



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Assessment of MSW Students' Self-Efficacy in Achieving Social Work Competencies

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Abstract

This study assessed the attainment of practice competencies among 182 graduate social work students of an MSW program in Southern California. Using pretest-posttest design, this study measured students' self-efficacy in performing social work practice behaviours at program entry (pretest) and at exit (posttest). A paired-sample t-test yielded statistically significant differences between pretest and posttest scores in all practice competencies (EP 2.1.1-EP 2.1.10(d)) issued by the CSWE. The results indicate that perceived stress, self-esteem, perceived support from family, friends, and significant others, and use of positive reframing and planning were strong correlates of students' achievement of social work competencies.

Keywords: Social work, social cognitive theory, ethnicity, coping, psychological well-being

Abbreviations: **PSS:** Perceived Stress Scale; **EPAS:** Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards; **CSWE:** Council on Social Work Education; **MSPSS:** Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support

Introduction

The issuing of 2008 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) shifted the focus of program assessment from the evaluation of program objectives to the evaluation of educational outcomes and student achievement of practice competencies [1-4]. Although there are strong calls for outcomes assessment, implementation of a competencies-based measurement in evaluating student achievement remains challenging [5].

The purpose of this study is to assess graduate social work students' attainment of practice competencies during their enrolment with an MSW program. Specifically, the current study attempts to answer the following research questions: (1) What is MSW students' level of self-efficacy in executing social work practice behaviours prescribed in the 2008 EPAS at program entry (pretest) and at exit (posttest)?; (2) what are the changes made from pretest to posttest in students' social work self-efficacy and are they significant enough to indicate students' achievement of the social work competencies suggested by the CSWE?; and (3) what are the roles of self-esteem, coping, social support, stress and demographic variables (age, gender, ethnicity, and marital status) in understanding the students' social work self-efficacy? There are few systematic studies of the assessment of students' achievement of practice behaviours in social work education based on the 2008 EPAS;

thus, this study can expand and update the limited information on evaluation of educational outcomes. Also, the results of this study could have implications for social work programs and educators assessing students' performance and designing curriculum contents in more effective ways.

Literature Review

Self-Efficacy as an Assessment Indicator of Attainment of Core Competencies

The notion of self-efficacy and its role in behaviour or outcome performance have received considerable attention in the literature. Rooted in Albert Bandura's [6] social cognitive theory, self-efficacy refers to "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to produce given attainments" (p.3) [6]. While researchers agree that self-efficacy is a strong predictor of behaviour [7, 8], they also claim that self-efficacy is a multidimensional and situation specific construct; therefore, it must be evaluated in a domain that is specific to the outcome behaviour [6, 9, 10]. Particularly, Multon et al. [8] discussed in their meta-analysis that academic self-efficacy was the strongest proximal explaining factor for academic performance among college students. On the other hand, general self-efficacy was not found to be a robust predictor of academic outcomes [8, 11].

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Received: July 03, 2018; **Revised:** July 09, 2018; **Accepted:** July 11, 2018; **Published:** Apr 02, 2018

An extensive body of research has studied the effect of self-efficacy on academic performance in an educational setting. Studies have shown that students with higher levels of self-efficacy tend to be highly motivated, be willing to face challenges, make stronger commitments, focus on success rather than failure, handle stress and anxiety well, manage personal resources more efficiently, and use effective coping skills [6, 12-17]. Particularly, Zajacova et al. [18] found a strong positive effect of academic self-efficacy on freshmen students' academic outcomes [18]. Likewise, there is accumulated evidence in the literature that has demonstrated a positive association between self-efficacy and educational outcomes and career achievements [8, 13, 14, 16, 19-23].

Self-efficacy has also popularly been used to assess the outcomes of social work programs. Many researchers have used the concept of self-efficacy to evaluate the teaching of social work skills [24-27] or to develop measures of social work self-efficacy [25-31]. In addition, self-efficacy has been indicated as a significant explaining factor for social work skills in a field placement setting [32-34]. These researchers supported the usefulness of self-efficacy as an indicator of outcome measure in social work education.

Correlates of Academic Performance: Stress, Social Support, Coping, and Self-esteem

An extensive body of research has shown a negative association between self-efficacy and stress among college students [16, 18, 35-40]. Studies have supported stress being a major predictor of students' adjustment to colleges [41] as well as their academic achievement [42, 43]. Researchers generally agree that stress has a detrimental effect on performance in colleges, but also indicate that students with high levels of self-efficacy tend to be able to cope with stress by maintaining strong motivation and making persistent effort to accomplish their goals [6, 16, 44].

