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CRITICAL REFLECTION OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS AND ITS DEVELOPMENT IN KAZAKHSTAN

In the context of development of social work in Kazakhstan, critical reflection (CR) is becoming a relevant tool for the formation of professional identity and ethical thinking. The aim of the study is to examine the specific features of implementing critical reflection in educational programs for training social workers, to identify barriers and development opportunities based on international experience. The empirical basis of the study consists of in-depth interviews with 14 teachers from five regions of Kazakhstan. The data analysis, conducted using reflective thematic analysis, showed that the elements of critical reflection are present in teaching practice but are implemented in a fragmented manner through case studies, role plays, written assignments and discussions. The main challenges are related to the lack of a conceptual framework and the absence of critical reflection in official regulatory documents. The study offers recommendations aimed at providing methodological support for social work educators and the systematic development of critical reflection as a key component of professional social work education in Kazakhstan. The study has practical significance for the development of methodological guidelines, curriculum design and professional development of social work educators.

Keywords: critical reflection, education, social work, educational programs, transformational learning.

Introduction

In modern society, the profession of a social worker requires not only an effective response to client requests, but also constant reflection and rethinking of one's own professional practice. An important element of training specialists is the ability to deeply analyze their experience, knowledge and personal attitudes. In this context, the development of critical reflection, a process aimed at a conscious understanding and development of professional activity, is of particular importance. Critical reflection is recognized as a key element of professional development in various disciplines. In pedagogy, it contributes to the formation of professional competencies, pedagogical thinking and global citizenship [1]. In psychology, it is considered as a tool for conscious analysis of experience and improvement of practice through journalism and feedback [2]. In legal education, critical reflection helps to develop professional identity, self-assessment and ethical analysis skills in conditions of social uncertainty [3].

The meaning of the term "critical reflection" has been the subject of extensive discussion among philosophers, social theorists, researchers, educators, and therapists. This concept is associated with a number of positive results, including the development of thinking, deeper learning, as well as a deeper assessment of oneself and social systems. Critical reflection involves "the identification of deeply seated assumptions about the social world and the individual's connection with it" [4, p. 946]. Besides being an important teaching and learning tool in the training of future specialists in social work and social protection, critical reflection is also considered as an emancipatory tool that promotes the joint formation of knowledge and understanding. This process is described as "complex, rigorous, intellectual and emotional enterprise" [5, p.246]. Critical reflection occupies a key place in professional training of social workers, but it is not easy to understand and master it, partly due to the fact that there are many different definitions, which makes the concept itself complex and ambiguous.

The concept of critical reflection (CR) is not limited to the simple act of reflecting or rethinking personal experience. It is a more complex and multi-level process that involves analyzing the hidden and often unconscious assumptions underlying beliefs, values, and professional practices. Mezirow, a key representative of transformative learning theory, was one of the first to argue that reflection goes beyond ordinary thinking and requires a critical examination of the very foundations of knowledge on which professional judgments are based [6]. This position was supported by Brookfield, who emphasizes that in order for reflection to be truly productive, it must include a conscious critique of social and personal presuppositions that shape professional behavior [7]. Fook develops this direction further, considering CR as a process of deconstructing professional

skills and practices with the aim of subsequently creating new theoretical and practical foundations of social work activity [8, p. 144]. Høyrup also highlights that reflection becomes critical when individuals are able to question and challenge the validity of their own assumptions and frames of perception [9, p. 449].

Research shows that critical reflection contributes to the development of professional skills, strengthening the identity of a specialist and the formation of new approaches to working with different groups of clients. It allows social workers to be aware of the influence of social structures and their own position, which is important for effective interaction with vulnerable groups and building trustworthy relationships [10, P. 34–35].

Therefore, critical reflection should be understood not as a discrete or episodic activity, but as a continuous professional process through which practitioners critically interrogate both the outcomes of their actions and the underlying cultural, social, and institutional forces shaping these outcomes, with the intention of informing and improving future practice.

