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# Preparing for Domestic Violence and Associated Trauma: Are We Ready?

Melissa Rodas

*Southern Adventist University*, [mrodas@southern.edu](mailto:mrodas@southern.edu)

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Preparing for Domestic Violence and Associated Trauma: Are We Ready?

Melissa Rodas

Southern Adventist University

**Abstract**

Domestic violence is an important problem to consider amongst societal issues today. Statistics have consistently shown high rates of violence across the country, and many cases go unreported. Even if survivors are able to escape their situations, trauma often casts a long shadow after the abuse is gone. A best practice model that has been utilized in Tennessee is that of Family Justice Centers. These centers utilize a co-located model to give survivors multiple services in a centralized location. As these organizations find their beginnings, attention is being noted to how social work students are being prepared for such settings. Social work education provides future service providers the knowledge and skills for practice, but how exactly are future practitioners being taught about how to work with victims of domestic violence and associated trauma? This research studied the curricula of Tennessee's CSWE-accredited social work programs. The research study hoped to provide insight into how social work students are prepared to work with clients of domestic violence and associated trauma in the classroom, and also provide recommendations for further research, policy, and practice.

### **Introduction**

Field practicum is where the “rubber meets the road” for social workers. In 2008, the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards highlighted the field experience as the signature pedagogy of social work education. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) uses this term to distinguish practicum as the experience where students learn and demonstrate the skills, knowledge, and values necessary for professional social work practice (Boitel & Fromm, 2014). One of the important issues that students will often encounter in field is domestic violence. In the United States, more than one-third of women have experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner during their lifetime (Centers for Disease Prevention and Control [CDC], 2010). This percentage amounts to more than 40 million women nationwide, and the problem is only growing (CDC, 2010). Tennessee ranked in the top quarter among states where women were surveyed on the prevalence of physical or sexual violence incidences with an intimate partner (CDC 2010). Perpetrators often inflict physical abuse, but they can also hurt victims emotionally, sexually, and financially. As students step into the practice setting where they address domestic violence, attention needs to be noted on how social work programs are preparing students to work effectively with clients of this population. This research study hypothesized that the current curricula across the Tennessee social work programs is not adequately preparing students for these practicum settings. Through quantitative and qualitative research methods, this need will be explored and recommendations provided for future research and academic program development.

### **Literature Review**

Tennessee ranks high on many lists of statistics. Unfortunately, one of those lists includes rates of domestic violence. Tennessee is sixth in the United States for having the most domestic

violence cases of any state (The Associated Press, 2015). More than half of the crimes committed in 2014 were related to family violence, and 270 of these crimes resulted in murder (The Associated Press, 2015). This is a serious issue that has gained prominence nationwide. The Family Justice Center model has been recognized as a model that will effectively serve people affected by domestic violence. The Family Justice Center initiative began when President George W. Bush recognized the San Diego center's model as a best practice in the field. The government launched the \$20 million Family Justice Center initiative in October 2003, and Congress officially recognized the model within the Violence Against Women Act of 2005 (Conyers, 2007). The United States Department of Justice also recognized the Family Justice Center co-located model as a best practice in the field of domestic violence intervention and prevention services. Since the 2005 historic government initiative, centers have been created across the country. According to the Family Justice Center Alliance (YEAR), there are 90 centers operating in the U.S. and even other centers in more than ten other countries. Centers are serving clients in urban areas such as New York and even internationally in England (Boyd, 2006; Hocking, 2007). As these FJCs open, opportunities for social work practice are increasing. Program directors are looking to study how social work students, the future practitioners that will serve such populations, are being prepared for working in settings in domestic violence. Therefore, the question arises: how are social work programs preparing students to work in practicum settings that address domestic violence and associated trauma?

An important aspect of social work programs is the curriculum. Before students are able to practice their skills in the field environment, the classroom is the main opportunity where students learn how to work with clients. Studies have found a need for improved curriculum to more adequately prepare social work students to work with domestic violence survivors. Issues

within program curricula included insufficient training in resolving ethical dilemmas and practicing intervention methods (Bent-Goodley, 2007). Needs have been noted even at the graduate level. One study identified a lack of concrete knowledge of intimate partner violence issues by identifying student attitudes and interventions in IPV situations (Connor, Nouer, Mackey, Benet, & Tipton, 2012). In another study of graduate students specializing in mental health, only a small amount of participants had knowledge of specific interventions with domestic violence clients (Black, Weisz, & Bennett, 2010). Even graduates with social work experience in domestic violence showed inadequate knowledge about the causes of domestic violence and how to safely intervene (Black et al., 2010). A state domestic violence advocate shared her frustration: “Most of the social workers I’ve met only see domestic violence as a mental health problem that individual counseling can solve, and they come out of school not knowing anything about the issue... it’s exasperating that professional social workers still ask the same victim-blaming questions as the general public.” (Danis & Lockhart, 2003). The need for more effective education and training about domestic violence in social work programs is evident.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

