Student's Perceptions on the Personal Impact of a Social Education Degree Internship

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Abstract

The functional profile of the social educator is based on the development of theoretical, technical and personal/relational skills, which should guide training courses organization. Assuming the shortcomings of a merely theoretical approach, besides a consistent preparation in theoretical and essential technical contents for socio-educational intervention, practice in context should be favoured as an opportunity to develop professional skills, together with a critical reflection on the functional profile. This study emerges from the need to reflect and rethink the internship, as well as how the respective supervision is developed, of the degree in social education at the School of Education of the Polytechnic Institute of Viseu, and it is based on the students' perceptions about the impact of the internship on personal development. This is a qualitative and exploratory study, using the documentary analysis of 50 final internship reports. From the content analysis, four categories emerged referring to gains in terms of acquiring and managing knowledge, development of technical skills, personal and relational development and reinforcement of professional identity. The importance given to personal and relational development should be noted (41.4% of mentions) taking into account its relevance in constructing a professional identity. Findings on the technical skills and on the increase of profession knowledge, also by mobilising theoretical training, positively reinforce the internship model that is based on a proximity supervision approach and on a dialogical perspective of the professional learning.

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1. Introduction

In contemporary societies we have been witnessing the occurrence of social phenomena which it is urgent to address, especially in what concerns to isolation, displacing, diversity, and the fragility of

social and family relations (Gonçalves, 2006), as well as the rapid changes and loss of secure references (Ribeiro, 2013), becoming a breeding ground for growing tensions, marginalization and exclusion. So, there is a need to find differentiated answers in the field of education, particularly in socio-educational pedagogy and intervention. Thus, social education emerges from the confluence of several needs and opportunities: i) the aggravation of the phenomena of social exclusion; ii) its consideration by the political authorities; iii) an awareness on the shortcomings of the assistentialist attitude and traditional intervention; iv) and the development of research in the social and educational sciences (Carvalho & Baptista, 2004). It stands as an education that responds to a complex set of educational and social needs of individuals, through re-establishing and expanding educational opportunities in everyday life (Caride, 2005; Carvalho, 2008). Its knowledge matrix is social pedagogy which, in observance of the specificities of its subject matter, maintains the necessary openness to the problems and social realities of a globalized world that is constantly changing, demanding the permanent questioning of knowledge and socio-educational practice that needs to be redone in day-to-day life: in family life, in institutions, in the streets, in the community context, in the scientific and professional communities (Caride, 2005).

Compared to other European countries, the establishment of social education in Portugal has a relatively recent history (Baptista, 2013), with the culmination of the process of professional identity construction in the definition of a profile that includes activities of design, research, implementation, coordination, promotion, support, management and assessment of projects and programs supported by social networks and partnerships, and characterized by socio-educational and pedagogical practices developed in a social context (MSESS, 2015). Social educators assert themselves as agents and mediators in the monitoring of processes of socialization and integration of people and groups in order to enhance their personal, social and professional skills, with the purpose of promoting lifelong learning, minimising and solving problems.

This profile is necessarily based on skills development covering both theoretical knowledge, as well as intellectual, manual and social skills, attitudes and motivation. The International Association of Social Educators (AEIJI, 2006) systematises the professional competences of the social educator in two dimensions: i) fundamental competences, that support the basic processes of intervention, assessment and reflection, in different contexts, and ii) central competences, that provide methodological tools to develop socio-educational work, namely, relational and personal, social and communicative competences, organizational competences, system competences, learning and (self)development competences and competences generated by the professional practice.

Thus, the training process of the social educator must be organised around the development of "formal skills supported scientifically and technically…[and] informal skills of an eminently relational and affective nature" (Carvalho & Baptista, 2004, p. 86). Assuming that the theoretical approach per se does not seem to be sufficient to fully train these professionals (Molina & Carreira, 2011; Rosa, Navarro-Segura, & Lopez, 2014), besides a consistent preparation in some areas of educational sciences, the study of individual and collective behaviour, as well as general culture (Carvalho & Baptista, 2004), training institutions should emphasise practice in context as an opportunity to put their

professional skills into action, enhancing not only its development but also the reflection on their functional profile (Dominguez & Blanch, 2011).

