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Re-thinking South Korea's Special Graduate Education as a Continuing Education Resource¹

Junseob Shin, PhD

Introduction

Social work education in South Korea has experienced a rapid expansion. Since the founding of a social work department at a private university in the 1940s, the number of universities offering social work programs at both undergraduate and graduate levels has grown steadily. This expansion was accelerated in the 1980s when seventeen universities began to offer new social work programs at the undergraduate level. At that time, the establishment of graduate social work programs, offering only evening classes, also expanded. This type of graduate program is called a "special graduate program" since all students in the program enroll part-time, and most of them are non-traditional students. For the traditional students, most of whom have an undergraduate social work education, the general master's of social work programs provide advanced education. All graduate social work programs can, therefore, be classified as either special or general master's programs in social work. Currently, sixty-five (65) social work undergraduate programs, nineteen (19) general master's of social work programs, and forty-nine (49) special graduate programs in social work are in operation throughout the country.

Despite this rapid growth of social work education, continuing education has not been well developed (Kim, 1999). In general, continuing education is short in supply. Further, most programs of continuing education are offered within formats of traditional workshops, seminars, or conferences held by several professional associations. These educational formats have the limitation of a high cost (Weinbach, 1994). Particularly for social workers in the field, provisions for educational opportunities in updated theory and skills are greatly in need. A recent study conducted by Kim et al (1998) clearly showed the need, reporting 94.9% of 452 social workers in the field expected to have a learning

opportunity for specific theories and skills in performing their work.

The purpose of this study was to explore a strategy responding to the need for continuing education in South Korea. This study posited that the special graduate program could be a possible alternative, if reorganization of the program were to be properly approached. To achieve this purpose, a survey was made of 216 graduate students enrolled in both the general master's programs and the special graduate programs in social work. Then demographic characteristics and factors contributing to the pursuit of graduate education among students in both programs were compared. Based on the results, the study examined the characteristics and functions of the special programs in their current form and discussed a need for reorganization of the program.

Social Work Education In South Korea Continuing Education

From the perspective of the social work agency, continuing education is a personnel development process in which staff members are educated and trained to acquire new theoretical concepts and skills. According to Weinbach (1994), continuing education can be offered by several sources: staff in agency, private institutions, schools of social work, academic programs, and professional associations. Continuing education offered by the associations has strength in providing specific knowledge and skills based on the experience of experts in the field. However, it is limited to offering education in a cost-efficient way. In this regard, continuing education facilitated by schools of social work can be a more efficient way for a relatively larger number of workers to gain necessary practice skills (Weinbach, 1994, pp. 133-134).

In South Korea, professional associations in the practice areas of social work mainly offer continu-

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TABLE 1: Academic Affiliations of the Special Graduate Program in Social Work

Affiliation	Number of Programs
Graduate school of public policy	19
Graduate school of social welfare	7
Graduate school of social development	5
Others	18

ing education. Traditional workshops, seminars, and conferences are common. While clearly documenting a shortage in providing continuing education, Kim et al (1998) also found that the primary reasons for pursuing continuing education were acquiring service methodologies specific to practice areas and enhancing the understanding of social welfare policies (pp. 267-268). These findings may indicate that undergraduate social work education is oriented mostly toward providing generalist social work methodologies; thus, there is a need to acquire more specificity in knowledge and skills. This rationale makes continuing education critical for the profession.

Graduate Education in Social Work

Graduate social work education in South Korea has two forms: (1) general master's of social work program; and (2) special graduate programs in social work. The general master's programs offer education for students who mostly have earned a Bachelor's of Social Work (BSW) degree. As Kim et al (1998) notes, this kind of program emphasizes "academism." The curriculum of the program emphasizes various theories and research methodologies for social work practice. Students in the program tend to continue their studies in doctoral-level social work programs. The average length of study is normally two and a half years, containing two years of course work and a master's thesis.

As yet, it is difficult to define the characteristics of the special graduate programs in social work. The program is not specifically oriented toward academism nor professionalism. Rather, the orientation is mixed. Various academic affiliations, such as where the programs are geographically located, reflect this, as shown in Table 1. As academic affiliations vary, so do the curricula. For instance, some programs require eight credit hours of required courses, while others require twelve or more.

Another notable difference between the general master's program and the special graduate program is found in field practice. In the general program, field practice is required, while in the special program, field practice is not a requirement. The absence of field practice stems from the fact that most students in the program have a full-time job, so they are unable to perform practice during the daytime. This could be problematic, because the field practice course is one of the required courses for obtaining a level-one social worker license.² Nevertheless, graduates of the special program are eligible to obtain the level one license under the current regulations of social work license policy. In this respect, obtaining a level one license may be a driving force for students pursuing graduate study in the special program.