As the topic of social work student preparedness for working in domestic violence settings in Tennessee is state-specific, this research is the first of its kind. In addition, similar research to this topic is scarce. There are currently no peer-reviewed empirical articles relating specifically to Family Justice Centers, since the initiative is fairly new. In addition, the CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards have changed drastically in 2015. The implications of moving away from the 2008 competencies are important when considering how to achieve better social work competence. All in all, research has not had a chance to fully

expound on this topic considering the newness of Family Justice Centers. This study hopes to spearhead the research process in order to benefit social work educators and Family Justice Center developers alike with awareness and knowledge.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Examining how learning occurs is important to consider when studying how higher education programs are teaching students. Two learning theories, Howell's theory on Conscious and Competence (1982) and Barbe's, Swassing's, and Milone's three learning modalities (1979), will be used as theoretical foundation for the purpose of this research. In Howell's theory on Conscious and Competence (1982), there are four categories where a learner can fall into at various stages of his or her learning. In the first stage of unconscious incompetence, learners do not know about a subject and are unaware that they lack this knowledge. Learners in this stage may be either ignorant or believe that they are competent when in reality they lack the necessary knowledge and skills. In the context of this study, the stages presented by Howell may be interpreted in the way social work students learn to apply their skills to the field. For example, social work students at the beginning of their education may exercise unconscious incompetence. They very well may be unaware of what knowledge is needed for social work practice and therefore cannot know what they need to know. In conscious incompetence, a learner realizes there is a lack of adequate knowledge to be competent on a subject. This realization may be sudden and difficult to accept for some people. A student who becomes more exposed to the field of social work may start to realize how much they lack to become competent service providers. This may happen through course works, meeting other professionals, interacting with clients, or other similar instances.

With time and persistence, a learner can achieve conscious competence. This is the level where conscious effort is taken to become knowledgeable about an area. It is marked by being able to master a particular skill, but being conscious about everything done to achieve it successfully. A student may undergo this stage throughout their education and even their professional practice, especially if they are just starting to apply the skills learned in the classroom to the field. The last stage a learner will encounter is unconscious competence. Learners in this stage will reach a point where they do not have to consciously think about what they are doing, although they will competently apply their learned skills. Social work students will most likely achieve this stage after an extended amount of time practicing their skills in the field.

A second learning theory relevant to the study is related to the three learning modalities: visual, kinesthetic, and auditory, often shortened as VAK (1979). This model describes how people learn and what kinds of environments are most preferred for certain learning styles. People may identify with a combination of the modalities, and the style preferred may vary in response to the kind of learning taking place. Visual learners absorb knowledge through reading and writing. Within this modality, learners can benefit from taking notes from lectures, watching demonstrations, or by looking at visual materials. Students in social work programs can implement this learning style in various ways. These ways may include taking the traditional notes in class or watching videos of various topics. For auditory learners, talking out loud is preferred to reading and writing. This style can occur through discussion, allowing students to talk through their learning, and other auditory activities. Social work courses can utilize this style through in-class discussions and group activities. Lastly, kinesthetic learners enjoy touching and moving while learning. Learners who identify with this modality benefit from activities such as



games and keeping their hands occupied while listening to a lecture. This can apply to social work students who are able to physically practice the skills they learn through activities such as mock interviews in practice courses.

The VAK learning modalities may also be interpreted through the lens of this research study and tie into Howell's theory on conscience and competence. For example, the stage of unconscious competence can connect with the kinesthetic learning style in the context of practicum. The field practicum is recognized as the signature pedagogy of social work education (EPAS, 2008, 2015). The field experience is the first place where social work students can practice their knowledge and skills before entering the profession. While students are most likely to go through all the levels of conscience and competence throughout their education, they may be able to reach the level of unconscious competence during practicum as they successfully apply the necessary skills to be a competent social worker. However, it is important that students are given the necessary opportunities throughout their education so that they can reach competent practice. Furthermore, educators should be aware of the various learning styles and vary their lessons in order to accommodate students' different means of learning. This research study is important because it examines how social work educators are preparing students for practice settings in domestic violence and its associated trauma at the level of conscious competence, so they can ultimately achieve unconscious competence within the bounds of their preferred learning styles.

### **Study Background**

This study's scope will examine social work programs across the state of Tennessee because of the 2012 statewide initiative to open family safety centers. This initiative is part of Governor Bill Haslam's Public Safety Action Plan. Research regarding student preparedness for

practicum settings addressing domestic violence must be conducted as part of the larger picture of this initiative. This research study is beneficial to social work educators because of the raised importance on the issue of violence and the increased number of opportunities to complete practicums in these newly opened safety centers. The state of Tennessee is giving increased importance to the issue of domestic violence. For example, Tennessee has long been high on the list of states with the highest rates of men murdering women. Therefore, as part of Governor Bill Haslam's Public Safety Action Plan, multiple Family Justice Centers have opened across Tennessee. Since 2013, the cities of Chattanooga, Cookeville, and Nashville obtained grants to start Family Justice Centers. This statewide initiative is historic. Tennessee is the second state in the country to launch such an initiative, and it is the first in the nation to fund the Family Justice Centers through state grants. Social work educational programs in Tennessee can be a part of this statewide initiative by examining how their course curricula prepares students for practicum settings addressing domestic violence or the like. Because of these reasons, studying how social work programs in Tennessee are preparing students for the fields of domestic violence and associated trauma will be beneficial.

