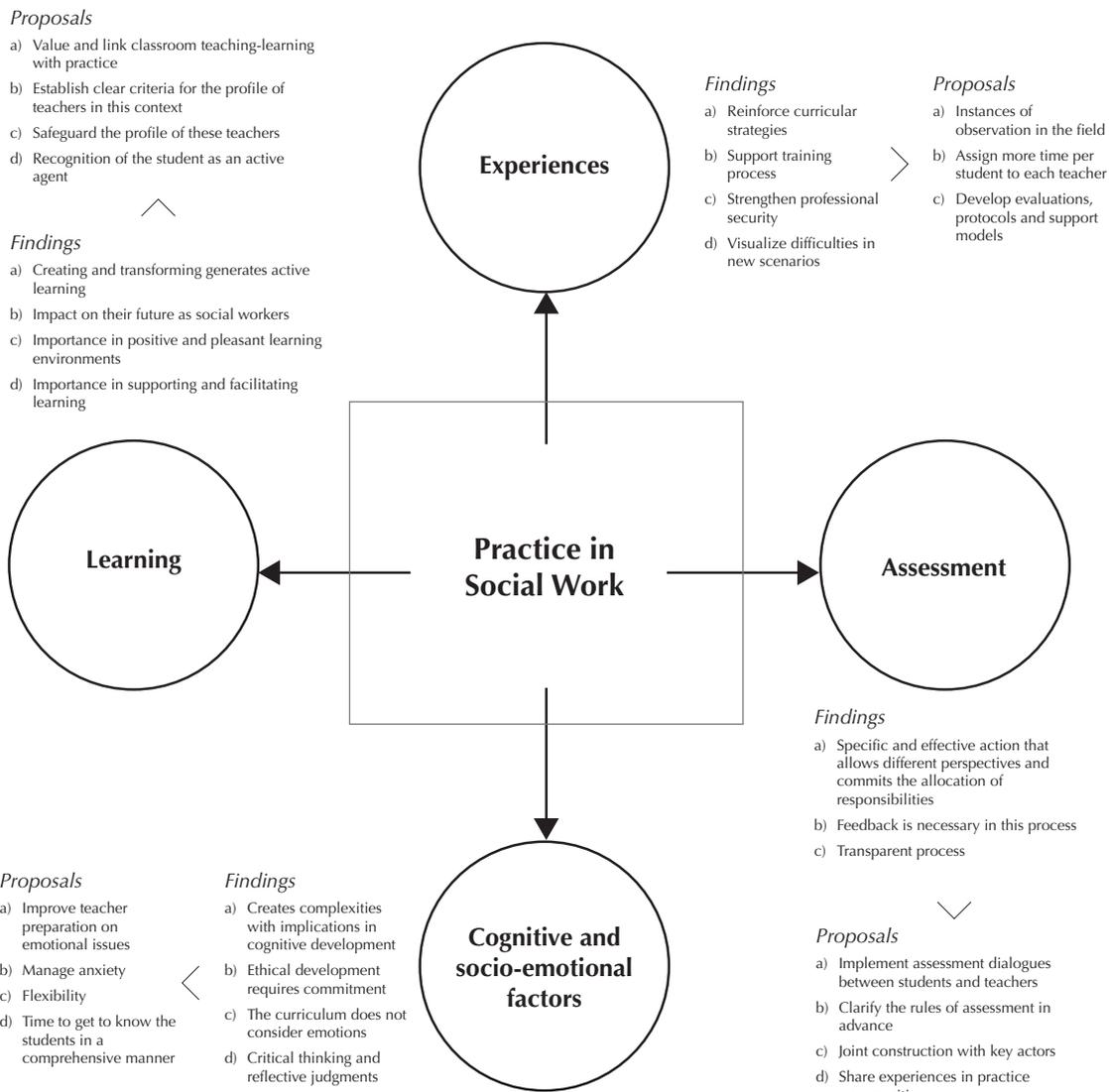


Figure 1. Findings and proposals from the literature review.
 Source: Prepared by the authors.

By way of conclusion of this section, we can point out that the findings made are endorsed and sustained in the principles of the Bologna Declaration and in the proposals of the Tuning project in Latin America, frameworks of action based on which the higher education institutions have had to transform their training systems, pedagogical approaches, teaching methodologies, and assessment models in order to co-construct and promote meaningful learning among students based on their own experiences, thus responding to the new needs and requirements of society (Álvarez, 2011).

Discussion

With regard to professional internships in social work, we can state that field practice should be the center of the curriculum and undergraduate training, since, according to the literature review conducted, it is clear that the learning process of students is strongly linked to the context of the internship, so it has a direct impact on their future performance as social workers (Flanagan & Wilson, 2018).