The positive correlation between self-efficacy and coping is well documented. Coping is proposed to be an important mechanism to respond to stress. If college students choose a coping style that does not effectively handle stressful situations, their stress may be aggravated. Generally, active coping strategies are reported to be effective for university students to release their stress, and the way they cope with stress is associated with their level of self-efficacy [45, 46]. In other words, students with high levels of self-efficacy are more likely to use active coping and problem-solving coping strategies like seeking advice, planning, and time management, while those with low levels of self-efficacy tend to use avoidance coping and maladaptive coping like behavioural disengagement or self-blame [14, 45-47]. For example, those with strong self-efficacy tended to set feasible and attainable goals and actively seek resources to complete their tasks or reach a satisfactory resolution. On the other hand, those with weak self-efficacy tended to procrastinate starting tasks which results in an incomplete or failure due to the delay.

Moreover, self-esteem is known to be a significant correlate of self-efficacy [47, 48]. Literature has indicated that self-

esteem is a strong predictor of developmental outcomes and academic performance [49-51]. Particularly, Friedlander et al. [41] found that university students with high level of self-esteem tended to use more effective ways to handle academic and social demands required in the educational environment. Also, the students with strong self-esteem showed a strong sense of confidence and competence handling stressors. This finding implies that self-esteem is a critical component in forming self-efficacy. This notion was supported by many studies demonstrating that those with high self-esteem tended to be more efficacious in stress management by implementing more positive thoughts and rejecting negative thoughts about themselves [52-56].

Furthermore, a large body of research has supported a positive association between social support and self-efficacy for college students [37, 39, 57]. Studies have found that social support from parents and peers better predicted academic performance and psychological well-being of college students [58-60]. For example, Holahan et al. [59] found that students with high levels of perceived parental support reported increased academic achievement, higher levels of happiness, and lower levels of depression and anxiety. Similarly, Friedlander et al. [41] found that social support from family and friends was significantly associated with better adjustment in college students. In addition, studies suggested a vicarious effect of social support on college student's self-efficacy through verbal support from social interaction [46]. In other words, seeking instrumental and emotional support was significantly related to self-efficacy in communicating and working well in a classroom.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this study is to assess students' attainment of social work competencies during the MSW program. Particularly, the current study examined MSW students' level of self-efficacy in executing the social work practice behaviours prescribed in the 2008 EPAS at program entry (pretest) and at exit (posttest). Also, the two test scores were compared to measure the change of social work self-efficacy that MSW students experienced during the MSW program. In addition, this study identified the areas of competencies about which students reported being most confident and least confident in their abilities. Moreover, it examined how student outcomes were associated with their age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, stress, social support, self-esteem, and coping styles.

Methods

Sample and Data Collection Procedure

The sample of this study consisted of 182 students who graduated from an urban social work program in Southern California in 2012 and 2013. Using a pretest-posttest design, the present study assessed changes in MSW students' social work self-efficacy as a result of their MSW education. Data for this study was obtained from the program's assessment data and the current study used indirect assessment data only.

Each academic year, incoming students participate in an online self-efficacy survey as part of the program assessment before they receive curriculum instruction in the program. They rate their level of confidence in performing social work practice behaviours corresponding to the thirteen competencies defined by the CSWE (2008). Also, graduating students participate in the same online self-efficacy survey just prior to completing their curriculum requirements. Then, the students' baseline scores on the pretest are compared to posttest scores to assess changes in students' confidence in performing social work practice competencies.

The subjects of this study are composed of the students who were enrolled with the program between the year of 2009 and 2013. All students in the program (both the 2-year program and the 3-year program) were invited to participate in the program's assessment. For those who graduated in 2012, a pretest was collected in the year they entered the program (in August 2010 for the full-time, 2-year program students and in August 2009 for the part-time, 3-year program students) and a posttest in May 2012. For those who graduated in 2013, a pretest was collected in August 2011 for full-time students and in August 2010 for part-time students and a posttest in May 2013. Among 263 pretest respondents (97.41% response rate) and 212 posttest respondents (85.83% response rate), 182 respondents were matched as completing both pretest and posttest. Among the total 182 respondents, 131 students (71.9%) were 2-year program graduates and 51 students (28.1%) were 3-year program graduates.

Measures

Social Work Self-Efficacy

MSW student's confidence in performing social work competencies (EP 2.1.1-2.1.10 (d)) was measured by the Self-Efficacy Scale. The Self-Efficacy scale was developed by adopting items from 41 practice behaviours of the 2008 EPAS, using two to four items for each competency from EP 2.1.1 to EP 2.1.10 (d). Students are asked twice in the program, at entry and exit of the program, to report their own confidence in executing the competency-related practice behaviours by selecting one of the following responses: 5= very strong, 4= strong, 3= average, 2= weak and 1= very weak. High internal reliability was found in the current sample, Cronbach's alpha ranging from .786 to .911 for pretest and from .724 to .925 for posttest. Coefficient alphas for each competency are presented in Table 1.

