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COMPETENCE FOR SOCIAL PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE: WHAT DO STUDENTS TELL US?

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Abstract. The introduction of the competency-based approach in universities in Bulgaria is part of the higher education reform linked to the creation of competence profiles. Involving students as partners in the process of defining the competencies to be mastered for their effective self-realization in the profession helps achieving this task. Aim: exploring students' opinions regarding the basic competencies inherent to and necessary for the social pedagogue to develop during academic training. Instruments: questionnaire and focus group. 114 undergraduates in Social Pedagogy participated in the survey. 20 undergraduates participated in 3 focus groups. The processing of the survey data was done using frequency and quantitative analysis, and the transcripts of the focus group discussions were subjected to content analysis. Results: Students identified a set of personal, social, and professional competencies as highly necessary and important to emphasize in their training. The results will be used to reflect on and modify the curricula in the direction of competency-based learning.

Keywords: competence; competency based education; social pedagogy; student participation

Introduction

The competency-based approach introduced in higher education reflects the need for students to learn at university what is relevant to the needs of the labour market (Brauer 2021; Koenen, Dochy, Berghmans 2015; Velikova 2022). The job market for future social pedagogues/educators is diverse and rich in opportunities, and "social educational work involves intervention in other people's conditions of life and requires a solid basic education as well as training in order to carry out this task in a professional and appropriate manner".

Different approaches to defining the competencies that students should acquire in the course of their academic studies are described. According to Gervais (2016), competencies are determined based on feedback from all stakeholders, including

teachers, students, and community partners. They can be developed entirely by faculty, prepared by professional organizations, or by outside experts (McIntyre-Hite 2016). Research on effective practices for developing competency-based models of learning in higher education has shown the need to gather input from multiple stakeholders (i.e., employers, professional standards, and faculty) (McIntyre-Hite 2016, p. 162). In most cases, it is university authorities who initiate the work of creating competencies, but student input is often sought for legitimacy purposes (Elatia, Ipperciel 2015, p. 10).

Competency-based education (CBE) ultimately aims to improve student motivation and engagement in the learning process (Brauer 2021). Learners are placed at the centre of the education enterprise, and in turn, they take responsibility for understanding and optimising their learning experience (Curry, Docherty 2017, p. 65). In CBE, "students set the pace and focus of the learning process; they continually measure their own progress and are responsible for choosing individualized and targeted learning activities" (Simonds, Behrens, Holzbauer 2017, p. 413). To facilitate learning, educators need to know learners' strengths and areas that need improvement (McIntyre-Hite 2016).

In this context, the role of students as active learners, motivated and taking responsibility in the process of their learning, requires both a full understanding and awareness of the competencies that the profession requires and a focus on those that students identify as particularly significant for their own effective self-realisation in different professional roles. This is important in terms of their identification with the chosen profession and is particularly relevant for undergraduate learners. Furthermore, active participation in the learning process is key to engaging students as partners. Involving them in defining the competencies they need to develop in their university education helps achieve this goal. Student empowerment and participation as partners in higher education has been gaining traction in recent years, particularly in relation to hybrid learning in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (Lohse 2023, Zou et al. 2023). It can also be introduced when exploring changes in training towards a competency-based approach in higher education in Social Pedagogy.

The article aims to present the results of a study of the views of Social Pedagogy undergraduates at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" regarding the essential competencies that they think are necessary and should be developed during their studies given the requirements of the profession. The study was conducted for the purpose of the project "Competence-based approach in the training of students in Social Pedagogy", aimed at improving the quality of their learning.