It was expected that a need for further educational preparation would emerge. Social work education encompasses such a broad range of topics that programs may not have the time to specifically address issues specifically related to practicum settings in domestic violence or associated trauma. If programs were addressing domestic violence, it was expected that they would be discussed in general terms rather than how to specifically deal with clients affected by these issues. However, social work educational programs need to be sensitive to the issues affecting their community and respond by preparing students for these fields. This research study

acknowledges how social work programs can better prepare students in light of the Family Justice Center initiative.

### **Methodology**

A mixed methods approach was utilized to examine how Tennessee's CSWE-accredited social work programs are preparing their students for practice in settings addressing domestic violence and associated trauma. Data was first collected quantitatively through an online survey sent to all full-time faculty members at qualifying social work programs in the state. Next, the research question was investigated qualitatively through a follow-up interview with social work faculty members who expressed a willingness to participate in this research stage. Through the interviews, the researcher explored opinions of how domestic violence should be addressed through social work education. Lastly, a meta-analysis of the course curricula syllabi was investigated to study how domestic violence is taught in social work programs. This research design was chosen to provide a comprehensive look on the topic and to connect how domestic violence is taught and how social work educators view how it should be taught.

The sample size chosen for the study were full-time faculty members at CSWE-accredited social work programs in Tennessee. The CSWE-accredited universities in Tennessee are the following: (a) Austin Peay State University, (b) Belmont University, (c) East Tennessee State University, (d) Freed-Hardeman University, (e) King University, (f) Lincoln Memorial University, (g) Lipscomb University, (h) Middle Tennessee State University, (i) Mid-Tennessee Collaborative, (j) Southern Adventist University, (k) Tennessee State University, (l) Trevecca Nazarene University, (m) Union University, (n) University of Memphis, (o) University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, (p) University of Tennessee at Knoxville, and (q) University of Tennessee at Martin. These 17 accredited social work universities offer either solely

undergraduate programs in social work or both undergraduate and graduate programs. A total of 22 accredited social work programs are offered in the above universities, with 16 being BSW programs and 7 being MSW programs. A total of 140 full-time faculty members were identified at the 22 accredited social work programs.

### **Methodology: Quantitative**

An online survey was created to explore how social work students learn about domestic violence within their program. The survey questionnaire utilized a purposive sampling technique, a type of non-probability sampling. The sample chosen was social work faculty in CSWE-accredited social work programs in Tennessee. The optimal participation rate was one faculty member from each of the 17 universities with an accredited social work program. This participation rate was chosen because of the insight it would provide on each of the social work programs. Contact information for survey participants was obtained through the public webpages of the social work programs. An email was sent to full-time faculty members requesting participation in the research questionnaire. The email contained a link to the research questionnaire hosted on Google Forms. Survey responses were kept confidential through Google Forms' anonymous system. At the end of the survey, a question asked for voluntary participation in the qualitative piece of the research study.

The survey explored perceptions on how students are prepared for practice settings in domestic violence through their curriculum. Survey questions included the following: "In your opinion, how often is the topic of domestic violence and associated trauma discussed throughout social work program courses offered at your university?" and "Please rate your agreement of disagreement with the following statement: "Social work students are academically prepared to work with clients affected by domestic violence and trauma." Such questions were chosen to

explore how domestic violence and trauma are taught and whether faculty members felt that students were ready to work with clients affected by these issues. Considerations were made from the editorial in the Journal of Social Work Education titled, “Domestic Violence and Social Work Education: What Do We Know, What Do We Need to Know?” (Danis, 2003). This article posed questions for further research that were addressed in this research survey. Once the survey data was collected, it was entered into SPSS, version 22 for MAC. After ensuring that the data was ready for analysis, the following statistical analyses were run in an attempt to answer the research questions: descriptive statistics, correlations, and multiple regression. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure that the test of homogeneity of variances was not violated. The data was employed to calculate coefficients and explore significant relationships between the variables addressed in the online survey. Please see Appendix A for the full research questionnaire.

### **Methodology: Qualitative**

In order to further explore the relationship between social work education and student preparedness for domestic violence practice settings, interviews were conducted with willing faculty members. Nine interview participants were recruited. At the end of the survey, the last question asked, “Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up study regarding how Tennessee’s social work programs are preparing students for practicum settings addressing domestic violence and trauma?” Respondents who provided contact information were interviewed via telephone. Interviews were recorded with an audiotape for transcribing and coding purposes. Identifying information is kept confidential in this research study by coding interview participants with numbers. Participants were asked six questions, and the interviews lasted for approximately 10-15 minutes. The interview guide is found in appendix B.

The interviews began with the question, “How does your social work program prepare students for practicum placements that involve domestic violence or trauma?” This preliminary question served to broadly define the purpose of the research and allow the interviewee to elaborate. The first three questions sought to explore how social work programs addressed domestic violence. Such questions included, “What kind of opportunities do students have to learn about domestic violence or trauma outside of coursework?” The last three questions further focused on faculty perceptions and asked participants’ opinions on a broader scope. These perception questions included, “In your opinion, what do all social work students need to know about domestic violence before they graduate?” and “In your opinion, how do you gauge the effectiveness of social work education’s response to domestic violence, especially in Tennessee?” The answers obtained provided interesting themes for analysis.

Once the sessions were completed, the audio recordings were transcribed, coded, and analyzed for themes. Research assistants aided this process to ensure a more objective, accurate analysis of the data. Major, observable themes were noted and participant insights highlighted. Special note was taken to how the respondents viewed the program curricula’s role in student preparedness for practicums involving domestic violence. The qualitative data was also analyzed in light of the quantitative survey data.