Factors Contributing to the Pursuit of Social Work Education

In the American social work literature, research indicated that there were numerous factors contributing to students' pursuing graduate social work education. These factors included: (1) compatibility of a person's values with those espoused by the social work profession (e. g., Abott, 1988; Enoch, 1988; Lusk & Miller, 1985; Morgan, 1988); (2) a desire to perform functions associated with the practice of social work (e. g., Abell & McDonnell,

² At present, the social work license has three levels. Level one is for people who have either Bachelor's or Master's Social Work degrees. Level two is for people who completed a two-year social work education program in a junior college. Level three is for high school graduates who completed the special social work training program. This policy will be upgraded in 2003 by launching exams held by the Ministry of Health and Welfare for acquiring a level-one license. Thus, people who are eligible for a level-one license, in current policy, will be granted a level-two license from that year forward.

1990; Hanson & McCullagh, 1995); (3) a background of family problems and dysfunction (e. g., Dunes, 1972; Goldmeir, 1968; Hess & Williams, 1974; Hanna, 1990); and (4) personality characteristics (e. g., Rompf & Royse, 1994). The above studies suggest that social work students pursue social work education, and subsequently chose social work as a career, for a number of reasons. The factors are often complex and interrelated, suggesting that one should not necessarily conclude or assume a causal relationship with regard to a career choice in social work.

Meanwhile, research on this topic virtually does not exist in South Korea. Similar to those of American students in social work, the paths leading toward graduate education in social work and a subsequent career in the field may vary for South Korean students. The lack of research on this topic can be generalized by the contention of American scholars, Romph and Royse (1994), who claim "little is known about why students choose social work for a career" (p. 163).

Research Methods

A questionnaire developed by the researcher was administered to 234 students at four graduate social work programs, of which two programs were special graduate programs in social work. The researcher contacted four professors in each program and had them distribute the questionnaire in the classes they instruct. Permission was obtained from the professors, and they distributed and collected completed questionnaires. Responses were anonymous, and all students had the option of not participating in the study. Of the questionnaires collected, eighteen were unusable due to incomplete information; thus, this study is based upon the questionnaires of 216 students.

The questionnaire consisted of three sections: demographic questions, 39 attitudinal questions, and 25 experiential questions. For the attitudinal and experiential questions that attempted to discern the reasons for a student's pursuit of graduate

social work education, the respondents used a Likert scale to rate their decisions. This scale was organized as follows: (1) Very Unimportant, (2) Unimportant, (3) Important, (4) Very Important, and (5) Not Applicable.

The mean age of respondents was 32.4 years, with a range from 22 to 59 years. Of the respondents, 47.8% were first-year students, 36% were second-year students, and the remaining respondents were third-year students. Female students dominated (60.8%, n=132), and student marital status included 48.5% who were never married, 47% who were married, and the remaining 4.5% were either divorced, separated, or widowed. There were more students in special graduate programs (n=118, 54.6%) than in general master's programs (n=98, 45.4%). Of the overall respondents, 35.2% (n=76) indicated that they had BSW degrees, and the remaining students had bachelor's degrees in other disciplines.

Findings

Demographic Characteristics

Students in the special program showed several differences in demographic factors, as compared to those of students in general programs. They tended to be older (mean = 33.9 years) than students in the general program (mean = 30.6 years), and this difference was statistically significant (t = -3.326, d.f. = 213, p = .001). The difference suggested that more students in the special program were non-traditional students who had full-time jobs outside of school. These students also resumed their graduate study several years after completion of their undergraduate study.

TABLE 2: Difference of Having Social Work Education as an Undergraduate

Having BSW degree	Type of Graduate Program	
	General	Special
Yes	45	31
No	53	87
Total	98	118

$\chi^2 = 9.062, d.f. = 1, p < .01$

In both types of programs, there were more students who did not have an undergraduate social work education. In the special programs, this ratio was higher, with 87 of 118 students (73.7%) having bachelor's degrees in other disciplines as Table 2 shows (see page 25). This indicates that students in the special program began their studies in social work for the first time in the special program itself. Careful consideration is necessary for this finding, because special programs offer minimum education eligibility for obtaining a level-one social worker license under current policy. The educational quality of special programs is exceptional and provides a solid foundation of knowledge and skills to become competent, practicing social workers in the field. Considering that there is no field practice requirement in most special programs, this situation could become more problematic.

