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ARTICLE

# Family Mediation: Competencies for Social Work Training

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## Abstract

This article discusses the fundamental principles of family mediation training and social competencies, focussing on the needs and requirements of mediation training. The results of the research, which was conducted with the assistance of professional mediators and students, are presented with a view to analysing the incorporation of mediation training within the competencies and requirements of the European Higher Education Area. The competencies defined by the statistical analysis can serve as a useful tool for the development of new syllabuses and for professionals who work in the area of conflict management.

## Keywords

conflict, mediation, competencies, social work, family

## INTRODUCTION

In our research, we focussed on the training requirements for mediation with a view to it being included in university training of social workers, using as a base the main agreements reached in discursive practices from a European and international perspective. We will first give some background on the role of social work in conflict management, particularly in the area of social mediation.

European higher education is currently undergoing a period of transformation as a result of the launch of the European Higher Education Area. This reform emphasises the need for all citizens to develop a range of competencies and skills that will enable them to undergo effective training in preparation for the world of work.

Moreover, significant social changes are taking place in social and family structures. One of the social institutions that has been most affected is the family, which has changed and evolved with the deinstitutionalisation of the traditional unit and the emergence of various types of family structure. Other factors, such as immigration, have led to an increasingly plural and multi-ethnic social reality. These developments have resulted in the rapid growth of family mediation as a method of intervention for social professions in general and social work in particular. Moore (1995: 9) defines mediation as "the intervention into a dispute or negotiation by an acceptable, impartial and neutral third party, who has no authoritative decision-making power" According to J. F. Six (1997: 13), "its purpose is to foster new relationships between the parties or prevent or heal troubled relationships."

We opted for a quantitative methodology, using a survey, to provide an insight into family mediation as close as possible to the reality. The aim was to identify the best quality learning of the competencies necessary for professional mediation, to be included in social work syllabuses. Experts were also interviewed to validate the effectiveness of the questionnaire and the relevance of the competencies and skills, to ensure the results were statistically significant and consistent with the changes in social work training

in the latest reforms of the training syllabuses. By coordinating the paradigmatic and methodological levels, we can empirically validate the proposed competence, to serve as a theoretical and methodological tool for both teachers and professionals working in the field.

The current effort to adapt syllabuses to the European Higher Education Area, requires scientific foundations to justify research on mediation and the competencies required by the social situation and the job market. The introduction of mediation training programmes in syllabuses is fundamental for equipping social work graduates with the necessary tools to use in all situations (Rondón, 2010).

This has given rise to calls for current teaching practices in social work studies to be modified and updated to reflect the social changes affecting families and the emergence of conflict.

The aim, therefore, was to analyse the competencies required for social workers to become involved in family mediation. The data from this analysis of the competencies required for social workers to become involved in family mediation could be a useful tool for developing new syllabuses and an interesting source of information for those involved in research activities.

## METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURE

In view of the objectives of the research, data collection involved a questionnaire with closed questions. In order to validate competencies and skills, experts and practitioners were previously consulted about their suitability for the role of mediator and a pre-test was conducted to ensure the appropriateness of the questions and to ascertain the initial impressions of the practitioners. The questionnaire was individual and self-administered, and the majority of the questions were closed in line with the purpose of the study. The comparative analysis of the two groups (students and professionals) enabled an analysis of the training received and its comparison with the realities of the job market.

To perform the statistical analysis, the latest version of SPSS, version 19.0, was used, which enabled us to establish descriptive statistics, averages, weighted sums, contingency tables, charts and levels of significance.

## PARTICIPANTS

The population samples for this research were:

- Final year social work students at the Complutense University of Madrid.
- Qualified professional mediators with a social work training background.
- Experts in social work training and mediation.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE VARIABLES

The analysis variables were structured in two main areas. One was related to the participants' backgrounds, including socio-demographic considerations, the subject's current status and the university they attended. The second dealt with the competencies necessary for the practice of mediation in social work studies, in accordance with the requirements of the European Higher Education Area, i.e. general and specific competencies, social skills and specific mediation subjects.