The integration of critical reflection (CR) into social work education is recognized internationally as essential for developing independent thinking, professional identity, and the quality of social services. The Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training [11] emphasize the need to develop the capacity for critical self-reflection. The document states that social work education programs should prepare students to develop as critically self-reflective practitioners who are able to analyze their actions, attitudes, and the impact of context on professional decisions. In Australia, its significance is reflected in the AASW Code of Ethics and Updated Standards of Practice [12]. CR is embedded into the educational process in universities across Canada, and Australia and forms a mandatory part of learning and professional supervision. For example, at the Southern Cross university, it is critical reflection was named as a core graduate attribute of Bachelor and Master courses on Social Welfare. [4, p. 945]. In Canada, reflective processes are considered core learning objectives and core competencies in social work education [13].

The development of CR in social work education is grounded in several theoretical approaches. One of the most influential is Mezirow's theory of transformative learning, which views CR as a mechanism for questioning one's assumptions, reshaping cognitive frames, and promoting personal and professional transformation necessary for ethical practice [6]. A post-structuralist perspective, influenced by Michel Foucault and adopted in social work research, conceptualizes CR as the deconstruction of dominant discourses and norms that shape practice [14, p. 749]. This approach fosters the ability to recognize multiple interpretations

of social situations, respect differences, and critically engage with universalizing interventions.

Taking into account the diverse social context of Kazakhstan: regional differences, the diversity of clients' life situations, as well as the dynamically developing field of social work; critical reflection is becoming an important component of the professional development of future specialists. It allows to better understand personal experience, analyze decisions, identify patterns of reaction and discover new approaches to solving professional problems. The development of CR skills helps to increase professional autonomy, the ability to adapt and make informed decisions in difficult conditions, which is especially important for effective and sustainable social work practices in Kazakhstan.

In the context of professional training of social workers in Kazakhstan, the importance of developing critical reflection is confirmed by official regulatory documents. Thus, in the Professional Standard «Social worker in the field of healthcare» [15], reflection and self-analysis are indicated among the requirements for personal competencies. This emphasizes that the ability to comprehend one's own actions, analyze the impact of personal attitudes and values on professional practice is considered as an essential component of a specialist's qualification. Therefore, the inclusion of critical reflection in educational programs on social work is not only consistent with international approaches, but also reflects current national training priorities. This requires universities to develop methods aimed at developing students' sustainable practice of meaningful professional self-observation, analysis of ethical dilemmas, cultural sensitivity and social responsibility.

The aim of this study is to identify the features of implementing critical reflection in educational programs on social work in Kazakhstan based on the analysis of empirical data, as well as to study the perception and experience of teachers involved in the teaching process.

Materials and Methods

The present research draws on qualitative empirical data exploring how critical reflection is conceptualized and fostered within social work education in Kazakhstan. To examine current pedagogical practices and challenges, in-depth interviews were conducted with social work educators from diverse higher education institutions across the country. The aim of the interviews was to elicit educators' understandings of critical reflection, the pedagogical strategies they employ to develop this competence among students, and the structural and contextual barriers that impede its integration into educational practice.

The sampling was purposive and included 14 teachers (n=14) working in higher education institutions that offer bachelor's and master's degree programs

in social work. The inclusion criteria were: at least one year of teaching experience in social work education and willingness to participate. Teachers currently on leave or not directly involved in social work instruction were excluded. Participants were recruited through professional networks and invitations distributed by program administrators. The number of participants was sufficient to achieve data saturation, as no new codes or themes emerged after the 12th interview, while two additional interviews confirmed stability of the findings.

Participants represented different regions of Kazakhstan: Astana, Almaty, Karaganda, Shymkent, and Pavlodar. The respondents included both specialists with formal social work training (BSW, MSW) and teachers with related qualifications in pedagogy and sociology. Their work experience ranged from 1 to 24 years, which enabled us to reflect the perspectives of both experienced and relatively new specialists. The language of instruction differed across participants, with some teaching exclusively in Kazakh, others in Russian, and a proportion employing both languages in their teaching practice.

