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ASPECTS OF THE PRACTICAL TRAINING OF SOCIAL PEDAGOGUES

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Abstract. The current article presents a study, which is a part of a broader study that aims to analyze, and – if required – to modernize or optimize the organization of the practical training of Social Pedagogy students in order to ensure its coherence with the dynamic conditions for professional realization. The article focuses on the final stage of the practical training of the students – the pre-graduate internship. The accent is the final product – a description of the pre-graduate internship; which is presented and defended at the state final certification examination.

Keywords: social pedagogy; practical training; practical education

University education in Bulgaria aims at the training of highly qualified specialists with higher education, and the development of science and culture¹). The expectations and requirements of society towards the institutions of higher education are that they organize the training of their students so that students acquire broad theoretical knowledge, together with practical skills for successful professional realization. The latter is achieved through targeted practical training. The training practice of Social pedagogy students in the Faculty of Education at the Trakia University of Stara Zagora is a key stage in the overall professional education of the students.

Organization of the practical training

The organization of the practical training in social pedagogy in the faculty is based on the 'Rules for organization, contents, and assessment of the practical training of students and graduate students at the Faculty of Education of the University of Stara Zagora'. It starts at the beginning of the fifth semester with lectures in observation and continues in the sixth and seventh semester with in-course training practice. The eighth semester is the time for the pre-graduate internship²). Observation introduces the students to a real professional environment under the direct supervision of the practical training instructors who are university lecturers. The in-course training practice aims to involve the students in real professional activities in an educational

or social institution and allow them to carry out an educational process on their own. The goal of that last form of practical training is to develop the students' skills to organize and carry out professional activities independently (as school counselors, social workers, other pedagogy specialists) in the respective educational or social institution. The 'Rules for organization, contents, and assessment of the practical training of students and graduate students at the Faculty of Education of the University of Stara Zagora' includes details about the main functions of the instructors in this training for every course of the faculty. They are members of the academic society of the faculty. Based on the rules, we can divide the functions of the instructor/instructors of the practical training of social pedagogy students into the following groups:

Activities, related to the changes in the state policy in the social and educational domains:

The instructors keep track of changes to the respective regulatory framework. They collect, research, and analyze information about changes to the structures, functions, target groups, and the organization of activities in social and educational institutions in the territory of the town.

Activities, related to the communication with leads and experts from social and educational institution and mentors from training facilities:

This type of communication is used by the training practice instructors to research the attitudes and possibilities for new or recognized institutions to participate in the practical training of the students in the current university year, in accordance to the course curricula. They discuss the practical training with the mentors, including the execution of the tasks that are assigned to the students.

Activities, related to the organization of the practical training:

The practical training instructors present a motivated proposal to the vice dean on educational affairs through the chamber head, to suggest a change in the list of training facilities, if required. They make schedules for practical trainings in real work environment in compliance to the work load of practice mentors and the study schedules of students. They instruct students in the beginning of every practical form of training. They seek feedback about the efficiency of the practical trainings through targeted interviews with mentors from the training facilities, direct observation of the training process, and/or inquiries to the students at the end of particular stages.

Activities, related to interaction with students:

Instructors arrange a system for communication with the students in case of unexpected changes of the schedule. They watch for the presence and activity of students in practical classes. They provide feedback to the students about the level of their practical preparedness by checking and assessing the products, developed at the different stages. At the final stage of the practical training – the pre-graduate internship; the practice instructors help the students to choose an institution,

considering the professional interests of the students. They carry out individual or group consultations about the development of the product (an element of a student's portfolio) for the practical state certification examination.

Control and feedback:

The Rules list a requirement for the students to keep a personal journal and/or list each exercise, carried out in the training facility in a particular format, set by lead instructors in the major courses for the respective subject, for every visit of the institution of their practical training. At the end of the training period, each student receives a quality assessment by his or her mentor, and includes it in the student's portfolio.

The Social Pedagogy subject (bachelor's degree) is taught in two forms of education – full-time and part-time. The institutions to provide practical training classes have been selected on the basis of the opportunities for professional realization of the students after graduation, as specialists in the field of education, the system for socio-pedagogical and social activities, and services in the state or public sector and the municipalities. The selection of institutions is also based on the qualification characteristic of the subject³⁾, and aims at providing the students with the opportunity to receive practical training in the major spheres of realization of the social pedagogue – as a school counselor in the institutions for pre-school and school education, and as a social worker in the social institutions. Due to specifics in the organization of their work and the available personnel, some of the institutions agree to accept students for only two of the forms of practical training – observation and in-course training practice. Since the school year 2016-2017 pre-graduate internship has been carried out and mentored in 3 schools – one elementary, and two professional high schools; one healthcare institution – Home for medical and social care for children; one social institution – Home for children without parental care; one non-governmental organization that runs two social services as state-delegated activities. Part-time students who work in another town can organize their pre-graduate internship on their own, under certain conditions. At a consultation, meeting students receive an extended list of institutions they can use while negotiating the organization of an internship at the particular location.