## ANALYSIS AND DESCRIPTION OF THE DATA

### Part 1: The background of the respondents

The university students participating were mainly young, female and full-time social work students. Considering the average age in general and those studying at the Complutense University in particular, a high percentage was very young: 90% were aged between 18 and 25 and only 10% were over 25. In relation to sex, 83.2% were women and 16.9% were men. In terms of employment, 57.7% were full-time social work students, 27.7% were employed, and 14.5% defined themselves as being in other situations, such as undertaking work experience, casual work and looking after children.

To a certain extent, the professional mediators had similar characteristics: they were predominantly female (81.25% women) and young (56.25% were aged between 26 and 33, with only 9.38% between the ages of 42 and 49.

With regard to their fields of work, the majority specialised in family mediation (71.88%) and the remaining in intercultural (12.5%) and judicial (9.38%) mediation. Other areas such as community mediation were not particularly well represented (6.38%).

### Part 2. Assessment of general and specific competencies and social skills

The following analysis evaluates the score for professional competencies and social skills, classifying the most impor-

tant according to the hierarchical order and importance they were given by the participants on the survey. For each group of competencies and skills, the respondent not only had to indicate the order of priority, but also the five most important competencies. The results are shown in three tables. Table 1 covers the classification of general competencies (gc), Table 2, specific competencies (sc) and Table 3, social skills (ss). The scores are ordered according to the percentage of the five most important general competencies to compare the evaluation with the importance given to them.

Due to the large amount of data, the students' results are shown on the left of the table and the professional mediators' on the right to display the information clearly. The shaded columns indicate the weighted sum of the group, which takes into account the fact that the student group is the largest and represents the point of comparison of the analysis.

The results obtained from the statistical analysis are shown below:

Table 1. Classification according to the weighted sum of the percentages in general competencies
Weighted sum: the sum of the % of students/professionals who ranked the skill category in the top five positions, with the position of the general competencies (gc) weighted as follows: gc1 x 5 + gc2 x 4 + gc3 x 3 + gc4 x 2 + gc5 x 1.

| General competencies | Students: positions in general competencies (gc) 1-5 (%) | | | | | | Professionals: positions in general competencies (gc) 1-5 (%) | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | gc1 | gc2 | gc3 | gc4 | gc5 | Weighted sum | gc1 | gc2 | gc3 | gc4 | gc5 | Weighted sum |
| 17 Conflict management | 18.8 | 14.1 | 16.5 | 18.4 | 13.4 | 251.13 | 53.1 | 12.5 | 18.8 | | 3.1 | 375.00 |
| 3 Interpersonal skills | 18.8 | 10.8 | 11.8 | 5.2 | 10.1 | 193.80 | 25.0 | 9.4 | 28.1 | 3.1 | 9.4 | 262.50 |
| 2 Teamwork | 14.5 | 12.4 | 6.1 | 7.5 | 10.5 | 165.92 | | | | | 3.1 | 3.13 |
| 15 Commitment | 5.1 | 6.6 | 10.4 | 11.8 | 8.1 | 115.51 | | | | | | 0.00 |
| 18 Analytical ability | 4.2 | 8.4 | 6.6 | 11.3 | 12.9 | 110.82 | 3.1 | 21.9 | 9.4 | 21.9 | 18.8 | 193.75 |
| 10 Critical reasoning | 6.6 | 7.5 | 4.2 | 6.6 | 3.8 | 93.12 | 3.1 | | 9.4 | 6.3 | 3.1 | 59.38 |
| 4 Ethical commitment | 7.0 | 7.0 | 4.7 | 4.7 | 4.3 | 91.70 | | 3.1 | | 6.3 | 6.3 | 31.25 |
| 16 Assertiveness | 3.7 | 8.0 | 7.5 | 4.7 | 2.4 | 85.57 | 6.3 | 21.9 | 3.1 | 12.5 | 15.6 | 168.75 |
| 1 Decision making | 7.0 | 4.7 | 3.7 | 5.6 | 6.7 | 83.72 | 3.1 | 3.1 | 6.3 | 9.4 | 15.6 | 81.25 |
| 11 Adaptation to new circumstances | 1.8 | 3.3 | 12.3 | 6.6 | 8.6 | 81.53 | 3.1 | | 6.3 | 12.5 | 6.3 | 65.63 |
| 9 Recognition of diversity and multiculturalism | 4.7 | 5.6 | 4.7 | 3.7 | 4.3 | 72.35 | | 6.3 | 3.1 | 3.1 | 6.3 | 46.88 |
| 5 Creativity | 3.3 | 3.3 | 2.8 | 3.7 | 2.8 | 48.72 | | 12.5 | 9.4 | 6.3 | 9.4 | 100.00 |
| 8 Information management skills | 0.4 | 2.8 | 2.8 | 2.8 | 2.8 | 30.78 | 3.1 | 9.4 | 6.3 | 12.5 | 3.1 | 100.00 |
| 12 Concern for quality | 0.0 | 0.9 | 1.4 | 3.7 | 2.4 | 18.03 | | | | 6.3 | | 12.50 |
| 14 Public service vocation | 0.4 | 0.9 | 2.8 | 0.4 | 1.9 | 17.53 | | | | | | 0.00 |
| 6 Leadership | 1.4 | 0.9 | 0.4 | 1.4 | 0.9 | 16.08 | | | | | | 0.00 |
| 7 Knowledge of a foreign language | 1.4 | 0.9 | 0.4 | 0.4 | 2.4 | 15.62 | | | | | | 0.00 |
| 13 Probity | 0.0 | 0.4 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.9 | 2.85 | | | | | | 0.00 |