Competencies and Competence-Based Education (CBE)

The concept of competence is what links education and real practice. Despite the implementation of competency-based learning not only in school and voca-

tional education but also in higher education in recent decades, the concept of "competence" has been interpreted differently (Berkovska 2014; Koenen, Dochy, & Berghmans 2015; Milkova 2015; Mulder, Gulikers, Biemans, & Wesselink 2008; Velikova 2022). Competence is most often defined as a dynamic set of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and relationships that are acquired in the process of learning, that is, those that are developed through high-quality learning, in an appropriate pedagogical environment, and through the acquisition of substantial practical experience (Zwell 2000). It is considered that for educational discourse, including in higher education, a distinction should be made between competence and competency, where competency is linked to a normative requirement/expected educational outcomes, while competence refers to ability, understood more as a personal characteristic/quality (Berkovska 2014; Milkova 2015), a state of successfully achieving one or more competencies (Velikova 2022).

Along with the above, there is no uniform classification of competencies, i.e. they are classified based on different attributes. According to the type of manifestation, a distinction is made between specific/narrowly professional competencies necessary for carrying out a particular job or profession and those that are transferable, broadly applicable in different life and professional contexts (Velikova 2022). The EU Council and the European Parliament's Key Competences Framework for Lifelong Learning1) outline eight groups of competencies, as well as a set of transferable, 'soft' skills that provide connectivity between each person's personal, social and professional expression. In turn, soft skills are defined as life skills, 21st century skills, key competencies for a successful life, and lifelong learning (Alt, Naamati-Schneider, & Weishut 2023, p. 1901). Many soft skills are considered essential and mandatory for fields such as social care and education, among other professions (Alt, Naamati-Schneider, Weishut 2023). In addition, apart from the variety of definitions and classifications of competences and competencies, there is no single recommended way to form and assess them in the learning process (McIntyre-Hite 2016).

Both advantages and challenges of introducing a competency-based approach to higher learning are shared (Mulder et al. 2008; Koenen, Dochy, & Berghmans 2015; Simonds, Behrens, Holzbauer 2017). Its implementation requires a major reorganization of the traditional educational paradigm, a reorientation of the focus from teaching to learning related to a change in roles, the development of curricular content aimed at competence formation, the application of a variety of learning technologies, and a change in assessment methods, among others. Taking up this task implies a thorough and systematic study of how competency-based curricula are designed, taught, assessed, and learned. It also requires identifying and understanding the components of the competencies to be formed and the ways in which their development can be fostered (Curry, Docherty 2017).

Research shows that each higher education institution takes an individual approach to introducing competency-based curricula (McIntyre-Hite 2016), and does so at its own pace and according to its own beliefs (Koenen, Dochy, & Berghmans 2015). There are proposals for linking CBE to a reflective approach, through which learners are given the opportunity to reflect on and interpret competence profiles through the prism of their own experiences, knowledge, understandings, attitudes, and expectations (Velikova 2022, p. 41). It has been argued that in this way, CBE aligns with the constructivist paradigm where "competence frameworks of reference... serve as stimuli for self-reflection and orient learners to the specifics of the relevant subject expertise or professional competence", and this, in turn, enables them to "make conscious, purposeful and informed choices about what, how and when to learn" (Velikova 2022, p. 41). This approach, combined with our view of students as partners and their empowerment through participatory action, is also at the core of our understanding of how it is appropriate to develop competency-based learning specifically in the field of social pedagogy as a humanitarian discipline. This in turn corresponds with the formation of central competencies for the profession of social pedagogue, namely empowerment and collaboration[2].

The problem of competencies in the field of Social Pedagogy education and training

A survey of the literature on the topic reveals a variety of competencies identified as essential for the effective performance of social pedagogues in different professional roles and positions. The competence profile of the social pedagogue/educator developed by the International Association of Social Educators identifies fundamental/central (holistic approach, empowerment, and collaboration), personal and relational, social and communicative, organisational and developmental, and learning competencies (Competence profile 2022). These competencies must be developed both during studies and through continuing and further education[2]. The education programme should ensure that the knowledge base reflects the professional competencies of social pedagogues[2].