### **Methodology: Meta-Analysis**

An email was sent to all faculty representatives of accredited social work programs listed on the CSWE website requesting the syllabi of classes that addressed domestic violence and its associated trauma. However, only two schools followed up with the requested syllabi. Because of the small scope obtained, the meta-analysis of domestic violence course syllabi was not completed. In order to mitigate for this lack of participation, more information was obtained

through the research interview. Specifically, follow-up questions such as, “What kinds of teaching models or frameworks do you utilize in the classroom?” were asked to investigate this topic. Further research is needed to investigate how social work classes address domestic violence.

## **Quantitative Findings and Discussion**

### **Description of the Sample**

The questionnaire was answered by 23 respondents, all being full-time faculty members in CSWE-accredited social work programs in Tennessee. Out of the 17 universities with accredited social work programs, the survey respondents represented 14 of the 17 universities, making up 82.3% of the sample size. This is significant because it provides a broad look into how social work education in Tennessee is addressing domestic violence. Female respondents made up the majority of the sample, with 82.6% of respondents participating in the quantitative study. This percentage is representative of the original sample size. Out of the 140 full-time faculty members currently employed in CSWE-accredited social work programs, 108 were female, making up 77.1% of the population. The majority of female respondents do not represent a gender bias because as reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015), 83.8% of social workers were female. About a third of the survey respondents completed a Master’s degree, while more than two-thirds achieved graduate education to the doctorate level. A majority of respondents worked in social work education for more than 10 years, including more than a third of participants working 25 years or more. Of the participants surveyed, only 21.7% identified domestic violence as a research or teaching specialization. Table 1 provides detailed information regarding the demographics of the research sample.

Table 1: Sample demographics

|  | Overall N = 23 |       |
|--|----------------|-------|
|  | <i>n</i>       | %     |
| <b>Gender</b>  |                |       |
| Female   | 19             | 82.6% |
| Male   | 4              | 17.4% |
| <b>Highest Level of Education</b>  |                |       |
| Master's   | 7              | 30.4% |
| Professional Doctorate   | 7              | 30.4% |
| PhD  | 8              | 34.8% |
| Other  | 1              | 4.3%  |
| <b>Years Working in Social Work Education*</b>                             |                |       |
| 2-5 years  | 3              | 18.8% |
| 5-10 years   | 1              | 6.3%  |
| 10-15 years  | 5              | 31.3% |
| 15-25 years  | 1              | 6.3%  |
| 25+ years  | 6              | 37.5% |
| <b>Identify Domestic Violence as a Research or Teaching Specialization</b> |                |       |
| Yes  | 5              | 21.7% |
| No   | 18             | 78.3% |

*Note:* \*Cumulative percentages do not represent 100% due to missing responses.

## Survey Results

The survey included several perception questions regarding the variables. One of the first questions asked how domestic violence was addressed through various types of courses available in the social work programs. The vast majority of respondents (70.6%) stated that they used electives to teach domestic violence. About half of the respondents (52.7%) said they addressed it in foundation courses, while a little less than half (47.1%) also addressed it in advanced courses. While at least half of the programs surveyed address domestic violence in required courses, the majority of social work programs teach it in classes that are not required.

The survey also asked the respondents for their perceptions of whether experts in domestic violence are utilized in the classroom. 64.7% of respondents stated they did, while the remaining third did not. An interesting question posed on the survey was, "In your opinion, do



the textbooks utilized in course curricula provide enough information for students to learn the complexities of domestic violence and its associated trauma?” All but one of the respondents stated that the textbooks used did not provide sufficient information on domestic violence and associated trauma.

Towards the end of the survey, a set of three questions addressed how often domestic violence, practice interventions with clients, and practice settings were mentioned at each undergraduate and graduate level. Results were mixed for the variable where how often domestic violence is mentioned at each level. At the BSW level, the majority of faculty members stated that it is either talked about at an *average* level or sometimes, with a small minority asserting it is *always* mentioned. In contrast, at the MSW level, the majority of respondents stated their programs talk about domestic violence *often*. This poses an interesting relationship that suggests graduate programs in social work more specifically address populations such as victims of domestic violence and associated trauma.

For the second variable, survey respondents gave their observations of how often practice interventions in domestic violence are taught at the BSW and MSW levels. This connects to the existing body of literature that asserts that only a small amount of graduate students have knowledge of specific interventions with domestic violence clients (Black, Weisz, & Bennett, 2010). At both the BSW and MSW levels, most respondents stated that practice interventions are mentioned sometimes or at an *average* level.

For the third variable, respondents were asked how often practice settings were discussed in their social work programs. This question was included in order to study the exposure students have to practice opportunities in domestic violence. At the undergraduate level, a high number of faculty members stated that practice settings are discussed at an *average* level or sometimes. At

the graduate level, results were similar except that a significant percentage of respondents stated it is *often* discussed. Interestingly, no respondents said that it is *never* discussed at either level.

