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Social pedagogy – new perspectives

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Abstract

The scientific status and the action scope of social pedagogy are yet subject to discussion. Although there is a quite long tradition in the field, we see even today the expression of divergent opinions in various countries as regards the role which social pedagogues could have in society and the professional training of such experts.

The author analyzes the theoretical and practical experience acquired until now in the field and proposes the launching in Romania of certain social pedagogy license programs by the extension of the roles this professional category may exercise.

Also, several new occupations which may be associated to this profession are proposed.

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1. The pedagogy as a science in deadlock

In this period, the pedagogy science is passing through a real identity crisis, especially since it was integrated in the wider *education science* concept. From that moment, the issue of *education* is spread towards other sciences, including social assistance. Closely knowing its peculiarities, the specialized workers in the field launch reflective messages – sometimes with desperate accents! – to bring to public conscience the interest for the pedagogical approach to education (Pedagogy does matter!, Jamie McKenzie, 2003). Pedagogy is more and more often restrictively associated to social education, *i.e.* to *how to be a teacher* and to *how to better organize a teaching activity*.

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The solution for a good reanimation of pedagogy comes from within it: it is social pedagogy – the most active variant of education sciences.

The roots of social pedagogy are old, coming from the Greek antiquity, in the thinking of Aristotle and Platon. The author of *The Republic* was reflecting even from over 2000 years ago on *how education could contribute to social development*.

In modern times, in the Renaissance and later during the Enlightenment, Jean Jacques Rousseau and J. H. Pestalozzi distinguish themselves by their ideas on a social education. The last one developed a method on a holistic education addressing the mind, the heart and the hand at the same time. His ideas on such an education feed the postmodern conceptions on the essence of social pedagogy.

More recently, Hämäläinen (2003) explains that “historically, social pedagogy is based on the belief that you can decisively influence social circumstances through education”. This branch of pedagogy does not only refer to children but includes educating adults.

In its *social pedagogy* version, the education science is much better seized in a pragmatic permanently moving world.

2. State of the art of social pedagogy today in the world

Although the interest for the social pedagogy field is increasing, a certain ambiguity in the definition of the concept continues to persist. On the other hand, not only the social pedagogy concept is in permanent reconstruction, but even the specification and delimitation of its study object create ambiguities and controversies.

Recent studies demonstrated that in various countries the theoretical and practical approaches to social pedagogy are different and that the professional practices in the field are more or less defined. This is also connected to the degree of officially recognizing social pedagogy as an education science.

The status of social pedagogy is also questionable when approached from an epistemological perspective: Is social pedagogy just a science? If YES, is it an independent science or interdisciplinary in nature?! Is social pedagogy a simple study discipline? Is social pedagogy a method?

The answers to these questions are various. Despite the diversity of opinions, however we retain a maximum generality definition formulated by J. Hämäläinen (2012, p.2): Social pedagogy focuses, in theory and practice, on the processes of human growth, which produce social integration, participation and well-being in members of society.

Other problems creating debates and controversies are: Is social pedagogy only dealing with children and the young or also with adults?! Does it deal with disfavored / disadvantaged social categories or with all the population categories from the perspective of a specialized problematic?!

Since the cycle of interrogations and concerns continues, we appreciate the initiative of creating an English association named ThemPra (Theory Meets Practice) founded in 2008 with the main mission - *to promote the understanding and support the development of social pedagogy* - <http://www.thempra.org.uk>.

The fact that, although the aspects related to the clarification and delimitation of the field are not yet solved, in a series of countries the process related to experts’ professional training in social pedagogy is quite well regulated, according to the newest rules related to the organization of university studies, is amazing and really paradoxical. Please find below several examples:

Table 1 Social pedagogy in some university study programs

Country	Level of university studies in social pedagogy /social education
Spain	bachelor degree in social education
Denmark	Bachelor degree in social pedagogy
Norway	BA in social education
North America	Master of arts in social and cultural pedagogy
Australia	Bachelor of Education (Social Pedagogy)

Of course, examples may continue.

On the other hand, it is interesting that in certain countries the interest for social pedagogy and the academic research in the field is very high but at a university level their educational offer does not yet include such a qualification. England is in this situation and justifies this absence by the fact that in this country the social worker assimilates many of the roles associated to a practical social pedagogy. Also, in Finland – a country with important concerns and results in the field - social pedagogy is not a profession, and there is no corresponding professional title (e.g., “social pedagogue”) - according to Hämäläinen, J. (2012).

3. State of the art of social pedagogy in Romania

Also, in Romania there is a scientific tradition in the social pedagogy field (Dimitrie Gusti, I.C.Petrescu, Stanciu Stoian).

In the modern Romanian culture, social pedagogy has been promoted as a palliative for the cultural emancipation of the nation, being particularly focused on the adults’ education.