It appears that universities and professional schools that train social educators (either independently or in the form of combined social pedagogy and social work programs) have developed their own academic frameworks for competency-based training in the field. There is no uniformity in the formulations, and the definition of competencies varies widely. In Switzerland, for example, the Framework Curriculum focuses on seven competence areas: for planning and implementing social pedagogical work, for supporting everyday life and crisis situations, for professional identity formation, for analysis and documentation processes, for teamwork, for professional reflection and development, and participation in the development of the organisation/institution[3]. The Austrian framework curriculum for the College of Social Pedagogy describes in twenty points the competencies that gradu-

ates acquire, but without associating them with a specific classification[4]. German vocational schools of social pedagogy are based on the definition of competencies adopted in the German Qualifications Framework and their classification into professional (including knowledge and skills) and personal (divided into social and independence)[5].

Specifically, the framework curriculum for training and education in the vocational schools of social pedagogy - Berlin-Brandenburg is competence-oriented and describes the extended professional competence to be developed as a unity of knowledge and skills to be acquired in an action-oriented and developmental learning process concerning reflected practical professional experience. Competent social-pedagogical action in areas of work requires not only specialised skills but also distinct personal skills (social skills, autonomy). The development of a professional attitude is a key goal in the training process, since quality professional relationships and educational work in the various fields can only be achieved through the further development of students' independence and social skills as part of the training programme. In particular, the acquisition of communicative competencies, which are essential for designing a resource-oriented pedagogical interaction with the child, adolescent, or young adult[5].

Pohlman & Gosch (2008) from the University of Applied Sciences in Munich investigated competencies concerning social work education in the joint degree programme in social pedagogy and social work. The authors draw on Roth's (1971) taxonomy, according to which competencies are divided into personal (autonomy, morality, ego strength, independence, responsibility), professional (language skills, thinking, judgment, and action skills, factual knowledge), and social (conflict management, cooperation, and communication skills). They also note current and frequently cited taxonomies that subdivide competencies into personal, technical-methodological, social-communicative, and activity- and implementation-oriented. For Pohlman & Gosch (2008), the differentiation of competencies in the training in the unified specialisation "Social Work" (Soziale Arbait) is into social, professional, and methodological competencies, some of which could have been already developed before the studies (e.g. social), while professional competences are mostly developed during the studies and are related to the study of basic theories of social work, scientific fields such as sociology, pedagogy, psychology, legal knowledge. They encompass a deep knowledge of target groups, fields of action, and organisational structures of social work. Immediately related to the latter are methodological competencies, which are also formed during studies and refer to a general knowledge of scientific standards and scientific methods, including research. Methodological competencies include social management, social planning, counselling, working with individuals and groups, etc. (Pohlman & Gosch 2008, pp. 9 – 11).

Herbert Effinger's study of the opinions of social work and social pedagogy graduates between 1995 and 2003 included a study of the acquisition of compe-

tencies in three periods: before studies, during studies, and in professional activity (Effinger 2005). Among the most important competencies are highlighted: listening skills, empathy for others (empathy), collaboration with others (teamwork), reflection on self and work (reflection skills), conflict management (conflict resolution), knowing where and how to mobilize resources, ability to adapt quickly to new situations, ability to tolerate controversy, ability to make decisions (decisiveness), critical thinking, ability to distance oneself, good knowledge of legal issues, having and using a sense of humour, having very specialised knowledge (Effinger 2005). According to the results, the prevailing view is that study is key to acquiring reflection on one's own work, knowledge of the resources to mobilize, knowledge of legal aspects, and very specialized knowledge. Empathy, the ability to listen, the ability to work in a team, reflection on work, and resilience in conflict were rated highest (Effinger 2005).

A similar study by Kollek & Mantey (2005) among 143 graduates of the Specialized Higher School in Berlin presents a correlation between the knowledge and skills provided in the studies and their relevance in the professional career. According to the results, leading in the profession but underrepresented in studies are ability to work independently, communication skills, resilience in conflicts, ability to work in teams, practical experience, social work methods, ICT knowledge, self-assessment, etc. (Kollek & Mantey 2005, p. 65).