Data were collected from February to May 2025 through online in-depth interviews (Zoom). The duration of interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes. An interview guide was used to ensure consistency of questions, while allowing flexibility to capture individual experiences. All participants gave informed consent, and interviews were recorded and transcribed with anonymization of personal data. Interviews were conducted in Kazakh or Russian.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke was under taken to inductively identify key themes. At least two researchers were involved in each stage – “1) data familiarisation; 2) systematic data coding; 3) generating initial themes; 4) developing and reviewing themes; 5) refining, defining and naming themes; and 6) writing the report” [16, p. 331]. This approach was selected due to its suitability for exploring subjective meanings present in teaching practice. Coding and theme development were carried out manually using transcripts, with special attention paid to the researcher’s reflection at all stages of data interpretation. We met regularly to review the literature, undertake analysis, discuss, and identify key themes. While we shared a commitment to the teaching and learning of critical reflection, we held various experiences and standpoints on critical reflection and gained important insights into the view of the others throughout analysis.

Results and Discussion

An analysis of interviews with teachers has shown that the development of critical reflection in educational programs of social work in Kazakhstan is carried out mainly through practice-oriented and interactive methods. Despite the lack of unified methodological approaches, most participants noted the importance of including learning formats that encourage students to reflect on personal

attitudes, professional values, and the context of social practice. The following are the most frequently mentioned methods and forms of work aimed at developing critical reflection in the educational process.

Main methods contributing to critical reflection development

Despite the absence of a conceptual framework for developing CR, educators describe teaching practices that clearly contain elements of reflexive practice. These often involve working through one's own values, beliefs, and professional position through case analysis, discussions, trainings, and experiencing professional roles (P – interview participant).

"Case management is like a filter, students begin to realize that they cannot be guided by one opinion" (P7)

"I use role plays. When they are assigned roles and someone becomes a service user, it is a completely different perception. It's a reflection" (P12)

These practices are most often implemented through the following methods described below.

Case method is the most commonly used approach. The cases allow students to analyze difficult situations, identify the influence of personal beliefs, and look for alternative solutions. The method is used both in the framework of case management and in interdisciplinary assignments.

Role plays: immersion in professional and client roles promotes the development of empathy and the revision of stereotypes. This is especially important for undergraduates who come with clear but often superficial judgments.

Feedback, guiding questions and essays: These methods are used to re-inforce reflection. Students are encouraged to reflect in writing on their experience and then discuss them, tracking changes in perception and professional stance.

Trainings, discussions and brainstorming: these formats promote collective reflection, allowing to identify differences in perception and evaluation, and move beyond one's own assumptions.

To summarize the identified approaches, analytical table was compiled (Table 1), presenting the methods used and key themes emphasized in teachers' statements.

Table 1 – Methods that promote critical reflection in Kazakhstani universities

Method	Teachers' statements
Case studies	"We analyze cases and teach students to avoid relying on their own beliefs" (P2)
Role plays	"Experiencing the role of a client triggers reflection" (P12)
Feedback and essay	"Every lesson includes feedback" (P3)

Brainstorming	"We take into account everyone's opinion and compare them" (P8)
Training sessions and discussions	"In training sessions we explore how personal beliefs interfere with practice" (P2)
Guiding questions	"I ask guiding questions to stimulate reflection" (P5)
Focus group discussions	"We critically discuss situations and look for solutions" (P9)

In addition to the qualitative processing of the interview, the frequency of mentions of various methods was calculated. This allowed us to identify which approaches are most common among teachers.

The following diagram illustrates the frequency of mentioning each method:

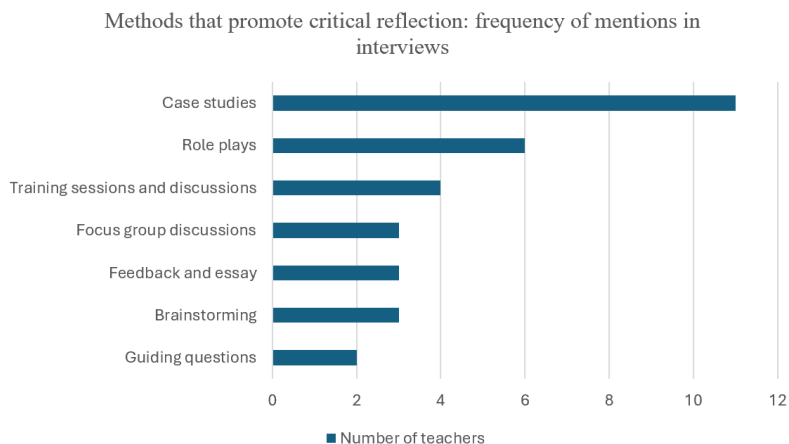


Figure 1 –Frequency of mentioning methods that promote critical reflection (based on interviews)