During the pre-graduate internship, each student receives, with the supervision of his or her practice mentor, the opportunity to communicate with the clients of the respective institution from the position of a particular specialist – social pedagogue, school counselor, social worker.

The curriculum of the full-time course on the subject includes 150 classes of final practical training in a work environment, and the curriculum of the part-time course includes 75 classes⁴⁾. Students in both forms of education can prepare for their specific role at every stage of their practical training with the optional course The Portfolio as Social and Pedagogical Practice in the fourth or fifth semester. For each stage of the practical training the course lecturer presents a table model in which students describe their participation in the training.

Below lists, the full names of the models.

First stage of the practical training (Observation): the students from the full-time form of education end with two products - Journal (Daybook) and Model for work report for student observation. Students of the part-time form complete with one product - Model for work report for student observation.

Second stage of the practical training (In-course training practice): the students from the full-time form of education end with two products – Journal and Model for description of the inclusion of the student in a particular institutional practice through training. Students of the part-time form complete with one product – Model for description of the inclusion of the student in a particular institutional practice through training.

Third stage of the practical training (Pre-graduate internship / practice): the students from the full-time form and the part-time form of study end with the product Model for case description in pre-graduate practice of the student.

The models above have been developed and introduced in the practical training by Professor M. Stefanova, lead lecturer in the Social Pedagogy course.

During the school year 2017 – 2018, the education of the graduate full-time students required the use of a different approach to the completion of the pre-graduation internship, as the students did not pay attention in the classes on the subject, and did not possess the required specific theoretical knowledge to develop a quality product to present and defend at the practical state examination.

The training practice instructors – Assist. Prof. Tsveta Delcheva, Assist. Prof. N. Zdravkova, developed and introduced a new form for training report to be completed by the full-time students – A description of pre-graduate internship by a Social Pedagogy student.

Initial premises for the development of the new form:

Each professional activity, carried out during the pre-graduate internship should be described in a journal and in the final product with predefined parameters.

The description of the work with an individual case should be parameterized to allow the comparison with the work of students, who received theoretical training for the development of a Model for Description of a Case in the Pre-graduate Internship of the Student.

Students get the opportunity to receive individual consultations by request during the pre-graduate internship. Part time student also receive consultations about the content and presentation of their models during the internship.

State examination session of the Social Pedagogy students is organized in the following way:

– Written theoretical state examination. Written exposition on a topic, selected at random from a predefined questionnaire. The topics in the questionnaire include the contents of the main subjects, though during the previous seven semesters.

– Oral theoretical state examination. Oral exposition on a randomly selected topic from the questionnaire. Each student selects a topic from the questionnaire at random, makes an oral exposition on the topic, and then answers any theoretical questions the examination committee might have.

– Practical state examination. This examination precedes the above. It consists of presenting the written Model for Description of a Case in the Pre-graduate Internship of the Student, which is part of the portfolio that the student develops over the years. This written model and the overall participation of the student in the pre-graduate internship are defended orally before the examination committee. The examination committee consists of faculty lecturers, and is the same for each of the three examinations. The written exposition for full-time students during the university year 2017 – 2018 is Model for Description of a Case in the Pre-graduate Internship of the Student. Students have not received specific theoretical training and have not exercised to describe the stages of their practical training into forms, similar to the model, mentioned above. Graduate part-time students present Model for the Description of a Case in the Pre-graduate Internship of the Student. They have received the required theoretical training and have practiced their skills through completing similar models at the end of each of the two preceding stages.

Conditions and course of experiment

The general number of students who participate in the study is 53 people, of which 46 female and 7 male. The number of full-time students N_1 is 28 people (3 male), and the number of part-time students N_2 is 25 people (4 male). The data analysis excludes 8 cases (all did not sit at least one of the forms of examination, due to different reasons), so the sample totals to 44 people.

The hypothesis of the study is a formal statement that prognoses that a change in one variable (a measured characteristic of the analyzed person) will lead to a change in another variable. Possible independent variables in this case are ‘sex’, ‘age’, and ‘form of education’. The study formulates a hypothesis of difference, which states that “There is a difference between the success rates between full-time and part-time students¹⁾”. The participants are grouped in two groups depending on the form of education, thus the variable ‘form of education’ is independent. The dependent variable is ‘success rate’, where success covers the practical state examination, and the theoretical written and oral examinations, and the values for the variable are defined by the participants in the study.