Perceived Stress

Perceived stress was measured using the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) [61]. The ten items of the PSS measures the frequency of specific feelings and thoughts that respondents experienced during the past month on a 5-point scale: 5= very often, 4= often, 3= sometimes, 2= almost never, and 1= never. Good internal consistency reliability ($\alpha = .78$) was reported in the original instrument study Cohen et al. [62] and the reliability coefficient was higher ($\alpha = .854$) in the present study.

Core Competencies (Educational Policy 2.1.1-2.1.10(d))	Pre M	Pre SD	Post M	Pre SD	t	p
2.1.1. Identify as a professional social worker and conduct one accordingly. (3 items, pretest $\alpha = .786$, posttest $\alpha = .724$)	3.48	0.83	4.53	0.47	-15.58	< .001
2.1.2 Apply social work ethical principles to guide professional practice. (3 items, pretest $\alpha = .804$, posttest $\alpha = .768$)	3.43	0.89	4.42	0.5	-13.16	< .001
2.1.3 Apply critical thinking to inform and communicate professional judgments. (2 items, pretest $\alpha = .871$, posttest $\alpha = .743$)	2.89	0.98	4.16	0.63	-14.62	< .001
2.1.4 Engage diversity and difference in practice. (4 items, pretest $\alpha = .864$, posttest $\alpha = .842$)	3.91	0.77	4.68	0.43	-12.08	< .001
2.1.5 Advance human rights and social and economic justice. (3 items, pretest $\alpha = .882$, posttest $\alpha = .872$)	3.23	0.99	4.22	0.66	-12.71	< .001
2.1.6 Engage in research-informed practice and practice-informed research. (2 items, pretest $\alpha = .798$, posttest $\alpha = .808$)	2.74	0.96	3.94	0.69	-14.04	< .001
2.1.7 Apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment. (3 items, pretest $\alpha = .885$, posttest $\alpha = .894$)	2.9	0.92	4.47	0.59	-19.09	< .001
2.1.8 Engage in policy practice to advance social and economic well-being and to deliver effective social work services. (3 items, pretest $\alpha = .911$, posttest $\alpha = .884$)	2.82	1.09	3.97	0.73	-12.55	< .001
2.1.9 Respond to contexts that shape practice. (4 items, pretest $\alpha = .819$, posttest $\alpha = .871$)	2.98	0.86	4.1	0.63	-14.27	< .001
2.1.10(a) Engage with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. (3 items, pretest $\alpha = .894$, posttest $\alpha = .884$)	3.3	0.92	4.47	0.58	-15.06	< .001
2.1.10(b) Assess with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. (4 items, pretest $\alpha = .890$, posttest $\alpha = .888$)	3.09	0.95	4.4	0.59	-17.01	< .001
2.1.10(c) Intervene with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. (3 items, pretest $\alpha = .852$, posttest $\alpha = .879$)	2.74	0.99	3.95	0.74	-14.12	< .001
2.1.10(d) Evaluate with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. (2 items, pretest $\alpha = .884$, posttest $\alpha = .925$)	2.79	0.98	3.84	0.79	-12.01	< .001

Table 1: Self-Efficacy scores for entire students (N=182).

Social Support

Social support was measured by the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) [62]. The instrument is a 12-item self-report inventory to measure perceived adequacy of social support from family, friends, and significant others. The original 7-point response categories were formed into a 4-point format for this study, ranging from "1= strongly disagree" to "4= strongly agree". High internal reliability (coefficient alpha ranging from .84 to .92) was reported in previous studies [63, 64], and a higher Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = .943$) was obtained in the current sample.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem was measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale [65]. The 10-item Self-Esteem scale asks respondents' overall feelings of self-worth or self-acceptance on a 4-point scale: "1= strongly disagree" to "4= strongly". Good reliability (with alpha ranging from .72 to .88) was demonstrated across the different samples [66-68], and stronger coefficient alpha ($\alpha = .889$) was obtained in the present study.

Coping

Coping was measured by the Brief COPE inventory [69-71]. The scale asks respondents' ways of coping in stressful situations on a 5-point Likert scale: 5= very often, 4= often, 3= sometimes, 2= almost never, and 1=never. For the current study, 14 items from the 28 items of the Brief COPE were selected to reduce the time burden. Many researchers

attempted to combine items into an overall coping index such as "problem-focused" vs. "emotion focused", or "approach coping" vs. "avoidance coping". However, Carver's [69] did not recommend generating a dominant coping style and suggested looking at each item separately to examine its relation to other variables. Therefore, items of the COPE were reviewed individually in analysing their association with social work self-efficacy and the other variables.