The last question on the survey was important because it pointedly asked faculty whether they believe social work students are academically prepared to work with clients affected by domestic violence and associated trauma. 42.1% of faculty members felt *neutral* about their agreement with this statement, while a third of respondents *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed*. Only 26.2% agreed that students are academically prepared through their programs to work with survivors of domestic violence and trauma. No respondents *strongly agreed* that students were prepared thus. The face results of the survey showed interesting insights into how domestic violence is taught in social work programs and whether the educators feel that students are being academically prepared to work with victims affected by domestic violence.

There were some statistically significant positive and negative correlations between some of the variables. Table 4 shows the correlation coefficients for the variables analyzed. The survey data showed some interesting relationships on how social work students are being prepared to work in domestic violence settings through their course curricula. A Pearson's correlation was computed to assess the relationship between variables. One such observation was the relationship between the degree that students are taught practice interventions in MSW programs and the perception of how often domestic violence is discussed in BSW courses. There was a strong positive correlation between the two variables,  $r = .94$ ,  $n = 21$ ,  $p < .001$ , with high levels of students being taught practice interventions in MSW programs associated with the perception of domestic violence discussed in courses offered at BSW programs.

Statistically significant relationships also existed between the perception of how often practice settings in domestic violence are discussed in BSW level courses and the degree that

students are taught practice interventions at the same BSW level ( $p = .68, n = 20, p < .001$ ). Compared with the MSW level, the data showed that the more the undergraduate social work programs teach practice interventions, the more they address domestic violence practice settings. In addition, the data showed that social work programs that address domestic violence in foundation courses are more likely to also address it at the advanced level ( $r = .53, n = 15, p < .001$ ). Lastly, statistically negative correlations existed between how experts in domestic violence are used in the classroom and how often practice interventions in domestic violence are discussed at the undergraduate level. Another correlation showed that the more speakers were brought into classroom, the less students were taught practice interventions at the BSW level ( $r = .22, n = 19, p < .05$ ). In contrast, the more domestic violence was discussed at the BSW level, the less experts were utilized ( $r = .22, n = 18, p < .05$ ).

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to see if there was a prediction model between the perception questions as the independent variables, and the opinion whether students are academically prepared for work with clients of domestic violence and trauma as the dependent variable. However, the model showed no fit that any of the perceptions are predicting whether students are prepared for domestic violence practice settings. The data showed that the independent variables do not predict the dependent variable. Therefore, more research needs to be done in order to find the predictors of academic preparedness for working with survivors of domestic violence and associated trauma.

In light of the statistically significant relationships, there was one relationship that needs to be taken into account. As mentioned previously, the last question on the survey had great significance for the quantitative aspect of this research. This question asked survey respondents if they believed that students were academically prepared for practice settings addressing

domestic violence and associated trauma. The majority of respondents either felt *neutral* or *disagreed* that their students were prepared for these settings. The data analysis shows further that the perceptions of academic preparedness only correlated significantly with one factor: the perceptions of how much domestic violence is addressed in undergraduate social work courses ( $r = .22, n = 19, p < .05$ ). Overall, the data analysis provided interesting insights on how domestic violence and its associated trauma are taught in the course curricula across social work programs in undergraduate and graduate levels in Tennessee. Table 5 provides the complete information on the variable coefficients utilizing Pearson's correlation.

Table 4: Descriptive statistics for the independent and dependent variables

| [Variables]   | N  | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation | Skewness | Kurtosis |
|---|----|---------|---------|------|----------------|----------|----------|
| Address DV through electives  | 22 | 1       | 2       | 1.41 | .503           | .397     | -2.037   |
| Address DV through required foundation courses                                  | 21 | 1       | 2       | 1.48 | .512           | .103     | -2.211   |
| Address DV through required advanced courses                                    | 15 | 1       | 2       | 1.53 | .516           | -.149    | -2.308   |
| Address DV through special topics courses                                       | 22 | 1       | 2       | 1.59 | .503           | -.397    | -2.037   |
| Address DV in curricula through other means                                     | 21 | 1       | 2       | 1.90 | .301           | -2.975   | 7.562    |
| Utilize experts to speak in the classroom                                       | 22 | 1       | 2       | 1.27 | .456           | 1.097    | -.887    |
| Believe textbooks provide enough DV information                                 | 22 | 2       | 2       | 2.00 | .000           | .        | .        |
| Perception of how often DV discussed in BSW level courses                       | 19 | 2       | 2       | 2.84 | .834           | .963     | 1.043    |
| Perception of how often DV discussed in MSW level courses                       | 21 | 0       | 5       | 2.00 | 1.643          | -.075    | -1.563   |
| Perception of how often students are taught practice interventions at BSW level | 20 | 1       | 4       | 2.65 | 1.040          | .179     | .191     |
| Perception of how often students are taught practice interventions at MSW level | 22 | 0       | 5       | 1.86 | 1.552          | -.003    | -1.545   |
| Perception of how often DV practice settings discussed in BSW courses           | 20 | 2       | 4       | 3.00 | .918           | .908     | .536     |
| Perception of how often DV practice settings discussed in MSW courses           | 21 | 0       | 5       | 2.14 | 1.621          | -.098    | -1.134   |
| Perception of how prepared social work students are to work with DV clients     | 23 | 1       | 5       | 2.78 | .998           | .177     | -.097    |

