

An evaluation of training in social pedagogy in Slovenia

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ABSTRACT This paper overviews key factors that influence the quality of child and youth care work, and focuses on pre-service academic training as a critical factor. The paper also presents the evaluation of a program in Social Pedagogy in Slovenia by 131 students who were in the fourth year of study between 1997 and 2001. Major themes that emerged from the evaluation were the need for an emphasis on the teaching of theoretical approaches, and the constant need to update and improve academic programs to keep pace with changing trends in the field.

Old problems in new clothing

At their first conference in Paris exactly 75 years ago, the European pioneers of social work were already asking, "What are the key areas of knowledge that social workers, child and youth care workers, and workers in similar occupations should acquire in order to deal with their work problems?" M.J.A. Moltzer, from the Social School in Amsterdam, had the following thoughts in 1928: "Especially sociology has the danger of being too abstract. The student should not be enabled to give an abstract review of the theory but to know its effects on the economic life of a working-class family." He ended with: "We have summarized a large group of basic social subjects: all sciences that directly refer to people" (Seibel & Lorenz, 1996, p. 24). He can be interpreted as recognizing the need for reflective and applicable knowledge. At the same time, even in those early years, the relevant knowledge base identified for youth workers covered a broad range of subjects.

The goals of child and youth care work and social work today remain consistent with this tradition. The mandate of these professional groups is to provide assistance to individuals who, in this era of postmodernism and globalisation, are unable to find coping strategies, acquired knowledge, skills, and social and economic resources that are adequate to secure a satisfying personal and social way of life. Consequently, there is still a need for analysis of the social and cultural contexts of users. Some notable recent publications support this view: *La misere du monde* (Bourdieu, Accardo, Balazs, Beaud, Bourdieu, Broccolichi, et al. 1993), *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (Bauman, 2001), *Identitat und Bindung* (Garlichs & Leuzinger-Bohleber, 1999), and *Developing Culturally Sensitive Health Services in Slovenia* (Zavirsek & Flaker, 1995). I fully agree with Lorenz (1996) who claims that workers in social occupations in Europe today need, first and foremost, "principles and methods which make diversity count as an asset to societies and which above all give people on the margins of society the means of defining their own sense of belonging." (p.41)

Residential care and elements of quality assurance

Among the many functions of child and youth care workers, dealing with young people with integration problems in out-of-home care is one of the most difficult. In institutional care, it is necessary to create quality of life in all its complexity. This includes focusing on (a) physical aspects of client functioning, including eating, resting, sleeping, providing living space, structuring free time, and fulfilling deprived psycho-social needs, and (b) implementing educational, counselling, corrective, supportive and other therapeutic interventions based on cognitive-behavioural and psycho-dynamic models (Kobolt, 1997). Until recently, the focus in professional circles was on the problems and difficulties of the users in their life context whereas, in recent years, more attention has been paid to the analysis of institutional operations and to professional qualifications that workers have (see Morris, 1996; Trede, 1996; Zizak & Koller, 1997; and others). These aspects need to be taken into account in any academic program.

Factors that contribute to better quality child and youth care can be organised into three interconnected groups.

1. Varied and flexible continuum of offers and models available to users, including children, adolescents, and their families. The plurality of different possibilities, ranging from preventive forms integrated into regular educational

institutions, short-term and long-term projects, kindergarten models, group homes, and conceptually flexible institutions for out-of-home care which can take into account the needs of the users and satisfy the standards of quality.

2. Quality assurance in the above-mentioned models, including factors related to an appropriate organisation of work, setting of standards, training of managers, development of teams, and creation of suitable eco-physical life conditions. In this context, supervision has proved to be a suitable method of professional reflection, ensuring not only support in the professional development of the individual, but also the development of the team and improvement of communication among the team members, thus adding to the quality of services and a better understanding of the needs of the users (see Dekleva, 1996; Zorga, 2002).

3. A highly professional and high-quality pre-service academic program, which plays an important role in providing high quality and professional services. It shapes the future professional and personal identity of the social worker. With research and professional community (see Vander Ven, 1986), training programs are the third pillar of professionalism. In Europe, there is a wide range of training programs available, from short-term in-service training to full-fledged university programs, all of them offered under the name of Social Pedagogy and/or Social Work.

