

Family support workforce skills: Pathways towards (new) conceptualizations

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ABSTRACT

Professionals working in different areas of family support have diverse conceptual assumptions and epistemological frameworks. Thus, a common conceptualization of family support workforce skills presents major research and practical challenge. Beyond general recognizability, a growing knowledge base and interests, there is still no generally accepted concept of what family support is as a practice, policy, and theoretical construct. This paper attempts to conceptualize the skills for the practice of family support in different professions and social sectors through several research approaches. Initially, we analyzed the content of websites with international organizations' resources about skills in family support. Second, we systematically reviewed literature using the PRISMA method. Last, we reviewed literature, including professional handbooks and publications. The content analysis and systematic literature reviews indicate that as an interdisciplinary concept, family support workforce skills are generally familiar, but not defined nor specified and differentiated from other skills used in the broad field of work with families. So, to deepen the knowledge on family support workforce skills and reach a reliable consensus, the Delphi method was used with a series of questionnaires at different stages of research. Results indicate that specific core and field-specific skills become family supportive when they are applied in the contexts of strength and relationship-based approach as well as both – whole family and child-centred approach. That has opened up new possibilities for more precise definitions, recognisability and transferability of family support skills and construction of a conceptual model.

1. Introduction

The conceptualization of family support workforce skills includes multiple elements and dimensions of this elusive construct. Vagueness arises from several sources: conceptualization of family support as a distinctive field, acknowledged but still indefinitely multidisciplinary in terms of the range of professions and occupations involved, and due to various social systems included in the provision of services to families ((Frost and Dolan, 2012; Tunstall et al., 2008). There is also a complex relationship between formal and informal support and differences in service provision in the public and non-governmental sectors (including

civil society organizations and private practice).

A particular challenge in the conceptualization of family support workforce skills comes from the notion of skills, which, although a widely used term, are conceptualized very differently in sociological, educational, psychological, and economic sciences. It is a “slippery concept” (Green, 2011, p. 21), the meanings of which vary among authors from different disciplines and in common usage and evolve with the changing economy (Winterton, et al., 2005).

The main aim of this paper is to describe and critically reflect on the comprehensive process of conceptualization of family support workforce skills launched within the framework of THE COST Action “The

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pan-European Family Support Network: A bottom-up, evidence-based and multidisciplinary approach” (EurofamNet: The European Family Support Network, CA18123, <https://eurofamnet.eu/>). Abstract conceptualization is considered as the most fundamental scientific process (Hohenester et al., 1988), and concepts are presented as the building blocks of thoughts and theory, “symbolic constructions by means of which people classify or categorize reality” (Mouton & Marais, 1990, p.126). They describe dimensions, aspects, or attributes of reality that interest the scientist and social aspects, such as context and socialization, that play a role in concept development (Kahn & Zeidler, 2017). Also, concept development is a necessary prerequisite for meaningful research. Therefore, it is essential to pay special attention to the interplay between definition and measurement in general concept development and specify how particular concepts are connected together in a broader framework organized around the process of concept explication.

Family support workforce skills constitute a concept with multiple dimensions that need to be outlined, clarified, and connected to form meaningful whole. That entirety must include previous considerations and theoretical and research knowledge in the field; it should be designed, tested with adequate methods, and finally opened to revisions as knowledge progresses. A conceptual paper assumes integration and combination of evidence in the form of previously developed concepts and theories (Hirschheim, 2008). Thus, it is important to explain how and why the theories and concepts in the family support workforce skills, as a central focus of this paper, have been selected to propose new relationships among the constructs in order to build up logical and complete arguments about these links (Jaakkola, 2020). Undoubtedly, it is essential to open space for meaningful classifications and typologies in this area in order to pave the way for further research.

2. Family support and its workforce – Setting a scene for conceptualization

There are visible challenges in the composite conceptualization of family support as a multidisciplinary field in practice, policy, and research. As a concept, family support is acknowledged internationally in public, policy, and academic discourse (Pinkerton et al., 2019) as a child welfare measure and social policy priority by governments across Europe (Devaney et al., 2021). As a social practice, family support is informed by a rich and diverse theoretical base from two broad theoretical fields: socio-structural (dealing with concepts of social exclusion, inequality, and poverty) and psycho-social theories embedded in an ecological approach (Herrera-Pastor et al., 2020). Dynamic interplay between macro, micro, and practical level theories, including social capital (Baron et al., 2000; Furstenberg and Kaplan, 2004), social support (Taylor, 2011), resilience, particularly family resilience conceptual framework (Walsh, 2016), attachment theory (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2018), and a rich inheritance of family-centered practice practical models (Dunst et al., 2007), contribute to a complex epistemological foundation of family support.