The diagram clearly confirms the dominant role of the case studies and the high prevalence of role plays and training sessions. These methods are used mostly intuitively and are embedded in everyday teaching practice. Less popular but valuable forms, brainstorming, written reflections and focus groups, create conditions for deep analysis and self-reflection.

The evolution of students' professional thinking

One of the prominent themes identified during the interview analysis was the dynamics of changing students' professional thinking in the learning process. Teachers note that in the initial courses, students often come with clear, but simplified and categorical ideas about social work, not always realizing the complexity of client situations and the contextual nature of decisions. However, as students engage with case analysis, role plays, and reflective assignments, a shift begins to occur from "right/wrong" position to a more flexible and critical perception of professional reality. As one of the interview participants noted:

"They are often categorical: «No, it's wrong, it should be done like this and that." They come in with great ambition. But by the second and third year, they begin to understand their professional stance" accurately: "Oh, no, we should evaluate situations in this way, approach issues like that, and avoid stereotypical thinking". (P4)

Other participants also emphasize the importance of the gradual process of through which students open up to a variety of viewpoints. For example:

"When you only give the first task for reflection, it is very difficult ... and gradually it becomes like a skill, the skill of constantly passing your thoughts through the filter" (P3).

This shift from confidence in one's own assumptions to a more balanced and reflective professional perspective demonstrates the effectiveness of critical reflection as a tool for fostering students' maturity and professional resilience.

Understanding the importance of CR and its role in professional development

Despite the fact that teachers may have different ideas about critical reflection, most of them realize its importance as a necessary element of the professional development of future social workers. Interviews often emphasize that the ability to self-observe, rethink experience, and analyze one's own position is considered an integral part of preparing for professional practice. For example, one of the participants emphasizes that:

"Critical reflection, what does it give us as teachers? Mentoring, or communication between students ... rethinking our own position" (P13).

Also, a number of teachers directly associate CR with professional ethics and responsibility. One of the interview participants notes:

"Each of us has our own experience, beliefs, specific principles that can influence the work with our clients. And it's important to be able to recognize where you're imposing and where you're really listening". (P2).

Thus, even in the absence of a formalized methodology, teachers see critical reflection as the key to professional growth, ethical choice, and meaningful interaction with clients.

Barriers: ambiguity of concepts and methodological uncertainty

Despite the practical use of the elements of CR, the interviews revealed limited terminological clarity among the teachers. One of the key barriers to the introduction of critical reflection (CR) in the training of social workers in Kazakhstan is terminological uncertainty and the lack of a unified methodological approach.

Many participants in the study primarily mean critical thinking by a critical approach, while the term «critical reflection» remains poorly understood or is not used at all:

"I didn't focus on the critical thinking of my students. But I think it's very important. Critical thinking, so that all this is formed from childhood" (P10).

"My methodology is working with cases, project activities too. They develop creativity, as well as critical thinking" (P2).

A similar attitude can be traced in the institutional approach to the formation of competencies:

"When designing professional competencies we definitely include critical thinking there" (P5).

These quotes illustrate that in the perception of teachers, critical reflection is often perceived either as a synonym for critical thinking or as an integral part of it, while in the international scientific literature critical reflection is considered as a deeper process that includes not only cognitive assessment, but also comprehension of personal experience, internal attitudes, ethical dilemmas and social context.

Also, the analysis of interviews showed that many teachers are not sure that they implement critical reflection in their practice, or consider it contrary to existing standards.