It is in this context that great responsibility is attributed to institutional guides and university teachers who support the training of each of the students, given their role as facilitators of the learning process during the internship (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018; Flanagan & Wilson, 2018; Qiang & Anne, 2017). Assuming this role implies considering the following challenges: improving oneself at the pedagogical level and in terms of the structuring of professional education; being attentive to the theoretical and practical needs of the students in their professional practice, decomposing teaching practice regarding how to perform professionally as a social worker, identifying the central practices that can subsequently be the basis to develop future study plans, progressively exposing students to authentic experiences of lesser to greater complexity, and providing spaces for feedback and gradual approximation to real situations linked to the performances typical of the profession, in order to analyze and improve these performances during the training process (Grossman et al., 2009; Müller et al., 2016).

Another important aspect that should be highlighted in order for learning to be truly meaningful is the quality of the relationship established between students and teachers, since it influences mutual recognition, commitment, reflection, critical position, and a sense of professional identity (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018).

In relation to the experience of the professional internship, students should address the difficulties they face in this new space of field education, which causes uncertainty, demotivation, and individual competitiveness (Eltaiba & Ndoeye, 2018; Mishna et al., 2015), which drives those responsible for their professional training to assume certain challenges, such as:

- developing improvements in instances for observation in the field;
- greater time for each assigned student being reflected in the hour load;
- developing reflective assessments, protocols, and support models in accordance with the curricular and methodological renewals to which higher education institutions are ascribed, constantly considering the perspective of the various participants in the training process (Bae & Park, 2016; Zuchowski, 2015).

Likewise, in order to develop a positive and enriching experience of professional internship, the curriculum must take into account the diversity and complexity of the social problems that are addressed based on the professional specificity, which are often highly demanding and draining, particularly on the emotional level. Considering this, the teacher should be able to manage according strategies and tools to contain the student, advise, support, and accompany them constantly, and generate self-confidence at the time of professional intervention (Deck et al., 2017; MacDonnell et al., 2016; Ranz, 2017).

As regards assessment and formative feedback, these are processes that contribute significantly to the effective and deep learning of students who carry out their practice applied to professional contexts (Brown, 2005; Carless, 2006), particularly in social work, since they imply a specific action of the respective training process, which requires reflection on the learning result that one wishes to assess, observe, measure, and/or analyze, and whose purpose is to lead to the transformation of the practices assessed (Chaviano et al., 2016; Santos-Guerra, 2001).

According to the scientific evidence, the assessment process also involves a great challenge to demonstrate the acquisition of learning, competencies, skills, and attitudes needed for professional performance, requiring transparency, clarity of criteria, and dialogue between teachers and students (Bloxxham & Campbell, 2010; Brown, 2005; Carless, 2006), with the latter being those who can monitor, observe, and self-regulate their own learning through effective and communicative feedback.

Following Boud (1995), the assessment process is profoundly emotional, since it generates both positive and negative perceptions among the participants and, therefore, these may facilitate or hinder feedback, commitment, self-perception, and learning based on how they interact with the discourse, power relations, and emotions themselves (Carless, 2006). For this reason, it is essential to conduct in-depth research into the emotional burden generated by the assessment, both for the teacher-tutors and the students, particularly in this discipline under study.

That said, the main factor that influences the assessment and the learning that students and teachers have is directly attributed to the teacher-student relationship, which is evident in all areas of learning, in the integration of generic and specific competencies, in the responsibility, and in the awareness of all the actors involved in the development of the assessment during the professional internship (Salm, 2017; Salm et al., 2016).

The cognitive factors of social work students are presented progressively as the training process progresses, according to the various levels of professional internship: initial, intermediate, and final (Bogo, 2010; Perry, 1970). Meanwhile, the socio-emotional factors are highly relevant, taking into account the complexity of the social problems that students face in their various approaches to reality and subjects of intervention. This is why emotional stability, self-esteem, constant reflection regarding professional duties, and being aware of one's feelings, attitudes, and relationships are determining factors in the process of social intervention, as well as essential components for the professional training of future social workers. These factors are aspects that must be reinforced during training, because although it is true that there is progress and greater concern, particularly regarding the socio-emotional factors of students, university training continues to develop in line with traditional logics by primarily focusing on cognitive aspects (Lee, 2016; Urdang, 2010; Williamson et al., 2010).

Practical implications and limitations of the study

This study will be useful to the scientific community, which will be able to learn about the themes being researched in the field of action of social work, particularly in relation to the professional internships of students, and also considering that the papers reviewed are indexed in high-impact international scientific journals. By the same token, it will enable more light to be shed on emerging lines of research that contribute to the further examination of these topics in the Latin American context in general and Chile in particular, as well as using different investigative approaches and involving other actors in future research.

In terms of the limitations, the study ruled out variables such as the origin of the author and number of citations in the studies, because the sample was small and we preferred a focus on the topics revealed based on the literature review, offering the scientific community analytical categories about what was being researched in the time period established herein.

Finally, once the search strategy was applied, the Latin American experiences were left out of the review due to the inclusion criteria we used, which was why we mostly used North American research that was indexed in WoS. Although this obscures the political component present in professional internships in Latin America, such as popular education, resistance, the decolonial issue, or ethical-political transformations—which are also relevant in order to better understand the role of teachers and students in the spaces of social action closest to Chilean reality—this could undoubtedly become a future focus of study by the research team and the scientific community in general.

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