Family support policy, which is considered to be the most developed in European countries among world regions, “refers to state policies oriented to the welfare of families with children and the support and regulation of the family as an institution and a way of life” (Daly, 2020, p.25), which includes cash benefits and/or tax allowances for families with children, various services focusing on early childhood care and education, care services, measures regarding family work-life balance in the employment sector, and legal measures to code rights and responsibilities.

In the mental health area, family support has a long-standing tradition in the United States in meeting the needs of parents or caregivers of children with mental health needs by providing a range of services, including emotional support, parental skill building, information about mental health services and direct advocacy for parents within the family-led, clinician-led and team-led model (Hoagwood et al., 2010;

Hoagwood, 2005). As a child welfare measure, family support is considered as an organizational framework for a set of services and practices supporting families in their caregiving roles. At the same time, a great variety in approaches and a mix of objectives aimed at different family members have been noted, as well as “an array of interventions which vary greatly in terms of delivery, impact and outcomes” (Walsh & Doherty, 2016, p.10). Prior explanations where Family Support was considered as an alternative or the “other track” of child protection are mostly outdated; today, it is perceived as a component of the continuum of protection interventions with specific activities focusing on supporting parents to ensure their children’s wellbeing to a safe level (McGregor et al., 2020; Daro, 2019). Devaney and Mc Gregor (2022) advocate for protective support and asupportive protection framework, claiming that children are best protected if they are provided with responsive support to themselves, their parents, family, and broader networks, given that situations and levels of risk and need change over time, to which the systems must adjust their response. Moreover, family support is a broader concept than parenting support, although many parental support programs involve more or less broader issues of supporting the family (see Daly et al., 2015). Family support services set a focus on the family as a whole and its functioning, where parenting and parental skills are only a part of various supportive interventions in the field. Family support is also perceived as the child-centered, holistic, strength-based, needs-based, and partnership-based style of practice, which requires a carefully critical understanding of social ecology, resilience, social support, and social capital (Herrera-Pastor et al., 2020; Canavan et al., 2016). The focus on children’s rights must be balanced but not blurred by the whole family approach and parent-centered support. In addition, family support is argued as a fundamental right of the child in line with various UNCRC principles and articles, given that it is a theoretically grounded and empirically tested practical approach to exercising and protecting the rights of the child (Dolan et al., 2020).

Therefore, several questions can be raised: what does the term family support workforce encompass? What professions, occupations, sector, and types of work are involved? Are the members of that workforce recognized within the national, European, and international frameworks? Are all practitioners who work with families family support workers, and when are they and when are they not? Do they identify themselves as family support workers? How do they work with families so that they can be labeled as such by the legal system, communities, policymakers, professional associations, and families?

It is well recognized that practitioners who carry out programs play a significant role in the success of these family programs (Canavan et al., 2016) and that there is high diversity in terms of the educational and professional background of the practitioners and high variance in working conditions, contexts, and qualifications (Cohen et al., 2020). In their scoping study of family support workers, Tunstill et al. (2008) identify five broad dimensions:

- 1) Those whose main or only role is family support or parenting support
- 2) Parent trainers or educators
- 3) Those who provide information, advice, and advocacy services
- 4) Professionals and paraprofessionals whose formal job titles do not include words regarding family/parenting support or education but who undertake this work as only one part of their other roles and tasks, and
- 5) Diverse volunteers constitute a key element in the delivery of family support in practice.

Therefore, the family support workforce includes professionals with different educational backgrounds (health care, social care, family therapy, education, youth work, community work, criminal justice, and advocacy) and those who do not have specific qualifications. They work in very different settings (where the main purpose is family support or on sites with different primary functions, such as health centers or schools), where the mode of service delivery (center-based, community-

based, or outreach) has implications for the specific nature of the service. Also, the main focus can be on children, children and families, or on adults (such as in the Drugs Action Team), while the workforce occupies voluntary, statutory, and private sectors. The range of family support services is identified as education-based, health-based, social services, and voluntary and multi-sector services. Services can be identified from universal to remedial (Tier 1 to Tier 4, according to [Henricson et al., 2002](#)), while most services could be labeled as targeted or referred. Strong emphasis on universal early preventive work is noticed in educational and voluntary and multi-sector services, "...whilst the health sector bridges these two types of provision" ([Tunstill et al., 2008, p. 15](#)).