Our study among students of Social Pedagogy and professionals in social services in the community, conducted in 2021, showed that the most important competencies for a specialist working in the field of social work are a set of professional qualities and skills, personal qualities, theoretical knowledge, knowledge of the legal and regulatory framework and methodological knowledge (Staneva, Minchev 2022). The recommendations of the study include increasing the relative share and quality of practical training of students and improving the so-called soft skills (communication, teamwork, leadership, time management, responsibility, etc.) that can be implemented at the university level (Staneva, Minchev 2022, p. 648).

Methodology of the study

Considering the variety of differently defined competencies for social pedagogical practice, along with those highlighted as essential for their development in the process of academic training and against the background of the need to engage students as active subjects and partners in the process of competency-oriented learning, our team set out to explore the views of students of Social Pedagogy in relation to the competences necessary for their future realization given the requirements of the profession and which should be developed during the training. For all the conventionality and insufficiency of any single definition, competence is understood here as a personal ability, a complex of knowledge, skills, and attitudes acquired in the process of learning and practical experience.

Instruments

The tools for collecting and analysing empirical information are a questionnaire survey and a focus group. The questionnaire was developed by the research team of the project and consists of 21 questions grouped into three areas as follows: 1) competencies most necessary in the work of the social pedagogue; 2) ways to develop competencies in the context of university education, including teachers' and students' roles and functions, and organization, forms, and amount of practical training; demographics by gender, age group, year and form of study, and practical experience.

The first group/ area of questions includes two open-ended questions, as follows: 1. Can you please indicate those professional competencies that you think will be necessary in view of your future successful realization as social educators? and 2. Which of the above competencies do you think need to be improved in your university studies. The purpose of the selection and formulation is for students to indicate the competencies they consider central to the profession and themselves and therefore important to develop during their studies. The same group should answer a closed-ended multiple-choice question, namely: 3. What efforts do you make to acquire these competencies.

The second group/area includes closed questions, where students can indicate more than one relevant answer, and have the opportunity to express another opinion/ add to the answer. For the purposes of this article, only the responses to the first group of questions were analysed.

As a technique to deepen the inquiry, the focus group focuses on the competencies that students indicate as the most important to be stressed on in their university preparation.

The processing of the survey data was done through frequency and quantitative analysis as well as content analysis of the open-ended responses. Content analysis was used to process and analyze the data from the focus group discussions.

Organisation and ethical aspects

The survey was conducted between May and July 2023. In order to reach a wider audience, the survey was distributed both in printed and online format (Google form). Participants were recruited through different communication channels: personal contact with the group leaders, messages on the e-mail lists of the individual courses, and verbal information from members of the research team. The main criterion for inclusion in the study was that the students are enrolled in the two forms of study in the Social Pedagogy major at the Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts of Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. 114 students meeting the criterion were contacted.

A total of 20 full-time students, including first to fourth-year students, participate in three focus groups. The selection of participants in the focus groups was made based

on willingness to participate, motivation, and activity during the learning process, linked to higher academic performance, and physical presence during the session. The study was conducted face-to-face with the focus groups and was facilitated by members of the project research team. Recordings of group discussions were made with tape recorders, whose transcripts were subsequently provided.

The study complied with the ethical standards for this type of research, confirmed by the Ethics Committee of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". Students participating in the focus groups were informed in advance about the duration and rules of the focus groups, the principles of voluntariness, confidentiality, and anonymity of the collected data, as well as their right to withdraw at any time. An informed consent form was provided.

Results

Of the 114 students who completed the questionnaire, 88 were in full-time study, 22 in part-time study and 4 did not provide an answer. Two of the respondents were male, 108 were female and 4 did not provide an answer. Over 90% of the participants were aged between 20 – 25 years, 9 were over 35, 5 did not indicate their age. Results were not analyzed by demographic indicators due to the relative homogeneity of the respondent group.