Demographic variables

In addition to the aforementioned instruments, the questionnaire asks the age, gender, ethnicity, and marital status of the students. Demographic variables and other background variables including stress, social support, self-esteem, and coping were measured with the Self-Efficacy posttest. The characteristics of the sample, t-tests on the changes from pretest to posttest in students' self-efficacy corresponding to the competencies (EP 2.1.1 – EP 2.1.10 (d)), and correlates of students' self-efficacy were reported.

Results

Sample Characteristics

Table 2 shows sample characteristics. Female respondents (81.9%) outnumbered male respondents (18.1%), and this gender distribution was similar in both the 2-year (full-time) and the 3-year (part-time) programs. Comparison of ethnic distribution for 2-year and 3-year program students was not statistically significant. For 2-year program respondents,

Demographic Variables	2-year program (n=131)		3-year program (n=51)		Test of Between-groups Differences
	n	%	n	%	
Age					X ² (4, n=182) = 42.320
21-30 years	99	75.6	13	25.5	p < .001
31-40 years	19	14.5	19	37.3	Cramer's V = .482
41-50 years	10	7.6	10	19.6	-
51-60 years	3	2.3	8	15.7	-
61 years or older	0		1	2	-
Gender					X ² (1, n=182) = .000
Female	107	81.7	42	82.4	p = 1.000
Male	24	18.3	9	17.6	phi = -.008
Marital Status					X ² (4, n=182) = 25.211
Married	24	18.3	25	49	p < .001
Never married	65	29.6	11	21.6	Cramer's V = .372
Separated or divorced	7	5.3	7	13.7	-
Not married but living with a significant other	21	16	4	7.8	-
Other	14	10.7	4	7.8	-
Ethnicity					X ² (5, n=182) = 4.802
Hispanic	47	35.9	24	47.1	p < .441
White Non-Hispanic	51	38.9	18	35.3	Cramer's V = .162
Black Non-Hispanic	7	5.3	-	-	-
Asian or Pacific Islander	14	10.7	4	7.8	-
American Indian or Alaskan Native	1	0.8	-	-	-
Other	11	8.4	5	9.8	-

Numbers in cells are frequencies and percentages.

Table 2: Characteristics of the Sample (N=182).

47.1% were Hispanic, 35.3% White Non-Hispanic, and 7.8% Asian. For 3-year program respondents, 38.9% were White Non-Hispanic, 35.9% Hispanic, 10.7% Asian, and 5.3% Black Non-Hispanic.

Comparing age distribution, the 3-year program respondents were significantly older than the 2-year program respondents: $X^2(4, n=182) = 42.320, p < .001, \text{Cramer's } V = .482$. For 2-year program students, 75.6% were in their 20s, 14.5% in their 30s, and 9.9% in their 40s or older. For 3-year program students, 25.5% were in their 20s, 37.3% in their 30s, 19.6% in their 40s, and 17.7% in their 50s or older. In addition, more 3-year program respondents were married than 2-year program respondents: 49.0% of 3-year program students were married as compared to 18.3% of 2-year program students. This comparison was statistically significant: $X^2(4, n=182) = 25.211, p < .001, \text{Cramer's } V = .372$.

As shown in Table 3, both 2-year program students ($M = 24.92, SD = 6.68$) and 3-year program students ($M = 24.51, SD = 5.75$) reported similar levels of perceived stress at the time of graduation (posttest): $t(182) = .333, p = .740$. However, 3-year program students reported significantly higher levels of perceived social support ($M = 45.18, SD = 4.74$) than 2-year program students ($M = 40.85, SD = 6.33$): $t(182) = -5.009, p < .001$. In addition, 3-year program students reported significantly higher levels of self-esteem ($M = 35.90, SD = 4.19$) than 2-year program students ($M = 33.63, SD = 5.28$): $t(182) = -3.049, p = .003$.

Social Work Competencies on Pretest and Posttest

Table 1 indicates the results of self-efficacy for all respondents

($N=182$). Upon completion of their MSW education, students rated themselves as being most confident in their abilities to engage diversity and differences in practice (EP 2.1.4; $M = 4.68, SD = 0.43$), to identify themselves as a professional social worker (EP 2.1.1; $M = 4.53, SD = 0.47$), to apply knowledge of human behaviour and the social environment (EP 2.1.7; $M = 4.47, SD = 0.59$), and to engage with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities (EP 2.1.10(b); $M = 4.47, SD = 0.58$). Students reported that they were least confident in their abilities to engage in research-informed practice and practice-informed research (EP 2.1.6; $M = 3.94, SD = 0.69$), to intervene with individuals, families, and groups (EP 2.1.10(c); $M = 3.95, SD = 0.74$), and to evaluate individuals, families, and groups (EP 2.1.10(d); $M = 3.84, SD = 0.79$). The greatest pretest-posttest changes were noted in competencies pertaining to applying knowledge of human behaviour and the social environment (EP 2.1.7; $t(182) = -19.09, p < 0.001$), assessing individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities (EP 2.1.10(b); $t(182) = -17.01, p < 0.001$), and identifying as a professional social worker and conducting oneself accordingly (EP 2.1.1; $t(182) = -15.58, p < 0.001$).