In fact, "...people formally called Family Support Workers or those, not so titled, who undertake Family Support work" ([Tunstill et al., 2008, p. 36](#)). However, some professionals who provide support outside the straight area of family support "per se may be reluctant to describe their practices as parenting and family support" ([Devaney et al., 2021, p. 55](#)). It is documented that healthcare professionals were unenthusiastic to declare that as healthcare providers, they were also providers of family support, but rather see themselves as contributing to family welfare by helping parents manage specific problems, i.e., drug use, so better training and guidance for staff and more resources are required ([Whitaker et al., 2016](#)). We argue that core characteristics of family support services are to be flexible, strengths-based, needs-led, having multiple referral routes, participative, and evidence-based. In that case, family support work also includes professionals' ability to reorient all aspects of their work (in health, education, social welfare, and protection, and in similar fields) towards child-centered practices and the whole family approach. It involves skills and knowledge to apply "principals of strengths, partnership, and a commitment to promoting rights, supporting families, and protecting children in circumstances where this is not happening within their own natural systems" ([McGregor & Devaney, 2020, p. 284](#)). Moreover, family-centered practices require an open and creative organizational culture, consumer-minded service delivery strategies, and solid communication and collaboration between practitioners, services, and systems ([Winter et al., 2022](#)).

The concept of *skills* is also challenging because numerous approaches, theories (or lack of theoretical backgrounds), classifications and typologies often overlap or encompass other related constructs. Skills occupy literally all aspects of everyday life; they imply tangible activities (measurable or observable) and refer to a level of performance in the sense of accuracy and speed in performing particular tasks. They also present practical forms of knowledge and understanding; they may be simple or highly complex, and there are also different levels of skillfulness among individuals. Skills are also learned and can be passed on through demonstration, observation, and practice. A range of physical, cognitive, social, and other capabilities of individuals can help in better and faster acquisition of skills. To perfect them requires practice, intention, deliberation, reflection, and feedback. Effective application of skills is situational since their sequences are modified, adapted, or improvised according to context, and they can be transferred from one setting to another ([McLeod & McLeod, 2022; Ivey et al., 2018; Winterton et al., 2005](#)). [Proctor and Dutta \(1995\)](#) specify a combination of crucial elements in the definition of skills as "goal-directed, well-organized behavior that is acquired through practice and performed with economy of effort" (p.18), which summarizes many of the aforementioned characteristics.

The term *competence* is often used alternatively or mutually with the concept of skills, although it is a broader construct that arose out of the necessity to bridge the gap between education outcomes and job requirements in the human resources field. Today, the concept of competence has a great application in management, education, psychology, and lifelong learning. It is an overarching term that includes tangible competencies of knowledge and skills and underlying competencies like traits and motives ([Hartle, 1995](#)). Both are used for performance, denoted as adequate (basic), effective (good), or superior in

certain working environments, involving cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. In summary, competencies include specific knowledge, skills as operationalized knowledge (or knowledge in action), along with numerous social, personal, and attitudinal factors that are the prerequisites for their development ([Winterton et al., 2005](#)). Comprehensive work on interprofessional competencies for positive parenting was recently presented by [Rodrigo et al., 2023](#) with 12 competencies and 213 corresponding micro competencies divided up into knowledge (49), skills (106), and attitudes/values (58), positioned in three action areas (e.g., characteristics of family support services and organizational culture; the process of professional work with families; and the use of evidence-based programs to support families). From an interdisciplinary and trans-sectoral perspective, this competencies framework creates a space for interprofessional training for quality practice in the positive parenting domain.

Skills that we are striving to conceptualize in this paper refer to the ability and expertise of practitioners, which involves specific performance strategies and routines within the broad field of family support, to use knowledge effectively in the execution or performance of specific tasks (such as supporting particular aspects of family functioning) in practical situations, and in a variety of settings ([Zegarac et al., 2021](#)). Thus, skills are an integral part of a broader concept of competencies, combining knowledge, abilities, motivational and volitional aspects, and values and beliefs ([Cedefop, 2014; Commission of the European Communities, 2007](#)). It is clear that the practitioners working with families and children (especially if they are at risk) need to have broad competencies as well as specialist knowledge ([Cohen et al., 2020; Cavan et al., 2016](#)) and particular skills.

The working definition of skills in the current paper refers to learned ability acquired through deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to carry out complex activities or job functions smoothly and adaptively. This involves ideas (cognitive skills), things (technical skills), and people (interpersonal skills).

Since many disciplines and practitioners are working in the family support field, there is a need for agreement on the qualifications of skills for the family support workforce necessary for high-quality service delivery in working with families. This could constitute an important stage in defining the framework for competencies in this field.

3. Framework for family support workforce and their skills

In the early stage of work, we define *the family support workforce* as a "broad range of professionals and paraprofessionals (practitioners) from both government and nongovernmental organizations, engaged in relevant social subsystems, who employ their resources in providing concrete emotional advice, as well as support to families" ([Zegarac et al., 2021](#)).

