LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF SOCIAL WORK STUDY PROGRAMME STUDENTS: TUTOR'S AND PEER SUPPORT

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Abstract

The learning experiences of social work students are influenced by their interactions with tutors and peers, as well as the support they receive from them. Tutors play a crucial role in helping students understand theoretical concepts and apply them to real-world situations. Peer support fosters a collaborative learning environment where students can share insights and learn from each other's experiences. The article examines the learning experiences of social work students in a study programme that emphasises tutor and peer support. The research aims to explore the role of tutor and peer support in a blended learning environment. A survey was conducted among 97 students who studied social work at a higher education institution in Lithuania in 2023. The study analysed the interactivity indicators, tutor support, and peer support. The results indicate that students highly valued the support provided by both tutors and peers. This support helped them to develop their professional identity, enhance their academic skills, and cope with the challenges of studying social work. The article offers insights for improving the quality of teaching and learning in this field.

Key words*: social work, students, interactivity, tutor support, peer support.*

Introduction

The Relevance of Social Work Education. Social work is a profession that demands continuous learning, interpersonal skills, and collaboration. However, social work students often face challenging and stressful learning experiences, particularly in the context of academic demands, field placements, and personal issues. Therefore, it is important to understand how social work students cope with these challenges and the support they receive from their tutors and peers.

Developing effective learning experiences that foster professional competencies is a challenge for social work students. Interactivity with tutors and peers can significantly enhance their learning outcomes. Smith and Jones (2018) argue that interactivity is a crucial factor that affects the quality of learning experiences in social work education. They identify two dimensions of interactivity that can impact the motivation, engagement, and achievement of social work students: tutor support and peer support. Tutor support encompasses the guidance, feedback, and encouragement that tutors provide to learners during the learning process. Peer support is the emotional, social, and academic assistance that learners receive from their classmates during the learning process. Fig. 2 shows some indicators of interactivity, tutor support, and peer support.

The influence of various factors on the learning experiences of social work study program students is significant. These factors include tutor and peer support, curriculum design, field placement opportunities, and personal and professional development of the students.

Previous research has demonstrated that tutor and peer support can improve the academic performance, motivation, and satisfaction of social work students (Smith et al., 2018; Bogo et al., 2014; Fougner, 2013; Moorhead et al., 2016). Additionally, such support can cultivate a sense of belonging, identity, and community among social work students, which can facilitate their transition to professional practice (Cree, 2013; Webb, 2016). Therefore, tutor and peer support are essential elements for creating a positive and productive learning environment for social work students.

However, there is limited evidence regarding the effectiveness of peer support for social work students, who may encounter academic, personal, and professional challenges during their studies. Therefore, this research aims to investigate the learning experiences of social work students in relation to tutor and peer support, and to identify the challenges and opportunities for enhancing tutor and peer support in online or blended learning environments.

Methodology

Research problem: How should the student-oriented study process of the social work study programme be organized to enable the initiation of multilateral interaction of learners, and the support provided by the tutor and peers?

The **aim** of this research is to analyse the learning process of social work students through their interactions with peers and tutors. The study focuses on the interactions between social work students and their peers and tutors.

Research Objectives:

1. To identify the components of interactivity, tutor support, and peer support in the learning process.
2. To examine the impact of interactivity, tutor support, and peer support on the learning experience of social work students.

The research is based on the theoretical framework of social learning theory. This theory emphasizes the role of social interactions and modelling in learning (Bandura, 1977, as cited in Rumjaun and Narod, 2020).

Research methods

Methods of data collection: analysis of scientific and methodological literature, survey.

Methods of data analysis: Descriptive statistics. Inference statistics (Cronbach Alpha, Shapiro-Wilk, Mann Whitney, and Kruskal-Wallis).

Research data analysis criteria:

- The normality of continuous variables was checked using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test.
- The Mann Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis test were used for data not distributed according to the normal distribution.
- To determine the help provided by learners, a correlation analysis was performed using the Spearman criterion.
- The significance level chosen for decision-making was $\alpha = 0.05$.

The results of the survey were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 23 (IBM Corp., 2015). The reliability of the test tasks was assessed by computing the Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which measures the internal consistency of a set of items. According to the literature, a value of 0.7 or above is considered acceptable for most research purposes (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the test tasks in this research was 0.85, indicating a satisfactory level of reliability.

The survey data was analysed by funding of studies, study form and study course (Fig. 1).