Today, some Romanian authors consider that it is “a “general theory for shaping the individual, with a special focus on educative assistance, provided by the state and society outside school” (Stanciu Stoian, 1983; Adrian Neculau, 1994). In the opinion of other authors, social pedagogy (re)becomes a modern, pragmatic-acting science, with universally corrective and formative vocation (I. Neacșu, (2010). For others, its object of activity is more limited and more precisely directed, as it is related to social work and adults’ education. (Loredana Drobot, 2008).

As regards the professional roles which could be exercised by the expert in this field, we see sometimes a quite restrictive perception: “Social pedagogue is the reference person for a long period of time for individuals and groups in difficulty.” (Cozărescu Mihaela, 2000, p.18).

Despite this diversity of opinions, we can see that, in terms of the professional training of the social pedagogue, several important steps were made in Romania:

- there is an occupation distinct from *social pedagogue* which is subordinated to the occupational group – social assistant;
- the main role of the social pedagogue is: to complete or partially replace functions of the family;
- the main condition for somebody to practice this profession is to have university education in pedagogy, social assistance, sociology, psychology or philosophy.

Despite such real success, there are also several critical aspects we wish to highlight:

- although there is an occupational standard for a highly qualified profession, universities do not offer a specialized study program (this situation favors manifestations of superficiality and improvisation in the professional practice in the field);
- the conditions for occupying such a position specify a quite wide range of skills that may be acquired only within a complex and specialized university training program;
- in the social field there are no real professional markets for these potential graduates of university studies, however there are positions of social pedagogues with preuniversity education around territorial school inspectorates; the professional roles of such social pedagogues are limited and target various support strategies for children in difficulty or with special needs;
- the occupational standard was drafted in 1999; since then, there were many changes in the process of defining and describing the Romanian university qualifications, which leads to the necessity of an update of both the occupational standard and of the conception on the vocational training of the professional in the field.

In our opinion, many of the signaled inconveniences may also be due to the fact that the occupational standard of social pedagogue is drawn up by a team that does not include any specialists in the educational sciences – which results in a poor definition of the educational roles this expert exercises. The social pedagogue occupation was included in the *social assistant* occupational group, and not in the *educator* group.

4. What about the professionalization in social pedagogy from an academic perspective?

Having as referential the national and international experience in the social pedagogy field, we wish to offer, through our work, several occasions for reflection on the possibilities to launch in Romania a new university qualification specific to this field, with possibilities of development at all the levels promoted through the Bologna strategy: license, master, PhD.

The starting premise is that, in the current development stage of the Romanian society it is necessary to identify new educational intervention mechanisms aiming at protecting moral values, individual and collective wellbeing.

Such a demarche would also correspond to the internal interest of universities for rethinking / updating the university study programmes with little labor market outlets, specific to the education sciences field.

Of course, the launching of a new university qualification is not an easy process. First of all, it would be necessary that the interested universities make an ample need study to be academically supplemented with an occupational analysis for a high professionalization level, an updated occupational standard, professional markets according to the new realities on the labor market.

In the same spirit it would be necessary a reevaluation of the scientific status of social pedagogy in order to take it from the position of simple education discipline within the university curriculum, to the rank of license study program with development possibilities at a master and PhD level.

In order to bring this profession as closely to the labor market a possible, we recommend:

- a. *Reconceptualization of social pedagogy as a behavioral science.* Social pedagogy may, of course, occupy a key position among behavioral sciences – alongside psychology, sociology, anthropology. Just like them, social pedagogy *deals primarily with human action and often seeks to generalize about human behavior in society* (according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary definition of behavioral science). Through its very mission, social pedagogy aims at modifying people’s behaviors according to a certain social/institutional/community project. This means that the social pedagogy expert should be skilled to design and obtain desirable behavioral modifications of people to the advantage of each and all of them.
- b. *Reconceptualization of social pedagogy as an action science.* Social pedagogy – as a distinct field of pedagogy also distinguishes itself by the fact that it does not limit to the reflection stage, although it supports on this human quality and even aims at developing it. Its force is given by the capacity to propose desirable changes and involve people in the change process. For all these reasons, social pedagogy is, first of all, a science of action. Social pedagogues must be true social *actors*, *i.e.* their professionalism must be assessed by the capacity to act efficiently in the scope of specific services. For this reason, it is essential that practical training is fundamental within the process related to the professional training of social pedagogues.

5. What about the professionalization in social pedagogy from a practical perspective?

For a good substantiation of a university study program in the social pedagogy field, it is important that the presence of this profession is visible and explicit in the targeted social service scope. From this point of view, the social pedagogue’s activity should be quite different from that of other experts from related professions: social assistants, didactical staff specialized in special psycho-pedagogy, school counselors, occupational therapists etc.