Table 5: Pearson's Correlation coefficients between variables

|   | Address DV through electives | Address DV through required foundation courses | Address DV through required advanced courses | Address DV through special topics courses | Address DV in curricula through other means | Utilize experts to speak in the classroom | Perception of how much DV discussed in courses offered at BSW level | Perception of how much DV discussed in courses offered at MSW level | Degree students are taught practice interventions at BSW level | Degree students are taught practice interventions at MSW level | Perception of how much DV practice settings discussed | Perception of how prepared students are to work with DV clients |
|---|------------------------------|--|--|---|---|---|---|---|--|--|---|---|
| Address DV through electives  | 1                            | .234   | .262   | -.060                                     | -.375                                       | -.258                                     | .538*   | -.497*  | .365   | -.433*   | .190  | .314  |
| Address DV through required foundation courses                      | .234                         | 1  | .732**                                       | .355                                      | -.333                                       | .346                                      | -.133   | -.069   | -.422  | -.163  | -.427   | -.194   |
| Address DV through required advanced courses                        | .262                         | <b>.732**</b>                                  | 1  | .342                                      | -.240                                       | .344                                      | -.267   | -.932**   | -.320  | -.753**  | -.534   | .011  |
| Address DV through special topics courses                           | -.060                        | .355   | .342   | 1   | -.281                                       | .484*                                     | -.250   | .383  | -.158  | .307   | -.190   | .162  |
| Address DV in curricula through other means                         | -.375                        | -.333  | -.240  | -.281                                     | 1   | -.200                                     | -.271   | .084  | -.112  | .055   | .022  | -.282   |
| Utilize experts to speak in the classroom                           | -.258                        | .346   | .344   | <b>.484*</b>                              | -.200                                       | 1   | -.471*  | .249  | -.479*   | .173   | -.521*  | -.119   |
| Perception of how much DV discussed in courses offered at BSW level | <b>.538*</b>                 | -.133  | -.267  | -.250                                     | -.271                                       | <b>-.471*</b>                             | 1   | -.493*  | .744   | -.423  | .636**  | .473*   |
| Perception of how much DV discussed in courses offered at MSW level | <b>-.497*</b>                | -.069  | <b>-.932**</b>                               | .383                                      | .084  | .249                                      | <b>-.493*</b>   | 1   | -.337  | .970**   | -.071   | .158  |

PREPARING FOR DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

|  |               |       |                |       |       |               |               |               |               |       |       |      |
|--|---------------|-------|----------------|-------|-------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-------|-------|------|
| Degree students are taught practice interventions at MSW level                   | <b>-.433*</b> | -.163 | <b>-.753**</b> | .307  | .055  | .173          | -.423         | <b>.970**</b> | -.253         | 1     | -.074 | .326 |
| Perception how much DV practice settings discussed                               | .190          | -.427 | -.534          | -.190 | .022  | <b>-.521*</b> | <b>.636**</b> | -.071         | <b>.827**</b> | -.074 | 1     | .224 |
| Perception of how prepared social work students prepared to work with DV clients | .314          | -.194 | .011           | .162  | -.282 | -.119         | <b>.473*</b>  | .158          | .435          | .326  | .224  | 1    |

Note: Significant correlations are highlighted in bold.

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

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

### Qualitative Findings and Discussion

Through the interviews conducted with faculty members in various Tennessee social work programs, several themes emerged about how domestic violence and its associated trauma are currently addressed in social work education. These themes included: teaching through integration, imparting important knowledge for students to learn, and increasing awareness for curriculum development.

**Teaching through integration throughout the curriculum.** When asked whether domestic violence should be treated as an elective or as a foundation course, the overwhelming majority stated that nothing specific is taught in regards to domestic violence. Some stated that they *could do better* in addressing domestic violence. A few respondents shared that domestic violence merited its own course as an elective or within foundation curriculum, but this was difficult to accomplish because of curriculum constraints. Comments made regarding curriculum constraints echoed the sentiment, “we can’t teach students everything with a generalist degree” (5).

*“Trauma in general is poorly mentioned in most courses, yet we recognize that the large majority of clients that social workers are going to see have experience with trauma...”  
The problem is that there aren’t enough students to offer all the phenomenal courses we would like to offer, so we have to make choices. We are doing what we can.” (7)*

While the reality for many social work programs is that *specifics are not taught explicitly*, interviewees were given the chance to state how this important topic should be addressed. Many of the interviewees stated that domestic violence and associated trauma should be incorporated within foundation courses, both in undergraduate and graduate programs. Respondents used words such as *integrated, incorporated, and embedded* to show how the topic should be taught in the curriculum.



*“Teaching domestic violence should be infused in practice and theory classes. We should teach students the basics of how to do trauma-informed practice.” (4)*

The fact that many interviewees stated that their programs address domestic violence and associated trauma through integration is positive because many respondents felt it should be taught this way.

***Work on assessments.*** When probed more about how the topics of domestic violence and associated trauma should be addressed, many faculty interviewed felt that more work needs to occur on assessing students effectively rather than addressing it more in the curriculum. Several participants felt that social work education has been addressing domestic violence well, but offered that more work can still be done.

***Community participation.*** The majority of social work faculty shared that the primary venue for students to learn about domestic violence is within the field placement. However, other outside opportunities such as connecting students with community events or volunteer opportunities should be encouraged. This focus on out-of-classroom activities may stem from the curriculum constraints social work programs face in addressing the specifics of domestic violence. Overall, the data analysis showed that social work faculty members perceive that domestic violence is not often specifically addressed, but ideally, it should be integrated in the foundation curriculum.