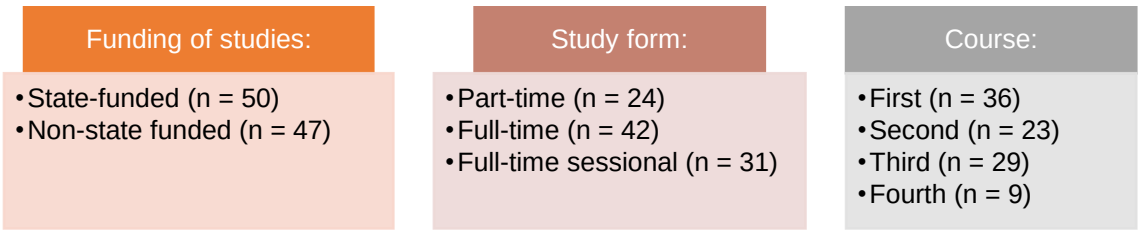

Fig. 1. *Funding of studies, study form and study course*

The research data was analysed according to the indicators of interactivity, tutor support and peer support (Fig. 2).

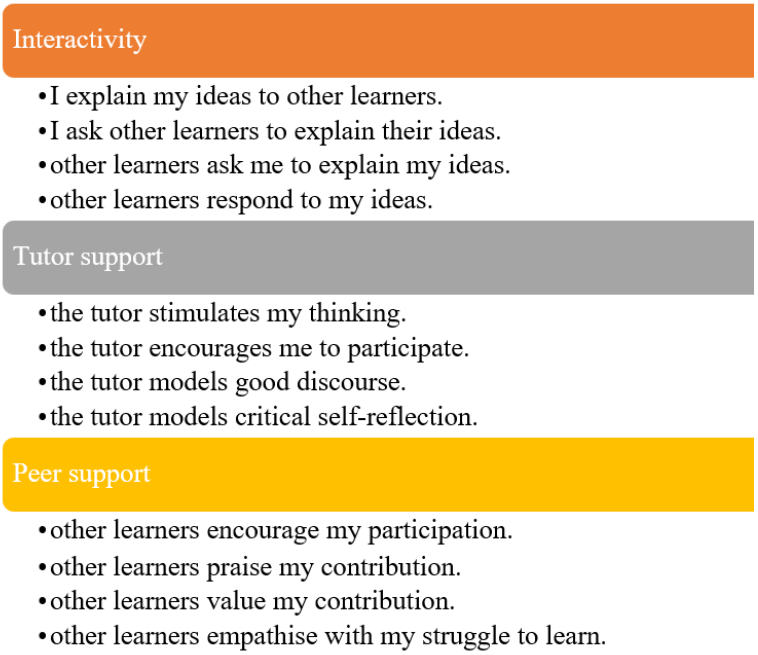

Fig. 2. Indicators of interactivity, tutor support, and peer support

Sample. Participants (n = 97) were part-time, full-time, and full-time sessional students studying Social Work in a mixed mode. Contact work takes place both in the classroom and in the virtual learning environment Moodle. The research was conducted during January of 2023.

Survey instrument. The research approach chosen for the research is a quantitative research approach - a survey. The survey was adapted from the Constructivist On-Line Learning Environment Survey (COLLES[1]). An electronic questionnaire that allows them to easily observe each student's preferred online learning environment and compare it with actual experience.

***Ethics*.** The research presented in this article adheres to the main ethical principles of the European Code of Conduct for Research (European Science Foundation, & All European Academies, 2011), which include reliability, good faith, respect for colleagues, research participants and the public, and responsibility for research. The authors have conducted rigorous and transparent research methods, reported their findings honestly and accurately, acknowledged their sources and contributions, protected the rights and interests of the research participants and the public, and considered the social and environmental implications of their research. The authors have also complied with the ethical standards and regulations of their respective institutions and disciplines.

Literature Review

One of the challenges that social workers face is addressing professional problems and assessing current phenomena in their field. To do this, they need to initiate multi-stakeholder interactions between learners (Henningsen and Stein, 1997), and to feel the support of teachers and other learners (Ellis, 2004). Based on the literature review, three groups of statements describing the learning process can be identified: Interactivity, Tutor support, and Peer support. These are briefly discussed below.

Interactivity

Interactivity can be defined as the process by which learners exchange and elaborate on their ideas, questions, and feedback with each other (Lefevre, 2015). Interactivity can take various forms, such as explaining one's ideas to other learners, asking other learners to explain their ideas, responding to other learners' ideas, and being asked by other learners to explain one's ideas. These forms of interactivity can enhance the students' understanding of the course content, foster their critical thinking skills, and promote their sense of community and belonging (Garrison, 2016).