Table 2 Comparison between missions of educational professions

<i>Profession</i>	Related professions	Social pedagogy (mission)
	<i>Mission</i>	
Social assistant	Diagnoses the social and economic condition of the assisted person in order to grant them support and reestablish their	Organizes an educational intervention (understood as a desirable behavioral change) for the targeted person/group, irrespective of

Special expert	rights' Organizes an educative intervention adapted to each individual with special educative requirements	such criteria as: age, gender, economic status, social status, health condition in order to ensure a generalized wellbeing – to the advantage of the individual, community, society.
School counselor	Grants psychological support to the pupils in the school unit where they perform their activity	
Occupational therapist	Ensures vocational counseling and a series of services associated to the employment process	

The identity of a qualification is given by the good specification of the professional mission and the ability to delimit the related roles by explicitly establishing the boundaries between specializations and occupations (Ezechil, L. 2012, p.43).

In our opinion, the social pedagogue may also exercise a series of professional roles which were not defined for now but which could become beneficial for community life and for each individual's life quality.

In an imagination exercise taking into account a series of social situations in which the expert's presence in education is often felt, here are several possible occupations which the social pedagogue could exercise:

- Educator for Public Services of Safety [EPSS] – having as a main mission the use of all possible communication channels in order to achieve an education for health, for all age categories;
- Educator for Pre-University School Education [EpuSE] - who could act as an educational counselor *for the pupils* with learning difficulties or who are the victims of various discrimination or abuse forms manifested in school; such an educator could also counsel teachers when they encounter difficulties in the educative activities they organize for pupils;
- Educational Adviser for Parents [EAP] - grants counseling and specialized support to parents so that they better exercise their parental roles;
- Adviser/Supervisor for Mass Media [AMM] who could play several professional roles: analysis and endorsement of messages broadcast on TV or published in the press in point of their consequences upon the conscience of the individuals and/or upon the collective conscience, in order to avoid *negative education*; organization of TV shows aiming social education or increase of the degree of citizens' awareness of various social phenomena and manifestations with negative effects as regards social relationships.

Exercising such occupations, social pedagogues could contribute to the extension of the social roles of the public institutions offering to the population services with a big impact on the individuals' conscience, and on the collective conscience. Since such roles cannot extend by themselves or as an effect of the application of decisional acts, specially trained persons exercising them with professionalism are needed.

Further, we propose a comparison of the professional roles of social pedagogues – as currently defined – to the extended professional roles we suggest for the future developments of the field:

Table 3 Comparison of current professional roles of social pedagogue and other possible roles

<i>Current professional roles of social pedagogues</i>	<i>Other professional roles possible for social pedagogues</i>
Preparation of support strategies for individuals or groups with special needs (socially marginalized individuals)	Preparation of strategies for people's awareness of certain individual or collective behaviors in order to improve the quality of life and interpersonal relationships
Educational counseling for children, young or old persons, for problems specific to each age (social care strategies adapted to well-defined social categories)	Public educative interventions for a preventive, corrective, optimizing purpose (holistic approaches)
Substitution of family functions in certain circumstances	Strategy for extending the social roles of the public institutions with educative functions (other than school)
Complementarization of educative roles to those specific to social assistance	Professional roles are explicitly educative even when the perspective for approaching specific processes and

Specific services are addressed to a relatively small public	phenomena is interdisciplinary Specific services are usually addressed to a large public through the use of collective interest messages
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The social pedagogue manifests in any circumstance as a social worker.

5. Conclusions

In the current development stage of the Romanian society, the creation of a university qualification in the social pedagogy field is more than desirable. It would meet the need of intensifying support strategies in the favor of people of various age categories who are confused by the high number and rhythm of the changes occurred in society in the post-revolutionary period. The chaotic exercise of democracy generated a series of effects which often challenge the very list of moral values which are seriously affected in politic confrontations. The individual feels lost in a world dominated by insecurity and stress and often finds no more solutions to routine problems. However, the social pedagogue should not limit their support interventions only in favor of the persons with special problems!

The version we propose is widely addressed to all public categories: people with health, social integration problems, victims of various abuse forms ..., but also people who seem not to have any problems and who must be protected in various ways, for prevention. For this reason, the social pedagogy expert should be present not only in school institutions but also in health services, legal and police services, in visual or written mass media, in the local or central administration etc.

Although social pedagogy is still in a period in which it looks for its identity, in our opinion, in the last over 20 years, a state of emulation was created which positively influences the process of discovering the huge potential it may have to transform society and direct it to a better state of balance.

Social pedagogy tends to manifest as a critical pedagogy, in the meaning that Peter Mc Laren gave to the concept. That means it could aim to raise the consciousness of people and teach them to act, change and assume parts of responsibilities.

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