This paper is based on the hypothesis that the quality of social educators' work is dependent on the selection of pre-service courses and also relates to methods of delivery in the undergraduate program. It is paramount for students to participate actively in the learning process, as well as to have an opportunity to test their theoretical knowledge in the field, either through projects or any other work-related activity. As it is important for the practitioner to reflect continuously on his or her work it is equally important for the program itself to be continuously evaluated. Jones (1992) compared academic programs in various European countries and discovered that there is a notable similarity in their content, even though the length of study varies from short courses, lasting only a few months, to full-length graduate programs. The common characteristics of these programs are: involvement in the social context; presentation of interdisciplinary concepts that provide insight into society; group and individual elements; and an examination of personal contributions to one's professional development.

Our program started as an undergraduate program in 1975 and developed into a full university program (postgraduate, Masters degree added in 1989) in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ljubljana. For a relatively new program, evaluation is extremely important. Our program, which runs for eight undergraduate and two graduate semesters, is similar to some other programs found in Denmark, Canada, and Germany, and includes three fundamental components: theoretical knowledge, practical skills, and self-knowledge. It is only by understanding and mastering all three components that competent, ethical, and professional action can take place. These components help to shape students' professional development through the learning process and the process of personal development.

Vernooij (1995) classifies professional competencies and their acquisition into the following categories:

(a) Personal competencies — becoming aware of one's own views, values, prejudices, emotional response, expectations, strengths and weaknesses;

(b) theoretical professional knowledge, which, in practice, contributes to the so-called practical competence, which includes general knowledge, special therapeutic know-how, as well as the knowledge of various therapeutic concepts and their practical application;

(c) competence in relation to an analytic understanding of various situations in the educational setting, which requires knowledge and recognition of social situations and the role of one's own perceptive mechanisms in this process, as well as the recognition of conflict situations and the ability to deal with them; and

(d) competent action which is characterized not only by highly ethical intervention by a social pedagogue, but also by the willingness for self-reflection and the search for solutions suited to the individual.

In addition to these elements, youth care work requires a high degree of professionalization and synthesis of knowledge from different areas (group leadership, understanding of the development of the individual, systemic orientation, understanding of the relationships existing in the child's former and present environment, knowledge of at least some of the elements of counselling and therapeutic work, etc.). Care work requires fast response, autonomous decision-making, and the ongoing search for creative ways to solve everyday problems. Since, in residential care, professionals work in teams (for example, a team of care workers in a group home unit), every team member's personal contribution to the work plays an important role.

A program of study that aims to train students by delivering adequate knowledge and supporting their personal development needs to be broad and flexible but, most of all, it needs to help students become responsible for their own professional development. At the same time, students' voices and needs have to be heard as well.

Students perception of the study program

The program was evaluated by 98 full-time and 33 part-time students (a total of 128 students) enrolled in the Social Pedagogy Program in the Faculty of Education in Ljubljana between 1997 and 2001. The evaluation included five cohorts of full-time students and one cohort of part-time students. Part-time study is available only once every four years. The students in the evaluation were all in their seventh semester of study, ensuring that their experience was of the same duration. Due to space limitations, results are presented selectively. What follows are key questions from the evaluation and major themes that arose from analysing all responses.

Key gains from the program

Students' answers are grouped into three themes.

Theoretical knowledge.

- **Widening one's horizons:** Statements about the usefulness of the study in the sense of widening one's ways of thinking, and thinking about work-related questions ("I think I found especially useful the wide context of the Social Pedagogy program, 'widening my horizons.'")
- **Development of cognitive processes:** Statements about being able to think, to develop one's ways of thinking, to analyse, to understand, to synthesize, and to connect topics. ("I liked those courses where we could think a lot"; "I spend more time thinking about life and I look for reasons why things are happening.")
- **Understanding of the world around us:** Statements about understanding the dynamics of relationships in social systems such as the family, school, and society. ("I can explain relationships in the family.")