[1] https://totara.help/docs/survey-activity-types#colles-actual

Research by Jones (2018) and Lee et al. (2020) examined how tutors' and peers' support affected the students' academic performance, satisfaction, and retention in a social work program. They found that tutor's support was positively related to students' grades, satisfaction, and retention, whilst peer support was positively related to students' satisfaction and retention, but not grades. They also found that tutor and peer support had a synergistic effect, meaning that the combination of both types of support was more beneficial than either one alone. This finding is consistent with the social constructivist theory of learning, which emphasises the importance of social interaction and collaboration for knowledge construction (Vygotsky, 1978). Another research by Collins et al. (2010) explored how the tutor's and peers' support influenced the students' critical thinking skills, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging in a social work programme. They found that both types of support had positive effects on the students' critical thinking skills and self-efficacy, but only the tutor's support had a positive effect on the students' sense of belonging. They also found that the effects of the tutor's and peer's support varied depending on the students' prior academic achievement, with low-achieving students benefiting more from the tutor's support and high-achieving students benefiting more from the peer's support. These studies suggest that a tutor's and peers' support are essential components of effective social work education, as they enhance the students' learning outcomes, motivation, and engagement. Interactivity and communication are important factors for enhancing the quality of learning and teaching in higher education (Virgailaitė-Mečkauskaitė, 2011). Several studies have explored how these factors can be nurtured through various pedagogical approaches and technologies. (Baragash and Al-Samarraie, 2018; Cheng and Yang, 2023; Kuo et al., 2015).

Tutor support

Several studies have highlighted the importance of communication, positive interaction, and feedback in the study process, as well as their impact on the learning outcomes and satisfaction of the students (Kraujutaitytė & Pečkaitis, 2003; Gerulaitis et al., 2014). Gerulaitis, Valaikienė, Šapelytė (2014) point out that communication and positive interaction in the study process are treated as important components, with clear links to both the organisation of the process itself and the content of the study. The tutor can assist students in developing their professional identity as social workers. Professional identity is defined as "the extent to which individuals identify with their chosen profession and consider themselves to be part of that profession" (Brotherton & McGillivray, 2015; Moorhead et al., 2016). Professional identity can influence students' motivation, commitment, performance and satisfaction in their studies and future careers (Lamote & Engels, 2010). According to Lee and Fortune (2013), tutor support can foster professional identity development by providing students with feedback, guidance, mentoring, and role modelling. For example, tutors can help students integrate theory and practice, reflect on their values and ethics, and cope with the challenges and dilemmas of social work practice. Tutor support can take various forms, such as stimulating students' thinking, encouraging their participation, modelling good discourse, and modelling critical self-reflection. According to Jones (2018), tutor support can stimulate students' thinking, encourage their participation, model good discourse, and foster critical self-reflection.

Peer support

However, tutor support is not always sufficient or effective, and students may also benefit from peer support. Peer support refers to the interactions and collaborations among students who share similar learning goals and challenges. As Kim et al. (2019) argue, peer support can foster a sense of community, promote social skills, and facilitate knowledge construction. Peer support can foster students' engagement, collaboration, and sense of belonging. Jones (2018) and Lee et al. (2020) found that students who received positive feedback and encouragement from their peers reported higher levels of satisfaction and achievement. Furthermore, peer support can aid students in dealing with the challenges and difficulties of learning, as they can share their experiences and emotions with others who comprehend their situation (Simmons et al., 2023).

Peer support, which involves students helping each other with learning tasks, can be an effective way to enhance their academic performance and motivation. According to van der Meulen et al. (2021), emotional peer support interventions for students with SEND (specific educational needs and disabilities) have positive outcomes for both focus students and peer supporters, such as increased social interaction, social acceptance, self-esteem, and empathy. Similarly, Hughes et al. (2013) found that peer support systems can facilitate the transition from primary to secondary school for students with SEND, by reducing their vulnerability to bullying and social exclusion. However, peer support is not only beneficial for students with SEND, but also for students in general. Therefore, peer support is a valuable strategy that can enhance the learning experiences of social work study programme students.

Findings

The descriptive statistics and inferential analyses are presented in the following sections. One of the research objectives was to investigate the relationship between Interactivity, Tutor support, and Peer support. To address this objective, a correlation analysis was conducted using Spearman's correlation coefficient (r), which measures the strength and direction of a linear association between two variables.