For the first group of open questions, the data obtained could be interpreted in the direction of the differentiation of personal and professional competencies. Within the group of professional, four subgroups were distinguished, respectively, for communication, empathy, work with a client, and scientific-theoretical. There was some conventionality in the grouping, as individual skills may be recognised in one or another of these groups. For example, being empathetic (as a quality and skill) could be associated with both personal and communication competencies and professional competencies, but was separated in its own due to the frequency of responses identifying its importance in respondents' understanding (over 39% of responses). Communication (33% of responses) could also be classified as both a professional and personal competence, but we considered it as a separate competence given the variety of forms, means, situations, roles, and subjects in the working reality. Another contingency arising from the nature of open questions came from the use of words with synonymous meaning in the answers. This also necessitated those certain answers be grouped by similarity, such as "positive attitude" with "benevolence", "communication" and "communion", "respect" with "tolerance", and others be relegated to the "other" column.

Among those mentioned, the so-called "working with a client" (over 67% of the answers) stands out as a fundamental competence for every social pedagogue, which is why a large part of the answers unsurprisingly fell into this group. 'Working with a client', however imprecise the wording may seem (as there are still a huge number of professionals working with clients), seems to refer more to indi-

vidualised intervention (Petrova 2011), which involves a complex set of aspects of professional interaction, namely: managing conflict and problem situations, showing respect, confiding, educating, supporting and motivating. Respondents specifically highlighted the need for competence in counselling (group and individual, of children and families), interview, observation, role play, and art therapy. Answers related to communion stand out with high frequency, among them are communication, observation, interaction, listening, assertiveness, and tactfulness. The group of empathy includes cooperation, empathy, emotional intelligence, and understanding. In some of their answers, the respondents indicated personal qualities and characteristics that they recognized as important for their future work, including confidence, purposefulness, persistence, self-initiative, inquisitiveness, determination, punctuality, calmness, self-control, organization, speech/oratory skills, foreign language proficiency. The frequency and quantitative distribution of the four groups of competencies are given in the table below, in descending order.

Table 1. Frequency and quantitative distribution by groups of competencies

Competence	Frequency distribution	Percentage
Working with a client	77	67%
Personal	63	55%
Empathy	45	39%
Communication	38	33%
Theoretical	32	28%

The answers to the question about the need for further improvement of certain competencies were similar to the data presented in the tables above. The competencies related to communication and practical work with a client were mentioned with the highest repetition. In working with a client, the need to increase knowledge and skills in applying art therapy, assessment methods, mediation, counselling, educational support methods, and interviewing was highlighted.

Depending on the year of study, additional trends in respondents' opinions could be identified. Communication, personal and scientific-theoretical competencies were more prominent in the answers of the students from the first and second year of study, while for the students in the third and fourth year, the emphasis was put on working with a client and in particular the application of the methods of counselling, observation, assessment, and evaluation.

Analysis of focus group data

Data from the focus groups were analysed using content analysis, whereby the presence and frequency of use of certain words, concepts, relationships, and inter-

relationships were analysed in terms of the main category, namely competence. The analysis delineated core competencies characteristic of the professional-personal profile of the social pedagogue, which can be formally categorized as personal, professional, social, and communicative.

Four key concepts emerged that students associated more with personal competencies concerning the professional role of the social pedagogue. Among these, "empathy" and "understanding" were present as expected (2 focus groups).

"Empathy, we talk a lot, but I'm not sure everyone knows what empathy is; not just to say it, but what it is, what it contains..." (Female, third year student)

"Understanding, listening, hearing..." (Female, first year student)

Other key words and phrases along these lines were also "patience" and "non-judgemental attitude" which appeared with great intensity in a focus group.