Source: Compiled by author

Both participant groups indicated that essential general skills were conflict management, interpersonal and analytical skills. Teamwork and commitment however were more highly valued by the students than the professionals, who, interestingly, carry out much of their work in a team, as shown by their answers to part 1. Probity scored very low for both groups. Many of the respondents needed to ask about the meaning of this word as they completed the questionnaire, which perhaps explains why it received a low score or was simply not answered.

Both groups agreed on the two most important competencies (conflict management and interpersonal skills). There were also similarities in the category of analytical ability, although the students generally gave it a lower score. As mentioned above, the students largely opted for commitment and teamwork, and the professionals for assertiveness and creativity. The main difference was found in the students' group, where the correspondence between the competencies rated as most important and how highly they were ranked was not proportional, i.e. between 3 and 4. The, exception was the recognition of diversity and multiculturalism competency, which featured among the five highest rated and also among the most valued.

In contrast, quality, public service, leadership and knowledge of a foreign language were considered general competencies with little value, especially among the students.

Table 2. Classification according to the weighted sum of percentages in specific competencies
Weighted sum: the sum of the % of students/professionals who ranked the specific competence (sc) category in the top five positions, with the different positions weighted as follows: sc1 x 5 + sc2 x 4 + sc3 x 3 + sc4 x 2 + sc5 x 1