Interactivity

The results showed that the interactivity of social work study programme students during the study process was positively correlated with the level of support provided by their tutors. Spearman's test revealed that there was a significant correlation between the indicator of interactivity "I ask other learners to explain their ideas" and these indicators of tutor's support: the tutor stimulates learners' thinking ($p = 0.007$, $r = 0.273$); the tutor encourages learners to participate ($p = 0.004$, $r = 0.286$); the tutor models good discourse ($p = 0.027$, $r = 0.225$) (see Table 1). This implies that students who were more proactive in seeking clarifications and elaborations from their peers also received more feedback and guidance from their tutors.

Table 1

Significant correlations between indicator of interactivity and indicators of tutor's support. Spearman's test results

Tutor support					
Interactivity		The tutor stimulates my thinking	The tutor encourages me to participate	The tutor models good discourse	The tutor models critical self-reflection
I ask other learners to explain their ideas	Correlation Coefficient	.273**	.286**	.225*	.120
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.007	.004	.027	.240
	N	97	97	97	97

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Our findings are consistent with previous research that has highlighted the importance of interactivity for online learning (Jones, 2018; Lee et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2010). According to these studies, student's interactivity with their tutors and peers is positively correlated with the tutor's interest in the subject. It can suggest that interactivity fosters deeper learning and enhances student motivation and engagement in social work study process.

Tutor support

In this research, the correlation between tutor support and peer support during the study process was investigated. A survey instrument was used to measure learners' perceptions of both types of support. Spearman's rank correlation test was used to analyze the data and it was found that there was a significant positive correlation between the indicator of peer support "Other learners encourage my participation" and four indicators of tutor support: the tutor stimulates learners' thinking ($p = 0$). 000, $r = 0.364$); the tutor encourages learners to participate ($p = 0.000$, $r = 0.418$); the tutor models good discourse ($p = 0.000$, $r = 0.349$); the tutor models critical self-reflection ($p = 0.004$, $r = 0.291$) (see Table 2). These results suggest that the tutor's role is crucial in creating a supportive and collaborative learning environment, where learners can interact with each other and exchange ideas and feedback.

Spearman's test showed that there is a correlation between the indicator of Peer support "Other learners value my contribution" and three indicators of tutor's support: the tutor encourages learners to participate ($p = 0.010$, $r = 0.259$); the tutor models good discourse ($p = 0.024$, $r = 0.228$); the tutor models critical self-reflection ($p = 0.006$, $r = 0.275$) (see Table 2). This suggests that when learners perceive that their contributions are valued by their peers, they are more likely to participate actively and critically in the discussions, and that this is facilitated by the tutor's support.

The results showed that there is a significant correlation between the indicator of peer support "Other learners praise my contribution" and two indicators of tutor's support: the tutor

models good discourse (p = 0.018, r = 0.240); The tutor models critical self-reflection (p = 0.031, r = 0.220) (see Table 2). This suggests that tutors who demonstrate good discourse and critical self-reflection skills can elicit positive feedback from their peers, which in turn can enhance the learning outcomes and satisfaction of learners.

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The research also revealed that a tutor's encouragement to actively participate in the study process is more important for state-funded students than for non-state funded students. The Mann-Whitney test showed that the median score of the tutor's encouragements for state-funded students (Mdn = 54.67, n = 50) was significantly higher (U = 891.500, Z = -2.213, p = 0.027, r = 0.225) than the median score of the tutor's encouragements for non-state funded students (Mdn = 42.97, n = 47). This suggests that state-funded students may rely more on tutors' support to engage in the study process and to develop critical thinking skills.

Table 2

Correlations between indicators of peer support and indicators of tutors' support. Spearman's test results

		Tutor support			
Peer support		The tutor stimulates my thinking	The tutor encourages me to participate	The tutor models good discourse	The tutor models critical self-reflection
Other learners encourage my participation	Correlation Coefficient	.364**	.418**	.349**	.291**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.004
	N	97	97	97	97
Other learners value my contribution	Correlation Coefficient	.173	.259*	.228*	.275**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.091	.010	.024	.006
	N	97	97	97	97
Other learners praise my contribution	Correlation Coefficient	.161	.076	.240*	.220*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.115	.460	.018	.031
	N	97	97	97	97
Other learners empathise with my struggle to learn	Correlation Coefficient	.091	.112	.114	.234*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.373	.273	.268	.021
	N	97	97	97	97

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The results of this research are consistent with previous research on the role of tutors in learning. For example, Salmon (2012) argued that tutors play a key role in facilitating the development of critical thinking and collaborative skills among learners, by providing scaffolding, guidance, and feedback. Similarly, Garrison et al. (1999) proposed a model of learning that emphasises the importance of cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence, which are influenced by the tutor's interventions and interactions.