Table 4 presents social work self-efficacy scores of the 2-year program students ($n=131$) and 3-year program students ($n=51$). The comparison of the pretest scores of the two groups using an independent-samples t-test showed significantly higher mean scores among 3-year program students than 2-year program students in EP 2.1.1 and EP 2.1.2: for EP 2.1.1, $t(182) = -2.264, p = .025$, and for EP 2.1.2, $t(182) = -2.261, p = .025$. The magnitude of the differences for both competencies

Variables	2-year program		3-year program		t	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Stress (PSS) ($\alpha = .854$)	24.92	6.68	24.51	5.75	0.333	0.74
Social Support (MSPSS) ($\alpha = .943$)	40.85	6.33	36.94	14.28	1.883	0.065
MSPSS- family ($\alpha = .920$)	13.18	2.73	14.78	1.96	-4.399	<.001
MSPSS- friends ($\alpha = .942$)	13.79	2.33	15.02	1.9	-3.658	<.001
MSPSS- significant others ($\alpha = .969$)	13.87	2.72	15.37	1.57	-4.636	<.001
Self-Esteem (SE) ($\alpha = .889$)	33.63	5.28	35.9	4.19	-3.049	0.003

Table 3: Stress, social support and self-esteem of the sample ($N=182$).

Core Competencies	Pretest				t	p	Posttest				t	p
	2-year program		3-year program				2-year program		3-year program			
	M	SD	M	SD			M	SD	M	SD		
2.1.1.	3.39	0.81	3.7	0.84	-2.26	0.025	4.52	0.45	4.58	0.52	-0.77	0.442
2.1.2	3.34	0.87	3.67	0.94	-2.26	0.025	4.39	0.5	4.48	0.51	-1.08	0.282
2.1.3	2.84	0.94	3.05	1.06	-1.34	0.181	4.11	0.67	4.28	0.51	-1.67	0.096
2.1.4	3.9	0.77	3.92	0.79	-0.148	0.883	4.66	0.45	4.74	0.37	-1.193	0.235
2.1.5	3.21	0.99	3.3	0.99	-0.536	0.593	4.22	0.67	4.23	0.62	-0.061	0.951
2.1.6	2.8	0.95	2.59	0.99	1.343	0.181	3.92	0.72	4.03	0.62	-0.989	0.324
2.1.7	2.93	0.89	2.83	1.02	0.694	0.489	4.47	0.6	4.5	0.54	-0.389	0.698
2.1.8	2.81	1.1	2.85	1.1	-0.209	0.835	3.92	0.75	4.09	0.67	-1.412	0.16
2.1.9	2.98	0.87	2.98	0.84	0.017	0.986	4.06	0.63	4.2	0.64	-1.311	0.192
2.1.10(a)	3.3	0.9	3.32	0.98	-0.148	0.883	4.44	0.61	4.55	0.52	-1.179	0.24
2.1.10(b)	3.03	0.95	3.22	0.95	-1.208	0.228	4.36	0.6	4.49	0.56	-1.344	0.181
2.1.10(c)	2.7	0.95	2.85	1.09	-0.938	0.35	3.93	0.76	4.01	0.7	-0.669	0.505
2.1.10(d)	2.81	0.96	2.72	1.03	0.531	0.596	3.82	0.79	3.91	0.81	-0.664	0.508

Table 4: Comparison of 2-year program students ($n=131$) and 3-year program students ($n=51$).

was very small with eta squared of .027. On the other hand, the posttest scores of 2-year program students and 3-year program students were similar and the mean comparison produced no significant differences in any of the practice competencies.

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to measure the changes in self-efficacy scores from pretest to posttest for 2-year program respondents (n=131) and 3-year program respondents (n=51). The results indicated a statistically significant increase in both groups' self-efficacy with respect to the social work competencies at 2-tailed significance. In other words, both 2-year program and 3-year program students reported significantly higher posttest scores than pretest scores on every competency (EP 2.1.1 – EP 2.1.10(d)). This implies that for 2-year program and 3-year program students, their self-efficacy in executing each practice competency significantly improved as a result of their MSW education. The increase of the self-efficacy scores ranged from 0.76 to 1.68 with a 95% confidence interval. The eta squared statistic ranging from 0.165 to 0.577 indicated a small to moderate effect size. Comparing the degree of change from pretest to posttest in two groups did not produce any significant difference. This indicates that both 2-year program and 3-year program students made comparable improvement from pretest to posttest in social work competencies (EP 2.1.1 – EP 2.1.10(d)).