Skills and learning through experience.

- **Acquiring skills:** This category included replies about the usefulness of the study program in the sense of acquiring and developing communication skills and conflict resolution skills.
- **Learning through experience:** Statements about learning based on practical experiences, tutorials, volunteer work, field work, visits to institutions, and project learning. ("I found the tutorials useful"; "In the first year, I liked the team seminars.")

Self, work on oneself, experiential training, and project work.

- **Work on oneself:** This category includes statements about activities that were conducive to knowing oneself better, one's feeling, one's responses, one's views, one's abilities, one's progress, etc. ("I've learned to accept differences better.")
- **Project work:** Connection with the practice that enables reflecting on oneself and one's abilities, limits, and coping strategies.

The answers of full-time students have not changed over the years. The only exception is the response pattern from students in 2000, when they, surprisingly, looked less favourably on acquired knowledge in theory. Those students were more inclined towards practical knowledge and skills. In all other years, the ratio between the theoretical and practical skills is balanced. Comparing categories of replies of full-time students with those of part-time students, it becomes clear that theoretical and practical knowledge were equally important to the full-time students whereas the part-time students felt they had gained more theoretical knowledge (75.7% for theory and 39.4% for practical skills). This is not surprising, considering that they had already had a few years of practical experience. Ranked third in students' replies is the category work on oneself and self-development. Such a ranking suggests that we did a good job of designing and implementing our program as we had stressed theoretical knowledge and practical skills. However, we did give our students an opportunity to get to know their own abilities, limitations, weaknesses, and strengths.

In a separate questionnaire, students were asked what type of knowledge they would have liked to acquire more of. The percentages of students who stated that they wished to acquire more theoretical knowledge ranged from 18.2% by part-time students to 66.7% by full-time students in 1999. Generally speaking, it seems that students wished to have acquired more theoretical knowledge, followed by practical knowledge, and skills last. The rest were individual replies asking for more topic-specific instruction such as more student activities, management skills, and instruction in codes

of ethics. We have already improved our program by offering a course in management in non-profit organisations, supervision (as an option) and a seminar at the end of their studies in which students acquire more knowledge in research methods so that they will be better prepared for writing a thesis.

According to student evaluations, 1997 was the best year in terms of the methods of delivery, as 73.7% thought the program was carried out well; later on, students became less appreciative. There was also some explicit criticism; some students in 1999 and 2001 answered that they thought the program was not carried out well. Only half of all part-time students believed the methods of delivery were appropriate, which sends a clear message to the lecturers that they ought to design a program which will better suit student needs.

Social pedagogy has spread in Slovenia from the traditional institutions into many other areas of youth work and now includes preventative projects implemented by non-government organisations. Social pedagogues are working in day cares, in schools as counsellors, and at centres for social work. Since this process is gradual and the founders of the program have tried to adjust its contents to reflect this reality, we were interested in finding out how students felt about their professional skills in the face of these challenges.

Results of the questionnaire reveal that students feel they are sufficiently trained for team work with children and adolescents but not trained enough for work with adults. They believe they need more knowledge and skills to be able to provide counselling and group leadership. As to the work venues, they feel they are suitably trained for work in residential care but not sufficiently trained for work in kindergartens, social work centres, and non-government organisations.

We are trying to broaden the program by offering many non-compulsory activities, and we were interested to know how students felt about the integration of these activities, which are free and based on voluntary participation. These activities are initiated by students or lecturers and they are organised sporadically. From the students' answers it is clear that they are quite happy with the integration of these activities.

Among suggestions on how to improve the program it is particularly notable that students wish to see more visiting scholars, they would like to be better organised within each year, they would like to have more self development work, and they would like to have supervised work experience. The latter has already been included in the program in the last two years. Students showed a lot of initiative in their suggestions. They thought that they needed more knowledge in management, that there was a need to improve cooperation with other programs, and that they would like more choice in their courses. Their responses clearly indicate that they would like to see better coordination among lecturers as there is unnecessary repetition in some courses in the program. They also believed that the Congress of Students in Social Pedagogy, organised by them and supervised, in recent years, by lecturers, contributes to a better quality of program.