***Imparting important knowledge for students.*** Three main subthemes emerged regarding what knowledge social work educators consider important for students to know before they enter social work practice. These subthemes were: teaching students a cultural understanding of domestic violence, how not to victim blame, and to recognize the signs of someone in an abusive relationship.

***Cultural understanding of domestic violence.*** Throughout all the answers interviewees provided, the respondents underlined the pervasiveness of domestic violence in today's society. They often addressed the issue's wide impact as *cross-cutting* and *prevalent*. Many faculty members connected the issue's pervasive nature with a cultural understanding of domestic violence that social work students should learn before they graduate.

*“Domestic violence happens everywhere. It is across all socioeconomic groups and its is often very hidden. It affects people on every possible aspect: cognitively with children, it affects health, wellbeing, and more. Students should understanding how domestic violence and trauma fully impacts people.” (1)*

*“You know, in many ways, you shouldn't even think of domestic violence, you should just say field of practice. It's just one of those things, they all sort of blend together. There's every other field of practice where some kind of domestic violence is going to be a factor.” (4)*

Several faculty members voiced that a cultural understanding of domestic violence will aid students in assessments of clients in their future practice. They shared that having a *sociological and cultural perspective* on domestic violence will also help students understand how this issue is connected to other social problems such as poverty and oppression.

*“We need to steep our students in responsibility for social change, sociocultural change, instead of just how to do therapy. Every social worker should be a social activist, attempting to fundamental change at the level of our society so that we minimize the risk of oppression against person of color, women, all groups that are oppressed, so that we can minimize victimization.” (7)*

The interviewees stated the need for social work students to address the deeper roots of domestic violence. They believed a cultural understanding would help students become better practitioners in their work with clients affected by domestic violence and its associated trauma.

***Victim blaming.*** Several faculty members underlined the importance of not victim blaming. The reasons stated for its importance included *how easy it is to fall into victim blaming* and *because there are valid reasons why victims do not leave*.

*“Stop blaming the victim. It’s not the victim’s fault. The victim is just that: a victim. And we hope to one day turn that victim into a survivor.” (9)*

When asked whether they perceived students in their social work programs graduated with a knowledge of not to victim blame, a majority of faculty members believed they did.

**Recognizing the signs.** In addition to having a cultural understanding of domestic violence and avoiding victim blaming, the respondents believed that social work students should learn to recognize the signs of someone in a domestic violence situation. One faculty member commented on the recognizing the *far-away look* in someone’s eyes that indicates an incidence of trauma, abuse, or neglect. Several faculty members agreed that students should be able to identify such warning signs and look for these indicators in their social work practice.

**Increased awareness.** Towards the end of the interviews, participants were given the opportunity to share last thoughts about the research topic. Several faculty members stated they had increased awareness as a result of the research interview. They included that their renewed understanding would be taken into account when they reviewed their curriculum and assessment guidelines for the future.

*“I mean that plants a seed - what kind of assessing should we be doing on our alumni around specific populations?” (5)*

*“This has brought to my forefront of what can we do differently that might help enhance our curriculum so that way our students who are moving into agencies where they are working with individuals who have experienced trauma can just be a little bit more prepared than where they are right now.” (4)*

Overall, the qualitative research provided interesting insights into how educators approach the topics of domestic violence and associated trauma and prepare students accordingly. The participating social work faculty viewed domestic violence and its associated trauma as an important issue in society today. While several faculty members felt that social work programs could do a better job of addressing domestic violence in their program curriculum, many faculty

felt that this was difficult to do. Obstacles to addressing domestic violence more specifically included accreditation standards, university pressures, and the many other topics to cover in social work education. While the opinions of how to better prepare students for practice in settings addressing domestic violence differed, the participants in this study agreed that is an important topic for students to learn.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

This research study is limited in regards to its reach. Because the data was obtained through quantitative surveys and faculty interviews, the research is not as comprehensive as if students or alumni were interviewed. This research study took the angle from faculty perceptions in order to observe how often these issues are taught in the classroom, what opportunities are offered to students, and how curriculum is addressing the issue. However, it would be beneficial to learn how students themselves as well as alumni perceive how domestic violence and associated trauma are taught in undergraduate and graduate social work programs. Such research would serve to connect faculty and student perceptions and facilitate more effective learning. Further research could investigate social work students' perceptions of preparedness for practice settings addressing domestic violence and trauma.

Because of internal policies, not all universities disclosed the course syllabi for this research study. This research study initially sought to complete a comprehensive meta-analysis of the course curriculum that addressed domestic violence in social work programs. An email was sent to each program's representative, listed on the CSWE website, asking for relevant syllabi to complete the meta-analysis. However, because of low participation, an adequate study was not possible. Future studies could complete such a meta-analysis to study how domestic violence and its associated trauma is being addressed through this aspect.

In addition, the research found a lack of variables that could predict students being academically prepared to work with clients affected by domestic violence. Therefore, more research is needed to find out what other variable may influence the perception that students are academically well prepared for social work practice with victims and survivors of domestic violence. Lastly, this research is limited to the state of Tennessee. While the Public Safety Action Plan and Family Justice Center initiative is specific to Tennessee, the issue of domestic violence is important across the country. Further research is needed to see how other social work programs in the United States are addressing and teaching this issue.