The study was carried out during May-June 2018. The data has been analyzed using the package for statistical analysis SPSS v.16. r. 16.0.1.

The initial analysis of the data showed that the data distribution is not normal and thus requires the use of nonparametric tests to compare the data between the two independent samples. Nonparametric statistics is preferred over parametric when the data is ordinal (rank) or nominal, and when the data sample is small and the normal distribution of

the variable is uncertain (Table 1). This is also recommended when the data contains abnormal or extreme values that distort the value of the arithmetic mean. In our case all three conditions are present, so a parametric test cannot be carried out properly.

Table 1. General data representation

Case Processing Summary							
Form of education and state examination results		Cases					
		Valid		Missing		Total	
		N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Results from the practical state examination	Full-time	23	82,1%	5	17,9%	28	100,0%
	Part-time	24	100,0%	0	,0%	24	100,0%
Results from the written state examination	Full-time	20	71,4%	8	28,6%	28	100,0%
	Part-time	24	100,0%	0	,0%	24	100,0%
Results from the oral state examination	Full-time	20	71,4%	8	28,6%	28	100,0%
	Part-time	24	100,0%	0	,0%	24	100,0%

One of the main drawbacks of nonparametric tests is that they are less sensitive than parametric alternatives, and might fail to find differences between groups, even when differences exist.

Results and discussion

The next stage of the scientific study consists of testing the formulated hypotheses. We applied the Mann-Whitney U test in order to test the hypothesis that the distribution of the success rate on the practical state examination and the written and oral state examinations is the same between part-time and full-time students.

The Mann-Whitney U test is similar to the t-test for two independent samples, but while the t-test tests the arithmetical mean values for both groups, the Mann-Whitney U test tests their median values. When we analyze the data ranks instead of source data, the source rate distribution of the data is insignificant.

The following conditions must be met in order to carry out the Mann-Whitney U test:

1. It is supposed that the dependent variable holds 'low' values that increase towards 'high' values before ranging.

2. The data in both groups is independent.

The statistical hypotheses that the Mann-Whitney U test tests are as follows:

H_0 : The two groups have the same distribution.

H_1 : The two groups do not have the same distribution.

Table 2 presents the results from the data analysis:

Table 2. Test Statistics

Examination	U	Range	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	r
Practical state examination	188,000	[0;552]	-1,963	0,050	-0,29
Written state examination	233,000	[0;480]	-0,169	0,866	-0,003
Oral state examination	214,000	[0;480]	-0,649	0,516	-0,014

With the practical examination results the value $U = 188,0$ which shows that the values for the first group (full-time students) are lower than the values for the second. With the results from the written and oral theoretical examinations the values of U are close to the middle of the range, which means that the values for the first group blend with the values for the second. To verify whether this is correct, we must determine the critical value of U . Since the samples for both groups are large (≥ 20) we use the normal distribution for the approximation of the U value and the p -value (the asymptotic significance) of the two-tailed statistical tests. In the current study $p \leq 0,05$ (statistically significant value) is observed in the distribution of the results from the practical state examination, which allows us to reject the null hypothesis H_0 and draw the conclusion that there is a difference between the two groups of students.

To calculate the effect size, we use the coefficient of determination r using the Equation 1 (below). Data comes from the tables, generated by SPSS.

$$r = \frac{Z}{\sqrt{N}}$$

Equation 1

Where Z is the standardized normal approximation of the test statistics and N is the value of the whole sample.

The interpretation of the coefficient, calculated using the Cohen methods shows that for the values $0.10 \leq r < 0.30$ we observe a small (or smaller than the typical) effect size for the effect of the form of education on the results.

The next question we must ask is “Is there any statistically significant difference between the results from the practical state examination and the results from the theoretical state examination (written and oral)?”

To compare the results from the practical examination and the results from the written and oral theoretical examinations, we average the results from the theoretical examinations. We analyze the results of both groups of students – full-time and part-time, $N=44$.

The null hypothesis H_0 states: “The probability for positive difference equals the probability for negative difference, i.e. there are no statistically significant differences in the results from the practical and theoretical state examinations”.

The experimental hypothesis H_1 states: “There are statistically significant differences in the results from the practical and theoretical state examinations”.