"Critical reflection, honestly, we don't have a clear understanding. But it seems to be a reflection, that we do" (P9)

"If we introduce the CR as a separate course, we will set students up against the legislation" (P7)

It is important to note that most teachers implement CR unconsciously, which indicates the need to develop a conceptual framework and methodological recommendations for teachers in order to make the implementation of CR more conscious and systematic. The introduction of critical reflection requires not the creation of a separate course, but the inclusion of relevant practices in existing training modules with an understanding of their essence and goals.

The analysis of interviews with social work teachers at universities in Kazakhstan shows that the elements of CR are present in educational practice.

The use of such methodological techniques as case studies, role-plays, feedback and discussions contribute to the formation of skills of self-analysis and revision of personal professional assumptions. Despite this, the development of students' understanding of social work remains at an intuitive level due to the lack of a clear conceptual framework.

Unlike Kazakhstan, in international practice CR is considered as a key component of educational programs. An evident example is the experience of Australia, where critical reflection is integrated into most bachelor's degree courses in social work. Of particular importance is the Critical Approaches to Social Work course taught at Deakin University in the fourth year of study, after the students' first academic internship [14, p. 746]. This course was developed by Jan Fook and Christine Morley and is based on a post-structuralist approach to critical reflection. The aim of the course is not only to teach students how to analyze their practical experience, but also to promote transformational learning, the formation of professional identity and the development of active citizenship.

International practices demonstrate the diversity of teaching methods in CR that can be adapted to the Kazakhstani educational context:

1 Dialogic practices are the dominant strategy in teaching CR. They are implemented in the form of small groups, seminars, paired discussions and interactive feedback from teachers. Dialogue promotes deeper understanding of professional experience and helps to identify hidden beliefs and assumptions [17].

2 Critical incident analysis is used to deal with situations that cause stress or professional dilemmas. Such cases help students not only analyze their reactions, but also rethink professional and personal beliefs [18].

3 Teacher modeling plays an important role in creating a safe educational environment. Teachers sharing personal examples from practice makes reflection less formal and helps reduce students' anxiety [19].

4 Reflective journals as a regular educational practice contribute to the formation of a stable habit of self-analysis and critical thinking where students consider social justice, ethics, values, and use of self, [17].

In Kazakhstan, the development of critical reflection of social workers is at an early stage compared to international practice. The lack of a conceptual framework is the main obstacle on this path. This is reflected in the terminological ambiguity that occurs when CR is considered from the point of view of critical thinking, and in the fact that some teachers consider CR to be negative and inappropriate in a local context. In addition, the absence of CR in regulatory and methodological documents complicates institutionalization and recognition of it as an important component of social worker training.

Nevertheless, the use of methods to foster CR is an important resource for development. Instead of creating new study courses, CR should be integrated into existing modules and disciplines such as professional ethics, social policy, and supervision. This will make it possible to systematically implement reflexive practices and at the same time overcome administrative obstacles. In addition, it is necessary to create methodological recommendations on teaching CR and organize advanced training courses for teachers. This will create the basis for the sustainable and informed implementation of these approaches in educational practice.

Thus, based on international experience, Kazakhstan can build its own conceptual framework for critical reflection in preparing social workers. This will enhance the quality of professional training, ensure the development of an ethical and critical culture among students, and promote the formation of socially active and reflective professionals.

Conclusions

The results of the study show that social work teachers of Kazakhstani universities actively apply various methods that contribute to the development of students' reflective thinking, such as case analysis, role plays, discussions and feedback. This indicates the presence of pedagogical potential and interest in the formation of students' skills of self-analysis and critical reflection on practice. At the same time, critical reflection in educational training programs for social workers is still implemented mainly in a fragmented manner. The lack of a clear understanding and systematic approach to CR as an independent educational component indicates the need for its conceptual understanding and further institutionalization in vocational training.

Critical reflection plays an important role in preparing social workers, as it helps them develop the ability to deeply reflect on their own professional experience, analyze personal beliefs and values, as well as develop critical thinking and self-reflection skills. These competencies are necessary for effective and ethical interaction with clients, making informed decisions and adapting to difficult social situations. Thus, the development of critical reflection is directly related to improving the quality of professional training and successful practical work of social workers.