### **Implications for Practice and Policy**

The research findings have several implications for social work students and educators alike. One such implication is how course content is delivered. The research found that social work programs primarily teach domestic violence through integration. However, because of the lack of assessment strategies for graduating social work students, there is no conclusive evidence that this course delivery is the most effective. Based on the research findings, a variety of teaching methods is recommended in order to provide students a comprehensive lesson regarding domestic violence. Teaching methods can include integration in foundation curricula, utilizing experts in the classroom, encouraging community participation in agencies or workshops, and more. In order to better structure program curriculum on domestic violence, accreditation standards in regards to special populations could be applied. This would enforce the profession's goal of diversity and give students the opportunity to learn more about various, at-risk populations. Based on the implications of this research, social work education can make meaningful changes in order to better prepare students for work with clients affected by domestic violence and associated trauma.

### **Conclusion**

This research project studied how accredited social work programs in Tennessee are preparing students for practice settings addressing domestic violence and associated trauma. Through a mixed methods approach, faculty perceptions regarding the topic were collected and analyzed. The study found that social work programs prepare students primarily through integrating domestic violence into foundation curriculum. However, other avenues such as the field experience and community events are utilized to teach students the specifics of domestic violence. As a whole, educators perceived that more work could be done to better inform social work students about this important issue. Through intentional education, social work students can be taught how to effectively work with clients affected by domestic violence and trauma.

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**Appendices**

**Appendix A**Quantitative Research Questionnaire

1. Gender:  Male  Female
2. Highest level of education completed:  
 Bachelor's degree  
 Master's degree  
 Professional Doctorate  
 PhD  
 Other (please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)
3. Number of years working in social work education:  
 1 year  
 2-5 years  
 5-10 years  
 10-15 years  
 15-25 years  
 25+ years
4. What university are you employed at as a social work faculty member?
5. Do you identify domestic violence as one of your research or teaching areas of specialization?  
 Yes  No
6. How does your program address domestic violence in course curricula? (check all that apply)
  - Electives

- Foundation courses
- Advanced courses
- Special topics courses
- Other (please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)

7. Does your program utilize representatives from local domestic violence programs or experts on the topic to speak in the classroom?

\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_ No

8. In your opinion, how should domestic violence be incorporated into social work course curriculum?

9. What out-of-class opportunities does your program offer for social work students to be educated about domestic violence and its associated trauma?

10. In your opinion, do the textbooks utilized in course curricula provide enough information for students to learn the complexities of domestic violence and its associated trauma?

\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_ No

11. In your opinion, how often is the topic of domestic violence and associated trauma discussed throughout social work program courses offered at your university?

|               | <b>Always</b> | <b>Often</b> | <b>Average</b> | <b>Sometimes</b> | <b>Never</b> |
|---------------|---------------|--------------|----------------|------------------|--------------|
| <b>At BSW</b> | 5             | 4            | 3              | 2                | 1            |
| <b>At MSW</b> | 5             | 4            | 3              | 2                | 1            |

12. In your opinion, to what degree are students taught social work practice interventions with domestic violence victims and survivors?

|  | <b>Always</b> | <b>Often</b> | <b>Average</b> | <b>Sometimes</b> | <b>Never</b> |
|--|---------------|--------------|----------------|------------------|--------------|
|  |               |              |                |                  |              |

|               |   |   |   |   |   |
|---------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| <b>At BSW</b> | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| <b>At MSW</b> | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |

13. In your opinion, how often are practicum settings that address domestic violence and/or trauma discussed throughout social work program courses?

|               | <b>Always</b> | <b>Often</b> | <b>Average</b> | <b>Sometimes</b> | <b>Never</b> |
|---------------|---------------|--------------|----------------|------------------|--------------|
| <b>At BSW</b> | 5             | 4            | 3              | 2                | 1            |
| <b>At MSW</b> | 5             | 4            | 3              | 2                | 1            |

14. Please rate your agreement or disagreement with the following statement: “Social work students are academically prepared to work with clients affected by domestic violence and trauma.”

| <b>Strongly Agree</b> | <b>Agree</b> | <b>Neutral</b> | <b>Disagree</b> | <b>Strongly Disagree</b> |
|-----------------------|--------------|----------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| 5                     | 4            | 3              | 2               | 1                        |

15. Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up study regarding how Tennessee’s social work programs are preparing students for practicum settings addressing domestic violence and trauma?

\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_ No

16. *(If yes)* Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. Please write your email address in the space provided below if you are willing to participate in a short, follow-up phone interview by the primary researcher.

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**Appendix B**Qualitative Research Interview Questions

1. How does your social work program prepare students for practice settings that involve domestic violence or trauma?
2. What kinds of teaching models or frameworks do you utilize in the classroom?
3. What learning opportunities exist for students to learn about domestic violence outside of coursework?
4. In your opinion, should domestic violence be treated as an elective or foundation course?
5. In your opinion, what do all social work students need to know about domestic violence before they graduate? Do you believe this is achieved?
6. In your opinion, how do you gauge the effectiveness of social work education's response to domestic violence, especially in Tennessee?