A significant difference was also found in the students' concentration in the programs. Students in the special program showed more interest in macro-level social work practice than did students in the general program. As Table 3 illustrates, more students in the special program were in administration and policy tracks, while more students in the general program were in the service delivery concentration. This might suggest that students in the general program tended to need more specific knowledge and service delivery skills because more of these students had already been educated in general social work methodology and skills in undergraduate programs, than those students in the special program.

TABLE 3: Difference of Concentration in the Programs

Concentration	Type of Graduate Program	
	General	Special
Administration/Policy	20	48
Service Delivery	57	28
Other	18	36
Total	95	112

$\chi^2 = 26.204, d.f. = 2, p < .001$

TABLE 4: Difference of Volunteer and Full-Time Work Experience as a Social Worker

Having volunteer experience	Type of Graduate Program	
	General	Special
Yes	33	56
No	62	59
Total	95	115

$\chi^2 = 4.151, d.f. = 1, p < .05$

Having full-time work experience as social worker	Type of Graduate Program	
	General	Special
Yes	16	29
No	79	89
Total	95	116

$\chi^2 = .740, d.f. = 1, p = .147$

In experiential factors, students in the special programs had more voluntary experience in social work fields than did students in the general programs (See Table 4). In terms of paid experience as full-time social workers, no significant differences were found among students in both groups.

However, this finding requires a careful explanation, because the reasons for pursuing graduate education for 45 students, who had paid social work experience in both programs, might be linked to continuing education

Factors Contributing to the Pursuit of Graduate Social Work Education

Of the 39 attitudinal items pertaining to factors associated with pursuing graduate social work education, the items that received the highest ratings were not significantly different between students in both programs (See Tables 5 and 6). The students in both groups pursued graduate social work education because of a congruence between the students' interests, desires, and capabilities, typically associated with the social work profession. However, the item that received the highest overall rating was different for the students in both groups. For the students in the general program, the item "You find social work personally rewarding," received a mean score of 3.77. Meanwhile, the item "You need to

TABLE 5: Importance of Attitudinal Factors Contributing to the Pursuit of Graduate Social Work Education among Students in General Programs (N=98)

Factors	Mean*	S.D.**	N
You find social work personally rewarding	3.77	.45	98
You want to make the world a better place	3.63	.53	97
You want to give something back to society	3.57	.63	96
You have a desire to better understanding yourself or your family	3.45	.66	97
Social work provides opportunity for self-awareness	3.43	.61	97
You need to obtain credentials to implement change	3.39	.62	97
You want to change existing social structure	3.36	.72	97
You enjoy working with people	3.36	.66	98
You have interest in social issues	3.33	.59	98
You view social work as a challenging career	3.32	.64	96
You enjoy helping people	3.31	.68	98
Social work provides an opportunity to work with diverse problems	3.31	.69	98
Social work provides an opportunity to be creative	3.31	.65	98
You have interests similar to social work professions	3.30	.66	97
You view your value as congruent with social work values	3.27	.63	98
Social work provides an opportunity to work with diverse populations	3.24	.73	98
You want to empower people	3.23	.60	97
You want to accomplish a vision in social work field	3.20	.66	98
You wanted to fulfill your need to be needed	3.16	.67	98
You view your talents or abilities as congruent with the field of social work	3.10	.59	97
You are a compassionate person	3.10	.71	98
You have a spiritual or religious calling to the profession	3.09	.98	95
You are sensitive to others	3.09	.75	98
Your views are common to the holistic approach	3.06	.71	96
You are a caring person	3.06	.62	98
You wanted to be instrumental in making policy	3.04	.74	95
You prefer the social science over the natural science	3.03	.67	97
You recognize your own strengths and weaknesses	3.02	.59	98
You like course work related to behavioral science	2.96	.69	96
You have a nurturing personality	2.94	.70	97
You feel you have a calling for a career in social work	2.86	.82	97
You view yourself as a person with good coping skills	2.83	.72	96
You felt that you had the capacity to make a difference	2.77	.79	96
You have particular interest in advocating for special populations	2.72	.83	94
You have a gift for networking	2.67	.76	96
Social work provides for a higher income than you previously had	2.64	.92	83
You wanted power	2.23	.85	90
Completing a master's degree in social work takes relatively less time than earning a doctorate in psychology or counseling	2.20	.79	87
Social work provides for better job opportunities than you previously had	1.88	.80	81

* Students rated each factor on a scale of 1 to 4 where 1=very unimportant, 2=unimportant, 3=important, 4=very important, and NA for not applicable. Non-applicable responses were eliminated from the analysis.