Correlates of Competencies

The level of students' stress, social support, self-esteem, coping, and demographic variables were measured with the Self-Efficacy posttest, and Table 5 presents correlations of posttest competencies (EP 2.1.1 – EP 2.1.10(d)) with the other variables. Older students scored higher on the self-efficacy pretest pertaining to EP 2.1.1 (r = .178, p = .016) and EP 2.1.2 (r = .206, p = .005), and they also scored higher on the self-efficacy posttest regarding EP 2.1.8 (r = .159, p = .032). Perceived stress was negatively associated with four competencies on the posttest: EP 2.1.1 (r = -.210, p = .006), EP 2.1.2 (r = -.185, p = .016), EP 2.1.6 (r = -.181, p = .019), and EP 2.1.9 (r = -.182, p = .018). Self-esteem was positively

related to six competencies: EP 2.1.1 (r = .200, p = .007), EP 2.1.2 (r = .234, p = .001), EP 2.1.3 (r = .151, p = .042), EP 2.1.4 (r = .189, p = .011), EP 2.1.9 (r = .218, p = .003), and EP 2.1.10(b) (r = .146, p = .049).

Perceived social support measures support from family, friends, and significant others, and the aggregate score of social support was positively associated with EP 2.1.1 (r = .185, p = .012). Evaluating each support component separately revealed more rich findings: support from family had a significant positive relationship with all competencies except for EP 2.1.4; support from friends had a significant positive relationship with all competencies except for EP 2.1.3, EP 2.1.4 and EP 2.1.5; and support from significant others had a significant positive relationship with all competencies except for EP 2.1.4, EP 2.1.5, EP 2.1.10(a), and EP 2.1.10(b). These findings suggest that it may be more valid to examine the function of each support component separately when studying the relationship of social support with students' social work self-efficacy.

Behavioural disengagement coping style ("I've been giving up trying to deal with it") was negatively associated with four practice competencies on the posttest: EP 2.1.1 (r = -.208, p = .007), EP 2.1.2 (r = -.213, p = .006), EP 2.1.6 (r = -.153, p = .048), and EP 2.1.7 (r = -.166, p = .032). Also, denial ("I've been refusing to believe that it has happened") was negatively related to EP 2.1.1 (r = -.165, p = .013) and EP 2.1.2 (r = -.197, p = .013).

On the other hand, positive reframing ("I've been trying to see it in a different light, to make it seem more positive") was positively associated with seven practice competencies: EP 2.1.1 (r = .181, p = .019), EP 2.1.2 (r = .231, p = .003), EP 2.1.4 (r = .235, p = .002), EP 2.1.7 (r = .169, p = .029), EP 2.1.9 (r = .161, p = .037), EP 2.1.10(a) (r = .157, p = .042), and EP 2.1.10(b) (r = .182, p = .018). Similarly, planning ("I've been trying to come up with a strategy about what to do") was positively correlated with six practice competencies: EP 2.1.1 (r = .225, p = .003), EP 2.1.2 (r = .239, p = .002), EP 2.1.3 (r =

EP posttest	Age	PSS	MSPSS	SE	Behavioral disengagement	Denial	Positive reframing	planning	Use emotional support	Religion	Humor
EP 2.1.1.		-.210**	.185*	.200**	-.208**	-.165*	.181*	.225**	.157*		
EP 2.1.2		-.185*		.234**	-.213**	-.197*	.231**	.239**			
EP 2.1.3				.151*				.184*			
EP 2.1.4				.189*			.235**			.158*	
EP 2.1.5								.157*			.161*
EP 2.1.6		-.181*			-.153*			.176*			
EP 2.1.7					-.166*		.169*	.191*			
EP 2.1.8	.159*										.177*
EP 2.1.9		-.182*		.218*			.161*				.157*
EP 2.1.10(a)							.157*				
EP 2.1.10(b)				.146*			.182*				
EP 2.1.10(c)											
EP 2.1.10(d)											

Numbers in cells represent Pearson correlation coefficients and 2-tailed probabilities; *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01.

Table 5: Correlations between posttest Self-Efficacy scores and personal characteristics (N=182).

EP Pre-post difference	Age	PSS	MSPSS	Denial	Use emotional support	Religion
EP 2.1.1.						-.154*
EP 2.1.2	-.147*					
EP 2.1.3						
EP 2.1.4						
EP 2.1.5					-.161*	
EP 2.1.6			-.205**	-.161*		
EP 2.1.7				-.155*		
EP 2.1.8						
EP 2.1.9			.221**			
EP 2.1.10(a)						
EP 2.1.10(b)						
EP 2.1.10(c)						
EP 2.1.10(d)		-.155*				

Numbers in cells represent Pearson correlation coefficients and 2-tailed probabilities;
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

Table 6: Correlations between pretest-posttest difference and personal characteristics (N=182).