The Wilcoxon signed-rank test is used for the comparison of related samples, when the answers of the respondents are measured in two different occasions or under two different conditions. It is the nonparametric alternative of the t-test for correlated samples, but it transforms the values of the variable to ranks and compares them, instead of comparing the arithmetic mean values. In the test, we calculate the number of positive and negative differences and reach a conclusion based on the number and the size of their difference. The absolute value of difference between the matching pairs in the two samples is ranged from the smallest to the largest and then the sum of ranks, associated to the positive differences is compared to the sum of ranks for the negative differences.

The Wilcoxon signed-rank test requires the following prerequisites:

1. The rank differences are numerical values.
2. The distribution of the differences is symmetrical.

When calculating the interpretation of the effect size, we use the coefficient r (Equation 1) again.

Table 3. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test Statistics

		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Average result from TSE – Result from PSE	Negative Ranks	25a	15,06	376,50
	Positive Ranks	4b	14,62	58,50
	Ties	15c		
	Total	44		
a. Average result from TSE (theoretical state examination) < Result from PSE (practical state examination) b. Average result from TSE > Result from the pre-graduation internship (PSE) c. Average result from TSE = Result from the pre-graduation internship (PSE)				

In table 3, the Ranks in column N (number) presents the sample for each group: on the first row Negative Ranks lists the number of negative ranks when the rank of the first variable is smaller than the rank of the second, which is $N=25$. On the second row Positive Ranks lists the number of positive ranks when the rank of the first variable is larger than the rank of the second variable, which is $N=4$. The third row Ties lists the number of equal ranks, which is $N=15$. The exact definitions (direction – a, b, c) of the differences are showed below the table. The second column Mean Rank lists the respective arithmetical mean values of the ranks, and the last (third) column Sum of Ranks lists the value of the sum of all ranks for the respective group.

In table 4 – Test Statistics, the first row Z lists the value of the standardized normal approximation of the statistical test Z. The minus sign before the Z value

is insignificant, as it depends on the order in which the observed pairs of the two correlated samples are compared. The value of Z is associated to the probability to observe either positive or negative differences, compared to its arithmetical mean value, which is 0. The associated significance level of this probability is listed in the row Asymptotic Significance (2-tailed) and if that level is statistically significant ($p \leq 0.005$) we draw the conclusion that the difference between the results from the two examinations is statistically significant.

Table 4. Test Statistics^b

	Average result from TSE – Result from PSE
Z	-3,458a
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	,001
a. Based on positive ranks.	
b. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test	

To determine the effect size we calculate the r coefficient using Equation 1.

Conclusions

The results from the Mann-Whitney test (U test) show that there is a statistically significant difference between the results from the practical state examination, achieved by the full-time students (mean rank 20,17) and part-time students (mean rank 27,67), where $U=188,000$, $p=0,050$, $r=-0,29$.

The analysis of the results in the context of the overall sense of the practical training provides grounds for the following conclusions:

1. Part-time students achieve better results at the practical examination. They were trained how to describe their participation in the pre-graduation internship in the predefined format and studied that format.

2. Full-time students need training on how to present their participation in the pre-graduate internship in the predefined written format, and the requirements and expectations towards them at the oral defense.

The results from the Wilcoxon - Signed Ranks Test show that there is a statistically significant difference between the results from the practical state examinations of full-time and part-time students, and their results from the theoretical examination $Z= -3,458$, based on the positive ranks; $p=0,001$, with an effect size that is larger and larger than the typical: $r=-0,52$.

The notable conclusion is that the results from the practical examination of the students in both forms of education are higher than the results from the theoretical examination. Both groups of students have very good learning skills and theoretical knowledge. The higher results from the practical examination are an indicator for

rationalization and competent application of the acquired academic knowledge into practice.

General conclusion

The training of students in the Faculty of Education of the Trakia University of Stara Zagora is a complex, multi-aspect activity. Its collective subject is the whole personnel of the educational facility, in which training is performed as well as the participants from the external institutions that host the practical training of the students. The effective interaction between institutions allows timely reaction to the dynamic changes that affect the professional realization of social pedagogues in the educational and social sphere. The good interaction between the institution for practical training and the university guarantees that the students will achieve good results at the practical state examination.

NOTES

1. Law on Higher Education. State Gazette issue 112, December 27th, 1995, last amendments State Gazette issue 98, December 09th 2016.
2. Rules for organization, contents, and assessment of the practical training of students and graduate students at the Faculty of Education of the Trakia University. Stara Zagora, 2014.
3. <https://sites.google.com/site/eipsptrusz/home/misia-i-vizia-na-specialnost-socialna-pedagogika> (Qualification characteristics of the subject of Social Pedagogy).
4. Curriculum of the subject of Social Pedagogy – Bachelor's degree at the Faculty of Education of the Trakia University - Stara Zagora, 2014.

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