The prospects for further work in this area include the development of methodological materials and recommendations aimed at systematization and awareness of critical reflection by teachers and students. An important step is to organize teacher training, introduce critical reflection into existing academic disciplines and practical exercises, and create a supportive educational environment that encourages open discussion and in-depth analysis of experience. Regular monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of the introduction of critical

reflection will allow timely adjustment of educational practices and ensure the sustainable development of competencies of future social workers.

Thus, critical reflection is a key element of modern education for social workers and requires targeted efforts to fully integrate it into the educational process in Kazakhstan.

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ӘЛЕУМЕТТІК ЖҰМЫС СТУДЕНТТЕРІНІҢ СЫНИ РЕФЛЕКСИЯСЫ ЖӘНЕ ОНЫҢ ҚАЗАҚСТАНДАҒЫ ДАМУЫ

Қазақстанда әлеуметтік жұмысты дамыту аясында сыни рефлексия (СР) кәсіби бірегейлік пен этикалық ойлауды қалыптастырудың өзекті құралына айналууда. Бұл зерттеудің мақсаты әлеуметтік қызметкерлерді даярлау жөніндегі білім беру бағдарламаларына сыни рефлексияны енгізу ерекшеліктерін зерделеу, халықаралық тәжірибе негізінде дамудың кедергілері мен мүмкіндіктерін анықтау болып табылады. Зерттеудің эмпирикалық негізін Қазақстанның бес өңірінен келген 14 оқытушымен терең сұхбат құрады. Рефлексиялық тақырыптық талдауды қолдана отырып жүргізілген деректерді талдау сыни рефлексия элементтері педагогикалық тәжірибеде бар екенін, бірақ кейстерді, рөлдік ойындарды, жазбаша тапсырмаларды және пікірталастарды талдау арқылы үзінді түрде жүзеге асырылатынын көрсетті. Негізгі проблемалар ресми нормативтік құжаттарда сыни рефлексияның тұжырымдамалық негізінің болмауымен байланысты. Зерттеуде әлеуметтік жұмыс оқытушыларына әдіснамалық қолдау көрсетуге және Қазақстандағы әлеуметтік жұмыс саласындағы кәсіптік білім берудің негізгі құрамдас бөлігі ретінде сыни рефлексияны жүйелі дамытуға бағытталған ұсыныстар беріледі. Зерттеу әдістемелік ұсыныстарды, оқу бағдарламаларын әзірлеу және әлеуметтік жұмыс оқытушыларының біліктілігін арттыру үшін практикалық маңызы бар.

Кілтті сөздер: сыни рефлексия, білім, әлеуметтік жұмыс, білім беру бағдарламалары, трансформациялық оқыту.

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КРИТИЧЕСКАЯ РЕФЛЕКСИЯ СТУДЕНТОВ СОЦИАЛЬНОЙ РАБОТЫ И ЕЕ РАЗВИТИЕ В КАЗАХСТАНЕ

В контексте развития социальной работы в Казахстане критическая рефлексия (КР) становится актуальным инструментом формирования профессиональной идентичности и этического мышления. Целью данного исследования является изучение особенностей внедрения критической рефлексии в образовательные программы по подготовке социальных работников, выявление барьеров и возможностей развития на основе международного опыта. Эмпирическую основу исследования составили глубинные интервью с 14 преподавателями из пяти регионов Казахстана. Анализ данных, проведенный с использованием рефлексивного тематического анализа, показал, что элементы критической рефлексии присутствуют в педагогической практике, но реализуются фрагментарно с помощью анализа кейсов, ролевых игр, письменных заданий и дискуссий. Основные проблемы связаны с отсутствием концептуальной основы для критической рефлексии в официальных нормативных документах. В исследовании предлагаются рекомендации, направленные на оказание методологической поддержки преподавателям социальной работы и систематическое развитие критической рефлексии как ключевого компонента профессионального образования в области социальной работы в Казахстане. Исследование имеет практическую значимость для разработки методических рекомендаций, разработки учебных программ и повышения квалификации преподавателей социальной работы.

Ключевые слова: критическая рефлексия, образование, социальная работа, образовательные программы, трансформационное обучение.

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