.184, $p = .017$), EP 2.1.5 ($r = .157$, $p = .042$), EP 2.1.6 ($r = .176$, $p = .022$), and EP 2.1.7 ($r = .191$, $p = .013$).

Moreover, use of emotional support (“I’ve been getting comfort and understanding from someone”) was positively related to EP 2.1.1 ($r = .157$, $p = .043$). Likewise, humour (“I’ve been making jokes about it”) was positively related to three practice competencies: EP 2.1.5 ($r = .161$, $p = .037$), EP 2.1.8 ($r = .177$, $p = .022$), and EP 2.1.9 ($r = .157$, $p = .043$). In the same way, religion (“I’ve been trying to find comfort in my religion or spiritual beliefs”) was positively associated with EP 2.1.4 on the posttest ($r = .158$, $p = .041$).

Table 6 shows correlations of the degree of change from pretest to posttest with the other variables. Younger students tended to report more changes from pretest to posttest in EP 2.1.2 ($r = -.147$, $p = .048$). Those who perceived higher levels of support from significant others were likely to rate less pretest-posttest change in EP 2.1.6 ($r = -.205$, $p = .006$), but more change in EP 2.1.9 ($r = .221$, $p = .003$). Likewise, those who used more emotional support (“I’ve been getting comfort and understanding from others”) to cope with stressful situations tended to show less pretest-posttest change in EP 2.1.5 ($r = -.161$, $p = .037$). Also, the students who used denial more as their coping strategy were likely to report less change in EP 2.1.6 ($r = -.161$, $p = .037$) and EP 2.1.7 ($r = -.155$, $p = .045$). In addition, the respondents who used religion or spirituality as their coping mechanism (“I’ve been trying to find comfort in my religion or spiritual beliefs”) tended to rate less pretest-post change in EP 2.1.1 ($r = -.154$, $p = .046$).

Discussion

This study aimed to assess MSW students’ achievement of social work competencies in a graduate social work program. As Table 1 shows, the average scores of the respondents’ self-efficacy on social work competencies ranged from 2.74 to 3.91 when they entered the program (pretest), with an average of 3.1 (“3 = average”). These scores significantly increased

when they completed their MSW education (posttest) and ranged from 3.84 to 4.68 with an average of 4.2 (“4 = strong”). Particularly, the respondents showed the greatest improvement in EP 2.1.1 (identify as a professional social worker and conduct oneself accordingly), EP 2.1.7 (apply knowledge of human behaviour and the social environment), and EP 2.1.10(b) (assess individuals, families, groups, and organizations, and communities). The respondents showed the largest amount of change in these three practice competencies and also reported the highest posttest scores in these areas upon completion of the MSW program. In addition, the respondents rated very strong confidence in the diversity-related competency (EP 2.1.4, engage diversity and differences in practice) at both entry and exit of the program.

Pretest results indicated higher scores for 3-year program students than 2-year program students in EP 2.1.1 (identify as a professional social worker and conduct oneself accordingly) and EP 2.1.2 (apply social work ethical principles to guide professional practice). The fact that the 3-year program students were older and perceived higher levels of social support and self-esteem may contribute to the higher scores on competencies related to professionalism and ethics. However, the differences in their posttest scores corresponding to these two competencies were minimal, implying that the MSW training improved their self-efficacy in these two competency domains to a comparable level. In addition, the posttest score of each competency was significantly higher than its pretest score, indicating the effectiveness of the MSW education in teaching the social work competencies.

Self-esteem was found to be a strong correlate of social work competencies. Specifically, the respondents with higher levels of self-esteem were likely to report higher scores in the areas of professionalism (EP 2.1.1), ethics (EP 2.1.2), critical thinking (EP 2.1.3), diversity (EP 2.1.4), responding to context (EP 2.1.9), and assessing individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities (EP 2.1.10(b)). The positive

relationships between self-esteem and these five social work competencies supported research findings that suggested self-esteem as a significant correlate of academic outcomes (Blake & Rust, 2002; Lane, Jones, Stevens, 2002; Mooney, Sherman, & Lo Presto, 1991; Rice 1999). Also, the results indicating that those with higher levels of self-esteem tended to report lower levels of perceived stress ($r = -.492, p < .001$), use more active coping styles (positive reframing: $r = .276, p < .001$; planning: $r = .178, p = .021$), and use less avoidance coping (self-blame: $r = -.460, p < .001$; behavioural disengagement: $r = -.360, p < .001$; denial: $r = -.234, p = .002$) were consistent with literature findings [41,52, 53, 54, 55, 56].