| Specific competencies | Students: positions in specific competencies (sc) 1-5 | | | | | | Professionals: positions in specific competencies (sc) 1-5 | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | sc1 | sc2 | sc3 | sc4 | sc5 | Weighted sum | sc1 | sc2 | sc3 | sc4 | sc5 | Weighted sum |
| 18 Identifying the cause of conflict | 5.5 | 6.6 | 9.7 | 7.7 | 1.5 | 100.81 | | 15.6 | 9.4 | 3.1 | 3.1 | 100.00 |
| 26 Managing a communication process for agreement | 8.5 | 3.5 | 2.5 | 6.2 | 13.1 | 90.54 | 3.1 | | | | 6.3 | 21.88 |
| 24 Skilful mediation through communication | 5.5 | 6.1 | 2.5 | 8.2 | 4.7 | 81.32 | 9.4 | 6.3 | 3.1 | 18.8 | | 118.75 |
| 23 Social skills to express ideas | 6.5 | 2.5 | 4.1 | 8.8 | 4.7 | 77.76 | 3.1 | 9.4 | 9.4 | 12.5 | | 106.25 |
| 5 Understanding conflict as a basis of mediation | 8.0 | 3.5 | 4.1 | 0.5 | 4.2 | 72.31 | 3.1 | 3.1 | | | | 28.13 |
| 1 Understanding conflict as a human dimension | 10.6 | 1.0 | 1.5 | 4.1 | 1.5 | 71.62 | 18.8 | 6.3 | | 6.3 | 3.1 | 134.38 |
| 25 Professional confidentiality and ethical principles | 3.5 | 5.1 | 4.1 | 4.1 | 6.8 | 65.59 | | 3.1 | 6.3 | 3.1 | 3.1 | 40.63 |
| 9 Respect for cultural diversity | 2.5 | 8.1 | 2.5 | 3.1 | 3.1 | 62.39 | 3.1 | 3.1 | 3.1 | | | 37.50 |
| 11 Interaction in conflicts to achieve balance | 2.0 | 5.1 | 6.1 | 4.6 | 3.6 | 62.08 | 15.6 | 15.6 | 9.4 | 3.1 | 6.3 | 181.25 |
| 8 Identifying the interests of the parties involved | 3.5 | 5.1 | 3.6 | 4.1 | 3.1 | 60.36 | | 12.5 | 6.3 | | | 68.75 |
| 19 Recognising mediation as a viable alternative | 3.5 | 4.5 | 4.6 | 3.6 | 2.6 | 59.85 | | 6.3 | 6.3 | 6.3 | 6.3 | 62.50 |
| 10 Supporting the parties in a self-management capacity | 2.5 | 5.1 | 5.6 | 4.1 | 1.0 | 59.39 | | 3.1 | | 9.4 | 3.1 | 34.38 |
| 3 Developing work hypotheses about the conflict | 6.5 | 3.0 | 1.5 | 2.0 | 3.6 | 57.54 | | 3.1 | 3.1 | | | 21.88 |
| 7 Valuing the participation of the parties in conflict | 5.0 | 3.5 | 5.1 | 0.5 | 1.0 | 57.09 | 3.1 | | 9.4 | 3.1 | | 50.00 |
| 12 Understanding the profile of the mediator | 2.0 | 3.0 | 4.6 | 5.1 | 0.5 | 47.15 | | | 3.1 | | | 9.38 |
| 6 Assuming mediation voluntarily | 4.0 | 4.0 | 1.0 | 2.5 | 1.5 | 46.38 | 3.1 | 3.1 | | 9.4 | 9.4 | 56.25 |
| 21 Investigating mediation experiences | 0.5 | 6.1 | 3.0 | 3.1 | 3.6 | 46.20 | 3.1 | | 3.1 | | 3.1 | 28.13 |
| 20 Using optimum intervention methods | 4.0 | 2.0 | 2.5 | 2.5 | 4.2 | 45.49 | | | | 6.3 | | 12.50 |
| 4 Distinguishing between different types of conflict | 2.5 | 1.5 | 4.6 | 3.6 | 2.6 | 42.55 | 9.4 | 3.1 | | 3.1 | | 65.63 |
| 17 Intervening to find real solutions | 2.0 | 0.5 | 7.2 | 1.0 | 1.5 | 37.44 | 9.4 | 3.1 | 6.3 | | 12.5 | 90.63 |
| 27 Designing communication strategies | 0.5 | 3.0 | 2.5 | 4.1 | 4.7 | 35.53 | | | | 6.3 | 6.3 | 18.75 |
| 14 Explaining possible legal consequences | 1.0 | 1.5 | 4.1 | 3.6 | 1.5 | 32.38 | | | | | | 0.00 |
| 28 Assessing interventions | 0.5 | 3.5 | 3.0 | 2.0 | 2.1 | 32.34 | 3.1 | | 3.1 | 3.1 | 12.5 | 43.75 |
| 30 Availability of mediation training | 2.5 | 1.0 | 0.5 | 2.0 | 2.1 | 24.50 | | 3.1 | | | 3.1 | 15.63 |
| 13 Investigating, analysing and using existing knowledge | 0.0 | 3.0 | 2.0 | 1.0 | 0.5 | 21.03 | | | 3.1 | | | 9.38 |
| 15 Evaluating interventions from a psychosocial perspective | 1.5 | 1.5 | 1.0 | 1.0 | 1.5 | 20.44 | | | | | | 0.00 |
| 16 Extensive professional knowledge | 0.5 | 1.5 | 1.0 | 1.0 | 1.5 | 15.39 | 3.1 | | 9.4 | | | 43.75 |
| 29 Interdisciplinary profile (social and legal) | 0.0 | 0.0 | 1.5 | 1.0 | 5.7 | 12.50 | | | 3.1 | | | 9.38 |
| 22 Assertiveness and adaptation of discourse | 0.5 | 0.5 | 0.0 | 1.5 | 4.2 | 11.89 | 3.1 | | | 6.3 | | 28.13 |
| 2 Analysis of conflict from an interdisciplinary perspective | 0.0 | 0.5 | 0.5 | 0.5 | 0.0 | 4.62 | 6.3 | | | | | 31.25 |

Source: Compiled by author

If viewed as groups, it can be concluded that the four groups of competencies generally have a positive rating for the reasons stated. However, the situation changes with respect to the differences in rating of the four groups of specific skills by the students and the professional mediators.