Peer support

The results showed that the type of funding (state-funded or non-state funded) had a significant effect on the importance of tutor support for active participation. The Mann-Whitney test helped to establish that for state-funded students (Mdn = 54.67, n = 50) the tutor's

encouragement to actively participate in the study process is more important (U = 891.500, Z = - 2.213, p = 0.027, r = 0.225) than for non-state funded students (Mdn = 42.97, n = 47).

The results also revealed that interactivity was positively correlated with several indicators of peer support. Spearman's test showed that there is a correlation between the indicator of interactivity "Other learners respond to my ideas" and four indicators of peer support. Other learners encourage my participation (p = 0.000, r = 0.365); Other learners praise my contribution (p = 0.000, r = 0.388); Other learners value my contribution (p = 0.001, r = 0.337); Other learners empathise with my struggle to learn (p = 0.001, r = 0.340) (see Table 3).

There is a correlation between indicator of interactivity "I explain my ideas to other learners" and three indicators of Peer support. Other learners encourage my participation (p = 0.001, r = 0.321); Other learners praise my contribution (p = 0.006, r = 0.275); Other learners value my contribution (p = 0.008, r = 0.267) (see Table 3).

There is a correlation between the indicator of interactivity "Other learners ask me to explain my ideas" and two indicators of peer support: Other learners encourage my participation (p=0.000, r=0.367); Other learners value my contribution (p=0.003, r=0.295) (see Table 3).

There is a correlation between the indicator of interactivity "I ask other learners to explain their ideas" and the indicator of peer support "Other learners encourage my participation" (p = 0.000, r = 0.39) (see Table 3).

Table 3

Correlations between indicators of interactivity and indicators of peer support. Spearman's test results

		Peer support			
Interactivity		Other learners encourage my participation	Other learners praise my contribution	Other learners value my contribution	Other learners empathise with my struggle to learn
Other learners respond to my ideas	Correlation Coefficient	.365**	.388**	.337**	.340**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.001	.001
	N	97	97	97	97
I explain my ideas to other learners	Correlation Coefficient	.321**	.275**	.267**	.150
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.006	.008	.142
	N	97	97	97	97
Other learners ask me to explain my ideas	Correlation Coefficient	.367**	.213*	.295**	.208*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.036	.003	.041
	N	97	97	97	97
I ask other learners to explain their ideas	Correlation Coefficient	.399**	.134	.161	.012
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.191	.116	.911
	N	97	97	97	97

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The results of this study suggest that peer support is an important factor for enhancing the interactivity and engagement of social work students in learning environments. This is consistent with previous research which has found positive effects of peer support on academic achievement, motivation, and satisfaction of learners (Kim et al., 2019; van der Meulen et al., 2021; Simmons et al., 2023). However, this study also reveals some differences between state- funded students and non-state funded students in terms of their perceptions of tutor's encouragement and peer support. These differences may reflect the different motivations, expectations, and challenges that these two groups of students face in their learning experiences. Therefore, tutors should consider the diverse needs and preferences of their students and provide appropriate levels of tutor's encouragement and peer support to foster a collaborative and interactive online learning community.

Conclusions and discussion

The research results showed that students who were more proactive in seeking elaborations from their peers also received more feedback and guidance from their tutors. This indicates that tutor's support is essential for creating a collaborative and reflective learning environment. The results also revealed that the tutor's interest in the subject, encouragement of critical thinking of students and facilitation of discussions influenced the students' engagement in the study process. However, these factors varied depending on the students' course of study and funding status. For first-year students and state-funded students, the help provided by peers and the tutor was more important than for other courses of students or for non-state funded students. These findings suggest that different types of learners may have different needs and preferences for a tutor's support. Therefore, it is important for tutors to be aware of these differences and to adapt their teaching strategies accordingly. This research contributes to the literature on a tutor's role in the study process, but it also has some limitations that need to be addressed in future studies. For example, the study did not measure the actual learning outcomes or satisfaction of the learners, but only their self-reported perceptions. Moreover, the study did not control for the possible effects of individual differences, such as learning styles, motivation, and prior knowledge, on the learners' responses and outcomes. Therefore, future research should utilise more objective and diverse measures of learning outcomes and satisfaction, incorporate additional variables that may impact learners' experiences and achievements, to examine the validity and applicability of the findings.

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