Accordingly, the family support workforce refers to various job roles related to children and youth in different sectors. The focus was directed on five main professional domains from diverse but interconnected fields in providing family and child support: psychology, social work, pedagogy, health, and law. Twenty-two occupations and fifteen paraprofessionals were identified as connected to these professions ([Buciuceanu-Vrabie et al., 2023](#)) That list is certainly not exhaustive, nor final, because many occupational names and variations appear among practitioners in different national frameworks, and some terms follow current theoretical and research preferences or international and national political agendas in the field of family work and are therefore subject to change.

[Fig. 1](#) shows the adopted Eurofamnet framework of the family support workforce, which incorporates personnel from relevant government and nongovernmental sectors on international, regional, and national levels. They come from different social systems: social welfare, health, mental health, education, and justice, and from various professions and occupations, such as social work, psychology, pedagogy, medicine, and law and corresponding paraprofessionals. Skills of family

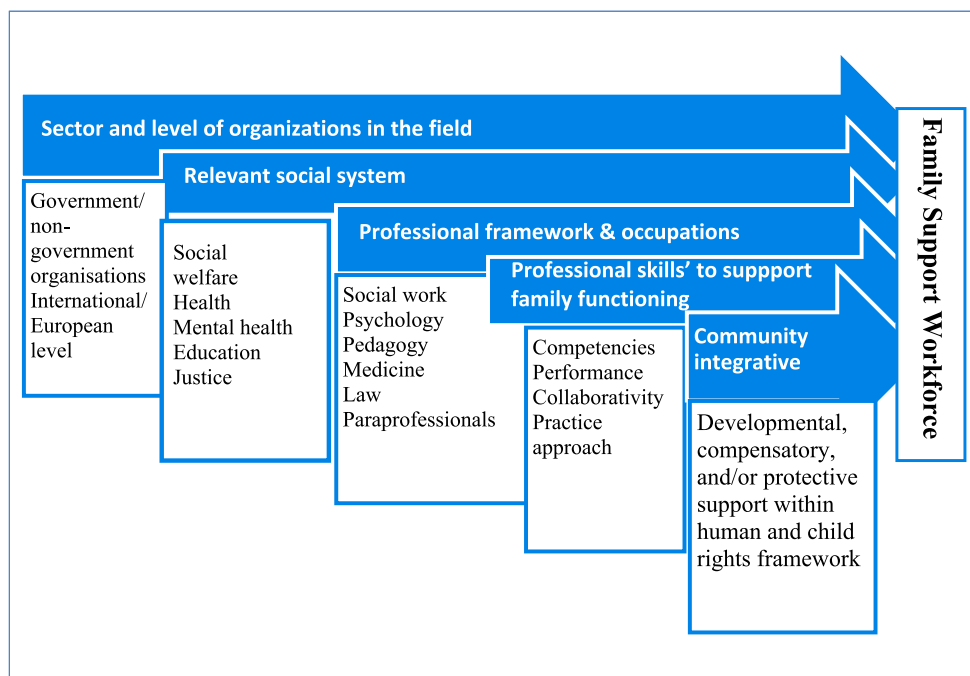


Fig. 1. The adopted framework of the family support workforce (Buciuceanu-Vrabie et al., 2023). Note: Blue color should be used for this figure in print. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

support enable the workforce to support competently different aspects of family functioning in collaborative ways using holistic, strengths- and relationship-based practice approach, while providing developmental, compensatory or protective support to families with children in order to facilitate development and community integration, under human and child rights formation.

Family support workforce skills are considered as the learned ability of “doing things in collaborative ways while supporting different aspects of family functioning, and the ability to use their knowledge effectively and readily in the execution or performance of serving families using holistic, strengths- and relationship-based practice approach” (Zegarac et al., 2021).

A particular challenge is delineating similarities and differences between family support and other skills used in diverse helping, rights-based, and protection contexts. A large group of skills applied in family support practice is usually labeled under the umbrella term “interpersonal skills”, which is again interpreted by different disciplines with their own approaches. One comprehensive review of the interpersonal skills literature resulted in the identification and definition of 28 interpersonal skills and provided a typology of 4 high-level skill groupings (interpersonal communication skills, relationship-building skills, peer leadership skills, and social/behavioral agility skills) in addition to numerous other taxonomies (Hutchins et al., 2013).

3.1. Mapping of representative international/regional organizations

The next step in conceptualizing family support workforce skills involved mapping relevant international and regional organizations in the area based on the review of web sources and the analysis of their content. The web content analysis was conducted from September 2019 to March 2020. A partially directed sampling method was applied, based on accessibility and selection unit, considering as representative international/regional organizations in the field of family support.

