Improving Internal Validity through using Multi-Dimensional and Multi-Method Measures of Professional Competencies

The 2015 EPAS (CSWE, 2015) directs BSW and MSW Programs to assess students’ competencies in varying contexts and through using multiple measurement methods. This presentation describes several methods for evaluating student progress and program monitoring. Included are 5 standardized scales and case presentations, employing objective and subjective measurement methods.

Competency-based measurement tools are recognized by professions as indispensable to adequate professional preparation (Bogo, et al., 2011; Edgren, 2006; Thilakaratne and Kvan, 2006; Wesselink, Dekker-Groen, Biemans, & Mulder, 2010). A variety of tools and measurement methods are necessary to assess student progress and for continuous program monitoring. Measures ideally include both objective (behaviors observed by others) and subjective (individual thoughts, attitudes, or opinions) types of tools. This presentation focuses on standardized instruments and case presentations as methods that can be used by BSW and MSW Programs to evaluate students’ achievement of professional competencies.

Standardized instruments require large validation samples and extensive data analyses to evaluate reliability and validity prior to general use as measurement tools (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). Although the development of such tools is time-consuming and requires a certain level of technical skills, there are increasingly a variety of tools that are available to BSW and MSW Programs for use in education assessment. This presentation includes the description of several standardized measures. The first two of these are instruments that measure generalist level competencies at the BSW and MSW program levels: The Generalist Practice Skills Index (GPS-I) and the Professional Behaviors Scale (BPS). Both of these instruments have demonstrated very high levels of reliability (.95 and above) and excellent content, construct, and factorial validity. These instruments are objective pre-posttest measures that are based on field instructors’ observations of students’ competencies. The third measure, the Social Work Values Inventory has been used nationally since the mid-1990s and is a pre-post subjective measure of changes in students’ adherence to basic professional values. Students are tested at the very beginning of enrollment in social work curricula and at the end of their BSW program enrollment. This measure has continuously exhibited good levels of reliability (.68 to .75) over time and has demonstrated excellent content, construct, and factorial validity.

Two standardized scales to be presented focus on the implicit curriculum. The first standardized instrument, entitled the “Racial Climate Inventory” (RCI), measures students’ perceptions of the racial climate within their academic programs. This measure is comprised of two scales (reliability = .95, .96) and demonstrated excellent levels of content, content, and construct validity. The RCI measures students’ perceptions of racially biased behaviors among their student peers and among faculty (Author, 2002). This subjective measure is useful for in-depth evaluation and analyses of implicit or tacit levels of racial bias within an educational environment. The second measure of the implicit curriculum, entitled the “Education Climate Survey: An Evaluation of the Implicit Curriculum”, is broader in nature and measures how students experience their educational environment or implicit curriculum (Authors, 2014). The two scales measure students’ perceptions about program delivery and the quality of advising (Reliability = .97 and .98, respectively), and the instrument has demonstrated excellent content, construct, and factorial validity. This subjective type of measure is designed to be administered annually and provides programs with on-going program monitoring information on a number of important educational indicators.

A final type of measure is customized for students at varying academic levels and specializations. Students demonstrate acquisition of generalist competencies at the BSW and foundation MSW levels, as well as acquisition of specialized competencies at the MSW level. These objective evaluations involve client case presentations by students either within their practicum agencies or in field seminars. At the beginning of their practicum placements, students are provided a standardized set of instructions that were developed for a given academic level. As a final assignment in field, faculty rate students’ levels of competence in demonstrating a wide variety of professional competencies. Students present a client system’s case from beginning to termination, describing a variety of issues. These issues include identification and application of ethical conduct to ethical issues surrounding the client’s case; developing systems and culturally-informed assessments; implementation of practice theories and research findings as applied to the assessment, intervention, and termination of the case; and, a delineation of how the client system’s outcomes were evaluated. These comprehensive case presentations allow faculty to observe students’ use of skills in applying concepts, ethics, theories, and practice-informed research to professional practice.

The methods presented here include both standardized and customized education assessment methods that are both objectively and subjectively measured. These are just a few of the methods that can be used in assessing professional competencies. Using multi-dimensional and multi-method tools increases the internal validity (i.e., accuracy) of our assessment of our students’ professional competencies and contributes to more effective services to meet the needs of client systems.

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