As for the professional competencies, they were mainly represented by concepts related to methods for "direct social-pedagogical work with vulnerable groups" and "building a trusting relationship with clients". It is noteworthy that they were represented both quantitatively and qualitatively by the largest number of concepts. Methods of working are discussed extensively in the focus groups, with the most significant focus on "individual and group counselling" and "client interviewing", which students identify as central to their own learning and preparation for their professional practice:

"We need to have practice in counselling, to feel more confident, to be more open with the client, to behave not so much as professionals but as people." (Female, third year student)

"Counselling is most challenging, the plan for meetings, the questions to ask... More talking about interview – a real case with an interview." (Female, fourth year student)

Interviewing and counselling were undoubtedly among those methods of social pedagogical activity that largely determine the nature and specificity of the professional interactions of the social pedagogue. On the other hand, highlighting them is logical insofar as the training in the specialty emphasizes these basic methods through the set disciplines and practices. The ability to build a trusting relationship was highlighted as a competency for working directly with a client. There was also a discussion on the need to know the status of the profession of social pedagogue and institutions for social work, which corresponds to some of the important professional competencies, according to the students' opinion.

Social and communicative competencies were elicited by students through concepts and phrases about "individual and group work skills", "team collaboration", and "self-improvement". In two of the focus groups, the professioanl's abilities to manage emotions and team-work were mentioned as important for professional activity. The emphasis on emotional inteligence, which appeared to be a significant challenge for students, was impressive as it was noted in each of the focus groups:

"To learn ... to control my own emotions in the first place. After my first practice, I began controlling my emotions." (Female, third year student)

"How to manage my emotions worries me, how not to cry in front of the client... Self-control over emotions [is needed]." (Female, second year student)

Worthy to mention is that some of the concepts mentioned above intersect with the principles of social-pedagogical work, such as "confidentiality", "acceptance", and "understanding of the other".

Conclusions and summary

The study focused on those basic competencies that students identified as crucial in terms of the demands of professional practice and that they should develop during their studies. This is important given their involvement in a learning process that implies the role of an active learner taking responsibility for their own learning. Broadly speaking, it is evident that the competencies identified as important by students fall within the range of those highlighted by both the professional association of social educators – AIJIE and the framework curricula of the institutions studied. To a large extent, they are also part of the personal and professional qualities and skills identified in the qualification profile of the Social Pedagogy program at SU "St. Kliment Ohridski", including responsiveness, empathy, tolerance, assessment and planning skills in casework, conflict management skills, social and communication skills, etc.[5]

To put it differently, we are talking about personal, professional, social and communicative competences, even if the boundaries between them are largely blurred. However, they all form the personal-professional profile of the social pedagogue or, in other words, are included in the set of comptenecies for social-pedagogical practice. The capacity for empathy, teamwork, conflict management, counselling, etc. have also been identified in other studies referred to in the theoretical framework (Effinger 2005). Empathy is probably the most frequently mentioned "soft skill" needed by helping professionals (Alt, Naamati-Schneider, & Weishut 2023). Cited research in the field of empathy identifies it as a "direct social perception of the other's experience" of great importance in social work practice and education, thus "it is essential that curriculum developers find ways to teach the content of social empathy to students"(Alt, Naamati-Schneider & Weishut 2023, p. 1904).

Current students from all years participated in the survey, and their responses correlated with their year of study. In this direction, there are differences in the way they grasped terms and concepts determined by the degree of theoretical training and practical experience. This is directly related to the construction of their own notion of competence on which students build their reflection, without it being bound to a preset definition. We regard this as an advantage, insofar as in this way they also set parameters of needs on which to focus in the learning process, regardless of whether these are formulated as competence/competencies. The fact that some of the participants in the study were trained under the constraints of the epidemiological setting associated with

Covid-19 must also be taken into account here, and this mostly influenced the opportunities for gaining practical experience in a real environment – deficits that students 'reported' through the frequency of occurrence of certain desired competencies.

Overall, the analysis allows us to conclude that students articulate notions that directly correspond to the elements of competency-based learning. The approach to engaging students in identifying competencies important to their self-realization in the profession and to develop during their academic training can help both to empower them in the learning process and to specify the social educator's competence profile across the conglomerate of competence and competencies associated with the helping professions in general. This is also important in terms of our own self-reflection as academic staff engaged in the education and professional training of future social pedagogues. The results of the study both orient us to the students' understandings and needs regarding competencies and ways of their formation and justify our efforts to optimize the process towards competency-based learning.

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NOTES

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