Most of the students valued the first group of competencies highly, i.e. they understood that conflict is the basis of mediation, then the third, fostering communication and negotiation between the parties in dispute, and to a lesser extent, the second, the ability to identify the conflictive parties and its relationship with environment. The third group, the ability to manage mediation, its nature and techniques was however rated as not very important. This trend supports the argument that conceptual and procedural issues are valued more highly than practical or instrumental matters, as far as mediation is concerned.

In contrast, the professional mediators valued the four general groups almost equally, and gave more importance to instrumental skills than the students.

The overall appraisal of specific skills is high and more positive for the mediation professionals than the students. Despite the large group of specific competencies, there was general agreement in the choice, indicating that the thirty specific competencies in Table 2 were considered relevant by those surveyed, and are valid for analysing the results of training as far as mediation and conflict resolution are concerned.

Table 3. Classification according to the weighted sum of percentages in the social skills
Weighted sum: the sum of the % of students/professionals who ranked the social skills (ss) category in the top five positions, with the different positions weighted as follows: ss1 x 5 + ss2 x 4 + ss3 x 3 + ss4 x 2 + ss5 x 1

| Social skills | Students: positions in social skills (ss) 1-5 | | | | | | Professionals: positions in social skills (ss) 1-5 | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | ss1 | ss2 | ss3 | ss4 | ss5 | Weighted sum | ss1 | ss2 | ss3 | ss4 | ss5 | Weighted sum |
| 1 Active listening skills | 56.9 | 8.6 | 9.1 | 2.4 | 7.0 | 358.68 | 37.5 | 9.4 | 3.1 | 12.5 | 15.6 | 275.00 |
| 5 Verbal communication skills | 7.1 | 11.0 | 12.0 | 9.6 | 6.5 | 142.11 | 3.1 | 12.5 | | 9.4 | 3.1 | 87.50 |
| 10 Conflict identification and analysis skills | 6.2 | 5.2 | 9.1 | 19.7 | 21.1 | 140.32 | 15.6 | 18.8 | 6.3 | 6.3 | 15.6 | 200.00 |
| 8 Ability to remain impartial and neutral | 5.2 | 7.6 | 11.5 | 19.2 | 9.0 | 139.37 | 6.3 | 6.3 | 9.4 | 18.8 | 9.4 | 131.25 |
| 7 Negotiation skills | 2.8 | 11.5 | 15.4 | 10.5 | 10.0 | 138.09 | 9.4 | 9.4 | 9.4 | 9.4 | 6.3 | 137.50 |
| 2 Ability to assess needs and interests | 7.6 | 16.8 | 4.3 | 7.2 | 4.5 | 137.57 | 6.3 | 21.9 | 15.6 | 28.1 | 9.4 | 231.25 |
| 3 Ability to build trust and rapport | 5.7 | 15.8 | 7.7 | 5.7 | 6.5 | 133.43 | 21.9 | 6.3 | 9.4 | | | 162.50 |
| 6 Nonverbal communication skills | 2.8 | 11.5 | 12.0 | 9.6 | 10.5 | 126.52 | | 3.1 | 18.8 | | 6.3 | 75.00 |
| 4 Rethinking and reformulation skills | 3.3 | 6.2 | 6.2 | 4.3 | 4.0 | 73.26 | | 9.4 | 12.5 | 6.3 | 21.9 | 109.38 |
| 9 Strategy planning skills | 1.4 | 2.4 | 5.8 | 7.6 | 9.0 | 58.61 | | 3.1 | 12.5 | 6.3 | 9.4 | 71.88 |
| 11 Ability to convey credibility | 0.0 | 1.9 | 3.3 | 2.4 | 5.0 | 27.67 | | | 3.1 | | | 9.38 |
| 12 Ability to design temporary plans | 0.0 | 0.4 | 2.4 | 1.4 | 6.5 | 18.59 | | | | 3.1 | 3.1 | 9.38 |

Source: Compiled by author

The skills from the first group (1, 2, 10, 3 and 7) with the highest weighted sum are the same for students and mediation professionals. These are the social skills for active listening, evaluation of interests and needs, identifying and analysing disputes, building trust and the ability to negotiate. For both groups of participants, more importance was given to social skills related to processes and communication management and those related to knowledge and disciplinary matters. Paradoxically, explicit communication in the skills (verbal and nonverbal), in spite of having the highest weighted sum in both cases, was not among the most important. This indicates that the students valued verbal (5) and nonverbal communication (6) skills more than the professionals.