Over 100 units of the website profiles were identified and selected for analysis of the website profiles. They include relevant organizations (agencies, associations, foundations) at the European, international, and regional levels, as well as some of the prominent agencies from the USA, Canada, and Australia, all of which focus on families with children and

youth in various fields (psychology, social work, health, law, and so on). The search only looked at organizations that have websites in English, which does not provide access to all organizations. However, this only partially limits the sample, as a large number of organizations also have a website in English. The collection data stage included the selection of organizations, the assessment of their eligibility for further analysis, the exploration of the content of the web pages of relevant selected units (name, level, and role of organization, target beneficiaries, listed professional skills with a quote from a document or summarized content about skills definitions, classifications, levels, training requirements) and similarly, and the analysis of the resources placed in the online circuit. In the preliminary searches, 12 organizations were excluded, related to religious communities, those with poor information about the role, activity implication, and target group. The final sample constituted 88 website profiles and their resources (in addition to 85 different reports, studies, articles, and methodological guides, from these sites that provide guidance or performance and skill requirements for professionals were selected and analyzed). The general trends of informative presentation in the online environment of specific family support worker skills were followed in an attempt to detect some methodological provisions, standardization criteria, and documents in the field of family and child support (more details regarding methodological approach in web content analysis in Buciuceanu-Vrabie et al. (2020)

The following research questions were proposed: What is the profile of organizations in the field of family support? Are practitioners’ skills mentioned on the website of the organization/agency in the field? What practitioners’ skills do international organizations in the field of family support present on the websites? Are any standardization frameworks or methodological guides indicated?

From the final sample of evaluated organizations (88 website profiles), three-quarters are at the international level, and the rest are at the regional level. Subsequently, based on web-content analysis, three interconnected maps have been developed ((Buciuceanu-Vrabie et al., 2020):

- 1) Map of family/children support international organizations/agencies (46 organizations)

- 2) Map of family therapy, occupational therapy, family educators, and family support paraprofessionals (12 organizations)
- 3) Map of youth support organizations (30 organizations)

The results of the web-content analysis provide an overview of practitioners' skills promoted by organizations in their work on family support and an initial repository of useful documents regarding standards for family support skills. It turned out that more than one-third of organizations' web resources in this area do not clearly define skills, listed generally or in a separate document. The website of one of the four organizations may describe some practitioners' skills, usually partially and indirectly. Most organizations present only limited descriptions of skills or references to a standard framework regarding skills on their website. As a result of the web content analysis, a wide range of skills was delineated within the family support framework. We ranked the skills based on the aggregate number of organizations that indicated this ability, after which the percentage of total reported skills was calculated. The most mentioned skills selected from the web page and sources of the organizations included in the analysis were:

- Communication skills (verbal and nonverbal; at the individual and community level; interpretation skills; non-judgmental communication skills; cross-cultural communication) (21.1 %)
- Counseling skills (knowledge, education, psychosocial, mental health and health counseling), counseling assistance; guidance (in access to services) (11.8 %).

The insight obtained from the content analysis of organizations' websites revealed some gaps in recognition and broad representation of skills used in family support work. It is noticeable that the information and data on the websites are mostly general, and practitioners' overviews and working principles of skills are rarely presented. Also, a limited evaluation of skills or references to a standard frame is present, and multidisciplinary approaches to family support skills are the exception rather than a common practice.

From the content analysis, it appears that further efforts and developments are needed to promote and disseminate a framework for standardizing practitioners' skills in the family support workforce, including family-friendly services and policies.

This is important for many reasons, but particularly to enable other professionals to learn from good practice, evaluate their skills, and make their work transparent to service users.

3.2. Systematic literature review(s)

A further strategy to advance family support workforce skills conceptualization has been addressed by (Zegarac et al. (2021), who conducted a systematic literature review with the following aims: (1) Conceptualize family support workforce skills family support from different social, cultural, and political contexts around the world, and (2) Provide guidelines for standardizing skills for the family support workforce.

A search that included qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies on skills in the practice of family support was completed. The systematic review was conducted according to the PRISMA guidelines for conducting and reporting systematic reviews and meta-analyses

(Moher et al., 2015). The search criteria included families with children, and families using family support services, articles published after 1995¹ and peer-reviewed articles published in scientific journals.

The search of the databases provided a total of 8,949 records. After adjusting keywords in abstract search, dates, types of publications, publication status, and abstract search, as well as full paper studies, 29 studies met the inclusion criteria, and 11 relevant studies were identified by checking the reference lists of the studies that met the inclusion criteria. Finally, a total of 40 studies on family support workforce skills were identified and analyzed for this review (more details regarding selection criteria for peer-reviewed journals in (Zegarac et al., 2021).