** S.D. = Standard Deviation

TABLE 6: Importance of Attitudinal Factors Contributing to the Pursuit of Graduate Social Work Education among Students in Special Programs (N=118)

Factors	Mean*	S.D.**	N
You need to obtain credentials to implement change	3.82	.41	118
You find social work personally rewarding	3.73	.56	118
You want to make the world a better place	3.49	.68	118
You want to give something back to society	3.45	.67	118
Social work provides opportunity for self-awareness	3.43	.65	118
You enjoy working with people	3.41	.74	118
You want to change existing social structure	3.39	.74	116
You enjoy helping people	3.38	.60	118
Social work provides an opportunity to work with diverse problems	3.38	.61	117
You have interests similar to social work professions	3.36	.65	116
You view social work a challenging career	3.35	.75	117
You want to accomplish a vision in social work field	3.34	.60	117
You view your value as congruent with social work values	3.33	.61	118
You have interest in social issues	3.33	.76	118
Social work provides an opportunity to be creative	3.30	.67	117
You have a desire to better understanding yourself or your family	3.29	.69	116
You view your talents or abilities as congruent with the field of social work	3.28	.76	116
Social work provides an opportunity to work with diverse populations	3.23	.75	117
You are a caring person	3.22	.66	116
You want to empower people	3.18	.55	117
You are a compassionate person	3.13	.62	117
You recognize your own strengths and weaknesses	3.12	.65	115
You prefer the social science over the natural science	3.11	.74	114
Your views are common to the holistic approach	3.09	.67	118
You wanted to be instrumental in making policy	3.05	.73	118
You have a spiritual or religious calling to the profession	3.00	.69	114
You wanted to fulfill your need to be needed	2.99	.81	115
You have a nurturing personality	2.98	.63	117
You feel you have a calling for a career in social work	2.98	.77	115
You are sensitive to others	2.95	.73	116
You like course work related to behavioral science	2.88	.71	114
You felt that you had the capacity to make a difference	2.83	.71	116
You view yourself as a person with good coping skills	2.75	.73	112
Social work provides for better job opportunities than you previously had	2.74	.91	106
You have a gift for networking	2.66	.72	117
You have particular interest in advocating for special populations	2.56	.91	113
You wanted power	2.21	.84	109
Completing a master's degree in social work takes relatively less time than earning a doctorate in psychology or counseling	2.12	.85	101
Social work provides for a higher income than you previously had	1.69	.67	101

* Students rated each factor on the same scale as those reported in Table 5. Non-applicable responses were eliminated from the analysis.

obtain credentials to implement change," showed the highest mean score of 3.82 for the students in the special program.

The items which showed moderate importance in pursuing graduate social work education were similar for the students in both groups. These included items which indicate that the students' talents and abilities were compatible with the field of social work; that they found the field personally rewarding; and that their attitudes, values, and personalities fit well with those demanded by the profession. Further, for the students in both groups, the least important items were those that were more self-centered or selfish in nature, such as: a desire for power; pursuing a master's degree in social work because it takes less time than earning a doctorate in psychology or counseling; and social work would provide for better job opportunities or higher income than they previously had.

Students also rated 25 items related to personal experience. When students had a particular experi-

ence, they were asked to rate the importance of this experience in light of their decision to pursue graduate-level social work education. For the students in both groups, the two most important experiential factors affecting their decision to pursue a graduate-level social work education were: (1) "You had positive contact with social services," rated by 84 students in the general program, and 101 students in the special program; and (2) "You had prior experience in the field," rated by 61 students in the general program, and 81 students in the special program. A notable difference was found in the item "You had a job or career change," which was the most important factor for students in the special program, while students in the general program indicated that "Your family's values socialized you toward a career in social work," was the most important factor. (See Tables 7 and 8.)

Implications

Overall, this study found some characteristics and functions of the special programs to be different from those of the general programs. First of all, the results of this study suggest that the major function of the special program was to provide social work education opportunities for those students who did not have an undergraduate social work education. Non-traditional students were the primary recipients of this program. In this respect, the actual function of the current program is to provide educational opportunities for people who need credentials for working in the social work field. It could be one of the ways to encourage more qualified people to pursue a profession in social work, if the special program would offer sufficient education. However, the provision for quality education by the special program far exceeds these expectations. Therefore, the curriculum for the special programs should be strengthened for people who do not have an undergraduate social work education. For example, requirement courses should be expanded to provide fundamental knowledge and theory, which are minimum

TABLE 7: Importance of Experiential Factors Contributing to the Pursuit of Graduate Social Work Education among Students in General Programs (N=98)