The professionals, in contrast, opted for rethinking and reformulation skills (4). Both students and professionals generally considered active listening as the most valuable social skill. The two participating groups generally coincided in the precedence they give and they are clear and precise in terms of reinforcing the conclusions.

From the tables, it is evident that no differences exist in terms of the skills rated as most important, and their average ranking varies only slightly, i.e. the social skills that the students and practitioners considered the most important are also rated higher.

We conclude that the twelve skills are relevant with a high statistical score for both groups.

# CONCLUSIONS

A detailed analysis was carried out on the role of social work in training programmes for family mediation, based on a survey. Here, we reflect on the results and offer the following conclusions, listed according to the initial objectives and assumptions.

1) Recent national and international debate agrees on the need to ensure that students acquire the knowledge, attitudes and social skills needed to pursue the careers for which they are being trained. According to the recommendations of the Tuning report, the competencies that social work students and graduates need to acquire are as follows:

   - Systemic competencies: related to teamwork. Skills that enhance interpersonal relationships and analytical, information management and decision making abilities.
   - Instrumental competencies: the ability to identify conflict is important as a basis for mediation. Also the ability to manage mediation and have the communication skills and techniques for negotiation between the parties in conflict.
   - Interpersonal skills: the relationship between conflict and environment, encouraging communication and social interaction.

   Due to their vital importance and their nature as an area of intervention in social work, specific competencies have to be mastered by students in the field of social mediation.

2) A degree in social work should prepare students to work with individuals, families, groups, organisations and communities, and enable them to evaluate performance. Social workers often encounter situations of conflict, daily, if we consider conflict as a factor that is present in the individuals and groups that make up society. As a result of the progress made in conflict resolution strategies, mediation can play a central role in dealing with the social changes taking place in postmodern societies and the new family units that now exist. Of all social institutions, the family has experienced the greatest change from its traditional model in terms of structure and multitude of forms.

   The proliferation of mediation and its many different areas of intervention are an inescapable fact that justifies the need to train postgraduate studies in conflict resolution and mediation. In addition, future social work graduates must be provided with applied and specific training that complements basic undergraduate studies and enables them to acquire highly specialised skills in accordance with the needs of the job market. This postgraduate study should be available to all graduates whose studies can be considered suitable for mediation, but with training pathways that are tailored to the needs of each specific discipline, in this case, social work.

   A commitment by universities to recognise society's new social demands is required, in line with the requirements of the European Higher Education Area. A social work degree should enable future graduates to meet the new demands of society and the new reality of the job market.

   From this study, it was evident that social work students had an extensive knowledge of mediation and its importance, although there was some bias, originating from their social work studies, which was mainly manifested in difficulties in identifying concepts, applying social work and mediation principles and, in particular, identifying the differences between the disciplines in terms of social intervention. In addition, more emphasis is given to issues of knowledge than to practical and methodological matters precisely because they conceive them as being identical to those related to social work and because of the ineffectiveness of old syllabuses in terms of the practical training which is essential for developing mediation skills.

3) Mediation as an alternative conflict resolution strategy is one of the core competencies for social workers. For this reason, they have to be properly trained for mediation to be part of their day-to-day work in a number of specific areas of conflict: schools, families, victims, minors, and communities and families (social mediation). To this, we can also add the multiethnic dimension and the resulting challenges for social workers in terms of multicultural or transnational families, in which the cultural variable becomes an important consideration in future social conflict, requiring special training. As stated by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2008), social workers are faced with the issue of conflict resolution as a regular part of their professional work and it champions mediation as an effective method for social workers dealing with family conflicts.