The workforce skills to family support described in the studies can be organized in three topics: (1) the qualities of the practitioners (attitudes and attributes), such as empathy and warmth (2) technical skills, referring to how to empower and enable families and their communication skills, and (3) specific knowledge necessary to support families.

Considering these findings in the framework of Drury-Hudson's (1997) model of professional knowledge of social work, we recognize that the identified skills and qualities cover four of the five domains. Technical skills, along with specific family support knowledge, actually cover the field that represents the heart or the central point in the model, as it overlaps with theoretical, empirical, personal knowledge, and practice wisdom domains, providing a specific framework. The procedural domain for family support workforce skills was not identified in this literature review (Burgund et al., 2021)).

This systematic review presented a very general concept of family support workforce skills. Findings indicate that social workers are the main targeted professionals in studies, although other child protection workers were studied, too. This specific finding occurs in the context where social workers, specifically in child protection, are under the strong impact of bureaucracy and performance management (Ferguson, 2018). Such an environment is not suitable for relationship-based and reflective practice, "which is essential in (skillful) activities implemented to strengthen and preserve families, prevent family separation or breakdown, and provide early intervention among families at risk" (Burgund et al., 2021, p. 35).

In the next step of the conceptualization pathway, a systematic review of handbooks and manuals from the field was undertaken to answer the following questions: Are there books and manuals about workforce skills in family support? In which scientific areas and skill domains are they addressed?

Although books and manuals are not always in scientific databases and do not always report research data, systematic review procedures were applied (Moher et al., 2015; Siddaway et al., 2019). To collect data, online searches were conducted in April 2021 at a Portuguese university and a North Macedonian university (more details regarding selection criteria for books and handbooks (Antunes et al., 2021, 2022).

From the initial pool of 57 books and handbooks, deeper and refined analysis resulted in a list of 48 books, excluding books and handbooks that, after all, did not meet the criteria. The main conclusions from the review of books and manuals can be summarized under four main points:

- a. The books/handbooks related to the development of specific skills of the practitioners working in family support are scarce;

¹ Articles published prior to 1995 were excluded from the systematic literature review due to the intention to include papers in the period of the last 25 years, and because of the restructuring and modernization of family support services worldwide, which included new organizational and practical approaches and population groups (Dunst et al., 2006). Furthermore, family support after 1994 has been considered an international initiative since 1994, when the United Nations declared that year the International Year of the Family.

- b. There seems to be a lack of standardized guidelines on the skills needed by practitioners working in family support;
- c. The existing literature focuses on the areas of Mental Health, Psychology and Social Work; and
- d. The specific contents seek to promote the development of skills related to Knowledge development, Intervention, Research and practice, and Evaluation.

Basically, previous considerations and analyses have shown that research on the skills of practitioners who work with families are rare or weakly present in a number of professions and settings which cover the family support arena. Different terms often refer to identified skills; they mainly refer to communication, interpersonal, and relational skills, often without a clear distinction between these categories, and come mainly from the areas of social welfare and, to some extent, from mental health, while the areas of education, health, and justice are less covered. Also, skills were often described or associated with diverse knowledge, values, and traits of practitioners.

When discussing family support skills, participation, strength perspective, empowerment, co-creation, and relationship of mutual trust between family and practitioners(s) are regularly addressed. It actually describes the specific manner in which those skills are applied to provide a supportive environment and services for families. Thus, in the course of application, skills are underpinned and directed by a specific approach, and this seems to make them distinctive for the family support field. Therefore, challenges remain in making clear distinctions, connections, and interrelations with skills in other helping or rights-based and protection contexts practices.

3.3. Consensus building and Delphi study preliminary results

Further efforts in conceptualizing workforce skills gathered five stakeholders from European family support organizations and seven academics from eight countries in the workshop held at the University of Algarve, Portugal, in June 2022. The aim was to open a process of collecting, mapping, and organizing family support skills in an interactive dialogue with stakeholders and researchers from the field. A consensus-building activity was used to explore and establish an agreement on the description of skills used in family support practice and their constituent characteristics (Duncan, 2006, p. 401). The participants considered the question: What kind of skills do practitioners need to have for families to feel and to be supported?