Factors	Mean*	S.D.**	N
Your family's values socialized you toward a career in social work	2.70	1.02	83
You had positive contact with social services	2.65	.88	84
You had prior experience in the field	2.59	1.19	61
You received inspiration from articles, books, or other media	2.39	1.05	77
You received encouragement from family to pursue social work	2.26	1.05	54
You were influenced by another social worker	2.23	.99	75
You received encouragement from friends to pursue social work	2.21	1.07	58
You had a job or career change	2.20	1.13	55
You had a family member with chronic physical health problems	2.16	1.22	38
You had negative contact with social services	2.09	.84	75
You have had a serious accident or illness	2.09	1.08	45
You had taken a personal interest vocational test that suggested a career in social work	2.07	1.10	55

* Students rated each factor on a scale of 1 to 4 where 1=very unimportant, 2=unimportant, 3=important, 4=very important, and NA for not applicable. Non-applicable responses were eliminated from the analysis. Items rated below the mean score 2.0 were also eliminated from the table.

TABLE 8: Importance of Experiential Factors Contributing to the Pursuit of Graduate Social Work Education among Students in Special Programs (N=118)

Factors	Mean*	S.D.**	N
You had prior experience in the field	2.73	.97	101
You had a job or career change	2.72	1.21	81
You had positive contact with social services	2.67	1.16	72
You received inspiration from articles, books, or other media	2.65	1.05	92
Your family's values socialized you toward a career in social work	2.64	1.08	86
You were influenced by another social worker	2.22	1.06	89
You had a family member with chronic physical health problems	2.22	1.27	58
You have had a serious accident or illness	2.09	1.15	56
You received encouragement from family to pursue social work	2.07	1.18	68
You had negative contact with social services	2.07	.97	85
You received encouragement from friends to pursue social work	2.00	1.07	69

* Students rated each factor on the same scale as those reported in Table 7. Non-applicable responses were eliminated from the analysis. Items rated below the mean score 2.0 were also eliminated from the table.

requirements for practice. In this regard, field practice courses should also be required courses for all students in the program.

Another suggestion raised by the results of this study was that providing continuing education for persons who are already in the social work field should be of important concern for the special program. As reported in Tables 2 and 4, demographic characteristics of the students in the special program revealed that some students pursued graduate education for the purpose of continuing education. While it is reasonable for the special programs to offer educational opportunities for people who need to update their knowledge and theory for practice, the opportunity to access continuing education through special programs is not enough. Rather, these programs tend to focus their curriculums on required courses for obtaining a level-one social worker license. For example, in their current form, defining the level of instruction in required courses is even harder; whether the focus should be on students with or without prior social work education

continues to be debated.

Based on the results of this study, the major function of special graduate education can be currently summarized in two folds: (1) the provision of minimum social work education for people who need credentials to work in the field; and (2) the provision of continuing education for people who are already in the field. It is the researcher's contention that the special program should define its primary role in social work education. As noted above, a new social worker license policy will be initiated in the year 2003. The policy requires major alterations in the overall system of social work education in South Korea. As was contended by the Council on Korean Social Work Education (2000), the provision of minimum education for people obtaining credentials to work in social work fields should no longer be alternatives for social work education. The special program, in this respect, should be reorganized for offering continuing education, because educational circumstances are suitable to provide educational opportunities for social workers in the field, such as offering evening classes and part-time status to the students.

Finally, the results of this study showed that the overall reasons for pursuing graduate social education among South Korean students were not different from those of American students. Consistent with the findings in American social work literature, this study found that persons pursued graduate social work education for altruistic reasons: they wanted to be of service to people; they found their personal talents and abilities compatible with those demanded by the social work profession; and they were influenced by their positive experiences with social services or professionals in the field.

Conclusions

Continuing education is a critical process, which can assure that quality services are provided for the recipients. Provisions for the education of social workers in the field, however, are greatly needed in South Korea. This study found that the special

graduate program could be an alternative to making continuing education active if reorganization of the program is approached. However, the way in which to reorganize the program remains largely unanswered in this study. Efforts should therefore be made in defining specific ways of reconstructing the special program to provide an educational opportunity for social workers in the field.

Additionally, it should be noted that social work is a relatively new and evolving profession in South Korea. The professional identity of social work has not yet been well established. In addition to provisions for quality continuing education, more quali-

fied people should be encouraged to join the profession, and this trend should be emphasized.

Pursuing graduate social work education means that students chose social work as a career. The reason for career selection varies as this study found. Therefore, it is incumbent upon both social work educators and practicing social workers to continue to promote the value of the profession, and to serve as role models for persons who might be attracted to a social work career. Their contributions will then mirror, enhance, and define the unique mission of the social work profession in South Korea.

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