Conclusions

In child and youth care, we are becoming ever more aware of the importance of the environmental context and the relationships within it. For child and youth care workers, a wide range of theoretical knowledge and practical skills is needed so that the professional worker is able to understand the complexity of various situations and his or her own role in them. In other words, the worker should possess the knowledge, the strength, and the will to create, build, reflect upon, evaluate, and intervene in the contexts in which he or she operates.

The level of professionalism can be seen as a combination of the individual's professional responsibility and adequate training. This training should provide child and youth care workers with sufficient theoretical and practical knowledge, including personal and ethical dimensions, socially determined factors (e.g., norms, values, and the level of social development in a specific country) and other systemic and social influences. Quality work with people at risk is a multidimensional and relative notion and can be measured at different levels; student evaluation is one of these levels. It obliges lecturers to continuously improve the academic program in order to prepare graduates adequately for the challenges they will face in their work.

Implication for the future development of the study program

Evaluation shows that the study program provides a satisfactory spectrum of theoretical knowledge and skills through which the students are able to understand the dynamics of relationships in different social systems and are aware of their own involvement in the working processes. Nevertheless, a need for additional theoretical knowledge is evident and can be interpreted as suitable motivation for further professional development. But, it could at the same time confirm the thought that the theoretical knowledge in this study program is over-emphasised as is evidenced by the discrepancy between the ranks of the acquired and the preferred competences. For instance, in the competence "Understanding and considering the individual through the prism of different theoretical models" the actual rank is 7th

whereas it was the least desired competence, being ranked 20th.

The program doesn't focus enough on self-evaluation and work on one's self. This is an important finding of the present evaluation, especially when one considers that the relationship between the care giver and the user is an integral part of the child and youth care profession. This relationship is shaped by the professional's identity, inclinations, attitudes, and motivation. Our study program appears to have neglected this crucial aspect. The program can be improved by delivering in a different way the theoretical and practical contents and by focusing on personal, relational, and practical aspects of the study process. This idea is further supported by the students' negative assessment of the program's didactical methods. These results are a clear warning to the staff that they reconsider their present teaching methods. My assumption is that, because of our desire to improve the academic quality of this relatively new study program, we have neglected applied and relational aspects. Therefore, we should be more attentive to the methods of delivering knowledge and to the applicability of this knowledge. The latter is most prominent in the second part of this evaluation, which deals with the levels of acquired and preferred (wished-for) competencies. These differ significantly in the category of appropriation. For instance, the competence *Understanding and implementation of various types of social pedagogical work (preventive, educational, counselling, social integrative work)* ranked 12th on the acquired competencies dimension and 3rd on the preferred. This applies equally to the competence *Being able to make an appropriate individual program for help, support, and intervention*, which ranked 17th on acquired and 10th on wished-for competencies. These results demonstrate that the knowledge acquired by the students lacks applicability.

What can be done to improve on this point in the future? Integration of the project work can be seen as one solution. Students see the project work as having the greatest potential for the development of self-understanding and the testing of practical skills and attitudes. Active teaching methods and team work would enable students to acquire knowledge and skills necessary for planning, executing, and managing processes as well as the ability to transfer acquired experiences. Although the competencies mentioned are those most desired by students, they are the ones least acquired.

Social pedagogical work is team work. Students have voiced the opinion that there is neither enough interaction nor enough cooperation among the staff who deliver the program. This is valuable feedback. If we want the students to be prepared and equipped for team work, we should set an example, that is, staff should co-operate amongst themselves to contribute to student awareness of the need for team work. Another shortcoming of this study program is the very limited choice of optional study courses. Remodelling of the program in accordance with the requirements of the Bologna Process will be a step in the right direction.

Finally and most significantly, this evaluation suggests a need for a more practical approach to the transfer of knowledge and a focus on the applicability of this knowledge. At the same time, the didactical teaching methods should be developed and the theory integrated with the development of practical skills and self-reflection. Self-reflection on the part of the staff members who carry out the study program is the most crucial point for effecting these changes.

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