Literature that showed the inverse relationship between stress and academic achievement was supported by the current study. Especially, those with higher levels of perceived stress were likely to indicate lower scores in the areas of professionalism (EP 2.1.1), ethics (EP 2.1.2), research-informed practice and practice-informed research (EP 2.1.6), and responding to context (EP 2.1.9). Furthermore, the positive relationship between coping and academic self-efficacy was also supported in this study. Particularly, those who used more planning, more positive reframing, and less behavioural disengagement as their coping styles tended to achieve better in the areas of professionalism (EP 2.1.1), ethics (EP 2.1.2), and human behaviour and the social environment (EP 2.1.7).

Furthermore, research finding that indicated a positive correlation between social support and academic performance was confirmed in the current sample. For example, those who perceived higher levels of social support from family, friends, and significant others tended to report higher scores on most of the social work competencies: professionalism (EP.2.1.1), ethics (EP 2.1.2), research-informed practice and practice-informed research (EP 2.1.6), human behaviour and the social environment (EP 2.1.7), policy practice (EP 2.1.8), responding to context (EP 2.1.9), and intervene with and evaluate individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities (EP 2.1.10(c & d)). The results of this study corroborated the association of support from family and friends with academic achievement [54, 59] and suggested the importance of support from significant others in MSW students' academic outcomes. In addition, the current study found that those with higher levels of perceived social support were likely to report lower levels of perceived stress ($r = -.305, p < .001$) and use more emotional support ($r = .344, p < .001$), positive reframing ($r = .168, p = .029$), active coping ($r = .154, p = .046$), and less behavioural disengagement ($r = -.156, p = .044$). These findings imply that those who had higher levels of perceived support from family, friends, and significant others tended to use more positive coping and less avoidance coping, and to be able to handle stress more effectively. These results are also consistent with previous studies that suggested the positive association of social support with college adjustment, psychological well-being, and sense of happiness [54, 58-60].

In light of the amount of change made from pretest to posttest, younger students were likely to improve more in the ethic-

related competency (EP 2.1.2), and this may suggest that younger students were more active in applying social work ethical principles to guide professional practice. In addition, it was interesting to find that those who used more religiosity or spirituality as their coping mechanism tended to improve less in professionalism (EP 2.1.1). The respondents who actively practiced their religiosity or spirituality could give priority to religious/spiritual identity, thus being less active in identifying as a professional social worker. Considering the religiosity or spirituality is an existential concept, it seems to be critical to explicate religious/spiritual identity and professional identity as social workers.

Limitations

The findings of this study need to be viewed in consideration of several limitations. First, the study used a nonprobability sampling that included the students of one MSW program. Data collected from this sample may not represent MSW students nationwide. Therefore, caution should be exercised in generalizing the findings to a larger population. Second, indirect assessment data using self-report survey responses can be influenced by a social desirability bias. Combining direct assessment data may ensure the validity of the study findings. However, in light of the anonymity of the responses, it is reasonable to assume that vulnerability to social desirability bias of the current study does not appear to be more serious than in other anonymous surveys. Third, this study used pretest-posttest design to assess changes in MSW students social work self-efficacy, but background variables including stress, social support, self-esteem, coping, and demographic variables were measured in posttest only. Therefore, changes of social work self-efficacy made from pretest to posttest were not able to be compared with changes in the background variables.

Conclusion

This study attempted to assess MSW students' achievement of social work competencies during their enrolment in an MSW program. It measured students' self-efficacy in performing social work practice behaviours at program entry (pretest) and at exit (posttest), and the two scores were compared to examine the changes made from pretest to posttest. Also, the study identified the primary domains of social work competencies about which the students felt most confident and least confident in their performance. Moreover, it explored the relationships of students' social work self-efficacy with stress, coping, social support, self-esteem, age, gender, ethnicity, and marital status.

This study found that the students' fulfilment was greatest in identifying as a professional social worker and conducting oneself accordingly (EP 2.1.1), applying knowledge of human behaviour and the social environment (EP 2.1.7), and assessing individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities (EP 2.1.10(b)); and these are the practice competencies that the students reported strongest confidence in performing by the time they completed their MSW education. The study also found that changes made from pretest social work self-

efficacy to posttest was significant enough to recognize students' attainment of practice competencies, and this was consistent across 2-year program students and 3-year program students. Lower levels of stress, higher levels of self-esteem, more support from family, friends, and significant others, and use of positive reframing and planning as coping styles were positively associated with students' social work self-efficacy.

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Citation: Park HS, Levin A, Love S (2018) Assessment of MSW Students' Self-Efficacy in Achieving Social Work Competencies. *Drugs Alcohol Addict* 1: 001-011.

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