Individual statements on family support skills were described as a co-creation process with families; a way to understand the changing needs of different families to empower them and ensure trust in the process of help and support; practical tools and capacities used in different organizational and institutional contexts and as concrete skills – such as empathy, organization, planning skills, and responsibility. The group process was used to encourage interactions and argumentation while modifying and revising statements by negotiating their meaning. The group was guided toward eliciting, refining, reviewing, and confirming answers into clusters. The process was repeated until a consensus on how to name a particular category was reached. The products of the group discussion were clustered into 6 groups: strength perspective, traits, and four groups of skills – instrumental (also named technical), communication, relationships, and organizational. This suggests that participants tend to recognize both traits and strength perspectives as essential and integral parts of family support skills.

The process of generating, debating, and negotiating ideas about family support skills from this workshop is embedded in the Delphi study with a panel of family support experts from Europe, conducted in three rounds from October 2022 until January 2023. The method was chosen to determine the range of opinions on the matter of family support workforce skills and to explore and approach a consensus on the topic (Iqbal & Pipon-Young, 2009). To assess the consensus, three measures were used jointly:

- 51 % responding to the category “totally important/crucial” (Hackett et al., 2005)
- Interquartile range below 1 (Rayens & Hahn, 2000)
- Standard deviation below 1.5 (Christie & Barela, 2005)

After each round, the participants received a short report with the analyzed findings to be fully informed about the process and results.

The design of the first-round questionnaire was based on our previous analysis of family support skills. The Expert group consisted of 31 (of the initially contacted 63) experts from 23 countries who came from different areas of family support, e.g., social welfare, education, medicine, mental health, and law). The average professional experience is 27 years (SD 11,531; min 1; max 45). Participants primarily perform research (41.9 %), teaching (22.6 %), and both research and teaching (19.4 %). In addition to academic work, participants also perform advocacy (3.2 %), practice (3.2 %), and policy and practice (3.2 %), while several respondents (6.5 %) perform all of the jobs mentioned earlier.

The first-round questionnaire consisted of eight open-ended questions and questions about participant’s demographic data. The questions were about the understanding of family support workforce skills, the specific skills in family support practice, and ways of categorizing the specific skills and skills that are predominantly needed for practitioners to be family supportive in different fields (social welfare, education, health, mental health, and law).

Initially, two researchers conducted the qualitative analysis and coding separately with MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software (VERBI Software, 2021), and in the second case, coding by themes and categories in text manually, then they compared and reconciled the codes.

Many different definitions associated with skills, knowledge, approaches, and traits were gathered regarding the questions about the specific skills in family support practice. Answers were organized into categories suggested by participants and/or coded by researchers. Based on further analysis, discussions, and reflections on the research topic, we grouped the list of defined skills into thematic clusters. We divided them into skills, knowledge, approaches, traits, and an amalgam of family support workforce qualities for those codes describing two or three combinations (skills and traits, approach and skills, etc.). Based on the responses we received, we converted the collected information into a well-structured questionnaire, which was used as the survey instrument for the second round of data collection.

In the second round, 27 experts answered the survey (87 %), and a response rate above 70 % was considered methodologically appropriate (Giannarou & Zervas, 2014). In this phase, the proposed preliminary definition of family support workforce skills was evaluated as a whole and in each separate aspect. Participants were also asked to supplement or modify the corresponding determinations. The critical aspects of definition which reached the highest scores in the second round related to serving families using the following approaches: rights-based, relationships-based, and strengths-based (74.1 % – 70.4 % Totally crucial and 11.1 % – 25.9 % Mostly crucial; SD = 0.45–0.69, IQR = 1).

Regarding skills for family support workers across different professions and settings, participants were asked to rate to what extent each of the skills listed below was important. A list of 24 skills (followed by 10 personal traits, 6 specific approaches, 8 combinations of family support workers’ qualities, and 8 types of specific knowledge) was offered based on the analysis of the qualitative answers in the first round of the study. The participants decided the importance of each listed skill for family support workers across different professions and settings and then for specific fields (namely, social welfare, education, medicine, mental health, and law). Responses were grouped, and a number of skills and other qualities already reached a high degree of agreement in the second round, at 44.4 % to 70.4 %. In the third round, all 27 panelists from the previous round answered the survey. A questionnaire with Yes or No questions was designed, while one measure to assess consensus was

used: 70 % responded to the category Yes, which is considered methodologically appropriate (according to Giannarou & Zervas, 2014). Consensus was reached on all examined items in the range of 74.1 % (for the definition of family support workforce skills) to 100 % (for agreement regarding the necessary knowledge). Both core and field-specific skills reached an agreement between 74.1 % and 96.3 %. Also, the combination of family support workforce qualities across different professions obtained a consensus between 88.9 % and 96.3 %.