   In short, mediation should be incorporated into undergraduate courses from a bi-directional perspective. On the one hand, conflict resolution should be included in the cross-curricular competencies of compulsory subjects with the teaching of conflict resolution techniques for families, groups and communities to resolve conflicts that arise in the day-to-day work of social workers. On the other, specific subjects should be offered to enable students to apply their knowledge. The importance of mediation in social work education was emphatically recognised by the survey participants, and is supported by work developed in other European

countries. One such example is a document on social work competencies published in the United Kingdom (2002), which recognises the importance of mediation competencies and training in conflict resolution techniques. Also worth noting for implicitly legitimising these arguments is European Directive 2008/52/EC of 21 May 2008 (18) on certain aspects of mediation in civil and commercial matters. "Member states shall encourage, by any means which they consider appropriate, the training of mediators and the introduction of effective quality control mechanisms concerning the provision of mediation services."

These new challenges provide opportunities and interesting prospects for social work in the 21st century, opening the door for professionals to areas beyond the limited management of social resources.

With regard to the content of mediation training, according to our analysis, emphasis should be placed on knowledge and the disciplinary framework of mediation, psychosocial issues and techniques, skills and procedures for conflict resolution. In other words, it should have a twofold, theoretical and practical, dimension.

4) Social work is a major part of mediation training. In addition to an extensive history of working with families, it can also play a role in the first experiences of mediation programmes. Its characteristics are suitable for these programmes, due to its generalist and multidisciplinary nature, psychosocial and legal content and the social skills required by syllabuses, which are all considered fundamental in mediation training.

Mediation is part of social work not only as a tool but also as a goal to enrich this work, involving comprehensive intervention and providing new strategies and perspectives to enable the social reality and problems to be analysed. Social reality is becoming more complex and multidimensional and requires new and effective strategies to comprehensively deal with social situations from every perspective. Social work and mediation are forms of social intervention of an evident complementary nature. They operate in common areas such as the family, social services and the justice system, and share a common disciplinary framework, although the purpose of intervention is different, with a focus on conflict in the case of mediation and social problems in the case of social work. In this regard, the role of the social worker can be viewed as an agent who mediates between different institutional conflicts and more specifically between two parties in conflict.

The fundamental contribution of social work to mediation consists of introducing the social variable to the analysis of conflict, i.e. the social circumstances, in terms of family, community and intercultural relationships, which cause the social problems that result in conflict. It can also contribute to 'bridge building', when there is the need for an individual social intervention with one of the parties who may be subject to a social imbalance that prevents a symmetrical relationship or who needs to fulfil responsibilities involving childcare or other family functions, when these social circumstances can influence negotiation and agreement.

In this process of introducing conflict resolution techniques, social workers can play a central role as mediators between the parties in dispute. They can intervene and investigate and develop scientific approaches to the comprehensive and holistic application of their knowledge. In so doing, mediation can provide social work with an overall perspective of the social problems that affect the increasingly diverse range of family types in the 21st century.

To sum up, mediation and social work are complementary and interdependent. They share common professional ground and training content, but their social functions and intervention goals are different. Given the current educational situation and the challenges for this century, joint action is required from all sectors involved in training, such as universities and government. At all universities, it is necessary to standardise the criteria and harmonise syllabuses, at the local and European level, in order to fulfil the requirements of the job market and professional organisations, and the demands of the profession.

Since the practice of mediation seems destined to flourish in the future, the following lines of action could play an important role:

- National and international meetings or seminars to define the competencies of mediation and incorporate its teaching into current undergraduate degrees.
- Improvements in mediation training and retraining to ensure that professionals are able to respond to market needs, including instrumental, system and interpersonal competencies.
- Publication of scientific articles on social mediation.
- Incorporating social mediation courses and the cross-curricular content in core subjects into syllabuses to provide students with the necessary training for work in mediation and a competitive edge when entering the job market.
- Creation of lines of research and work on undergraduate and postgraduate social work courses.
- Development of joint action with mediators for ongoing learning and sharing of knowledge and experiences.
- Special attention to social changes and problems affecting families in order for them to be incorporated into the field of mediation.

Finally, with regard to our quantitative study, the data can serve as a means of evaluating courses related to mediation and conflict with the aim of improving training through the modification of programmes, student guidance, studies and research conducted at universities and, most importantly, establishing guidelines to optimise the quality of teaching.

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