In the second round, consensus was built on the set of core skills for family support workers across different professions and settings: partnership and collaboration; a set of empathic skills; advocacy and empowerment skills; and good listening skills. In the third round, a consensus was reached that problem-solving, user communication, and building trust and confidence should be added to the previously defined core skills.

4. Discussion

The presented path, evidence, and arguments enable the formation of a distinctive conceptual framework, definition, and application of the skills that practitioners “must have” and “put in action” in the genuine practice of family support. Organizations and professions mostly omit the profile definition of workers in family support, and their specific skills are named differently across fields and professions without a clear distinction between categories, typologies, and other phenomena. The conceptualization of an already recognizable idea of family support workforce and their skills is significant and maintains implications for practice, theory, research, and policy in this field.

During the comprehensive and iterative process, a model of family support evolved. Results indicated that core skills for the family support workforce across professions and settings are partnership and collaboration, a set of empathic skills, advocacy and empowerment skills, good listening, problem-solving, building trust and confidence, and user-friendly communication skills. Those skills are used commonly in different helping situations and fields (including child welfare, mental health, early interventions, etc.). However, they acquire new qualities and become family-supportive in a structure shaped by their connections with particular practice approaches, traits, and of practitioners' knowledge.

Core and field-specific skills become family-supportive when they are applied in the contexts of strength and relationship-based approaches as well as both – whole-family and child-centered approaches. Actually, the most extensive discussions have been conducted around these two approaches – which one is paramount for and signature of family support since there are conflicting views that one rebuts the other. Arguments opposing these approaches state that family support is constrained in circumstances that can endanger the child (Canavan et al., 2016). Thereby, there is a range of variations in the views on boundaries between support and protection – from excluding to entirely blurred borders (Daro, 2019). Our findings suggest that the development and application of family support skills require the joint application of both approaches and that one does not necessarily exclude the other, which is close to the McGregor & Devaney (2020) concept of protective support and supportive protection.

Furthermore, these skills are applied by practitioners who, in addition to field-specific knowledge, apply knowledge on family life cycle, dynamics and stresses; social context, poverty and discrimination; child development and services, and systems of support. The application of family support skills is underpinned by practitioners' integrity, commitment, and flexibility as personal traits, and some amalgam qualities such as being non-judgmental, having an ethical stance and conduct, and having the ability to manage emotionally demanding situations.

In addition to the core, sets of field-specific skills have also been outlined. This enables future work on evolving the general and field-specific models and the standardization of family support skills by

determining connections, associations, and boundaries between the constructs in the model and designating categorization and typologization.

In comparison to recognized Lefevre (2010) concept of skills of knowing, being, and doing, we can see some commonalities in the assumption that most of the denoted core family support skills refer to 'doing' and 'being' while 'knowing' refers to specific knowledge, and the distinctive mixture of family support approaches incorporates 'being' and 'doing' skills. Amalgam qualities of the practitioners imply that all of these three skill categories exist in different combinations and settings. Moreover, while competencies for supporting families are more comprehensive, family support skills consist of specifically organized categories of skills, and they are underpinned by specific approaches, knowledge, and traits, which furthermore creates a basis for the development of distinctive competencies in the field.

5. Conclusion

EurofamNet aims to advance a shared framework on skills qualification for family support workforce in the 21st century, so it is vital to address this challenge in comparative studies among countries and by identifying general or 'core' and specific (if there are any) skills needed to support families with children. This can provoke interdisciplinary and intersectoral dialogue and exchange, standardization, and quality improvement in the family support workforce and services.

The need for a clear and shared conceptual platform between practitioners and organizations is evident. This platform should be used with a common and inclusive language that integrates and articulates the activities, practitioners, social systems, and organizations involved in family support.

Comprehensive studies undertaken in the process of conceptualization of family support workforce skills included a systematic literature review, a search of books and handbooks, and webpages, and a mapping of representative international/regional organizations. These brought the research team to the creation of a Delphi study looking for a consensual range of the identified skills.

The expounded concept and model require further elaboration concerning the connections and relationships between the constituent constructs, a deeper argumentative discussion of similarities and differences between the related components, as well as more precise operational definitions that would enable various research in the field. The future endeavors imply positioning a coherent model of core and field-specific family support skills with research-based consideration and validation of links and relationships between the model's components in order to develop evidence-based practices and policies in the field. The findings of this paper may contribute to further development in the field of family support standardization, to the development of skills trainings for different practitioners, to organizational changes in services and sectors, and to advanced theoretical conceptualization of the field.

Author's statement

Informed consent was obtained for research with human subjects.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper. Nevenka Zegarac reports administrative support, article publishing charges, and travel were provided by COST European Cooperation in Science and Technology. Ana Maria Pereira Antunes reports financial support was provided by Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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