It is therefore essential to mobilise a situational intelligence which we consider corresponding to the essence of the Bologna Declaration (1999), envisioning higher education as an organisation focused on learning (Gómez, 2008) valuing the logic of competences/skills development (Ureta, 2008).

For the dynamics of training, as suggested by Ribeiro (2013), it is important to ensure that the profession learning occurs in contexts of socio-educational praxis, valuing their critical and reflective dimension, which means that autonomy skills, in connection with the theoretical, observation and experimentation frameworks, should be favoured. This desideratum "requires supervision models, which escape the logic of knowledge applying (qualification logic), valuing a learning dialogical dimension (skills logic) and a permanent sense of resource mobilisation (knowledge, skills, attitudes or values) taking into account the demands of the contexts diversity (Ribeiro, 2013, p.829) and the incentive for self-training throughout life (Gómez, 2008). Indeed "social educators do not have solutions for the plurality of problems they encounter. Nevertheless, supported by a proper professional knowledge" (Baptista, 2000, p.1) they mediate support contributing to transform the target group's living conditions (Garavan, 2013) and also local and community development.

It is up to higher education, in a logic of valuing skills, accordingly to the professional profile, to prepare students for an active citizenship, to foster personal development, to promote and develop an advanced and extended knowledge (Calvo, 2014; Gómez, 2008; Zabalza, 2011). So, the School of Education of the Polytechnic Institute of Viseu, establishes an internship with a school year duration in the curriculum of its degree in social education. This work is based on the need to reflect and rethink that internship, as well as how its respective monitoring and supervision process is developed, based on the perceptions of the students on its impact on their personal development. Indeed, in the assessment processes on training practices, it is often valued the adjustment between the functional profile and the requirements of the profession. When we focus on the personal profile of the newly graduated, we tend to do this in a perspective of hetero-perception from the reference of the trainers and others responsible for training, at the expense of self-perception. This proposal seeks to give voice to the actors and future professionals.

2. Problem statement

In the context of the internship of the degree in social education at the School of Education of the Polytechnic Institute of Viseu (Portugal), within the course of implementing a socio-educational intervention project, interns are encouraged to permanently reflect on processes (through fortnightly reflections and reports and the preparation of a logbook), culminating in submitting a final internship report. Taking as a starting point the professional profile of the social educator, a critical reflection on the personal impact of the internship is required, in a perspective of improving the training process, as well as reflecting and enhancing the interns' personal and professional identity component. In this context, our aim is to understand their perceptions regarding the impact of the internship on a personal level, seeking to assess the dimensions involved in this process by examining the final internship reports.

3. Research questions

Given the problem statement the following question was formulated: what dimensions of personal development, related to the individual internship impact, arise from the analysis of the final internship reports?

4. Purpose of the study

Based on the content analysis of the final internship report, our aim is to assess the dimensions of personal impact through the student's narratives on this component of the internship. This will allow us to reflect and rethink the content and practices of the training process, especially in order to improve the internship supervision model.

5. Research methods

We conducted a qualitative research to achieve the purpose stated above for this exploratory study, in the academic year of 2015/2016, at the School of Education of the Polytechnic Institute of Viseu, with 50 final internship reports. These reports described intervention processes as well as the assessment and reflection on the practice developed in 55different contexts with diverse target groups, including people of several ages from the community in general, as well as specific vulnerable populations (note that the difference between the number of reports and the total number of contexts result from the fact that some reports cover more than one context). Internship contexts described in the reports involved mostly local municipalities (41.8%) and private social solidarity institutions (36.4%). Some schools (16.4%) and Ministry of Justice related entities (5.4%) were also student's internship contexts.

The subchapter on the reflection about the personal impact, included in these final internship reports, was submitted to content analysis developed with the NVivo software, version 11. Documental analysis procedure included three steps, as proposed by Nascimento e Menandro (2006): i) random selection of reports to draft a categorical system (in our study we selected three reports); ii) construction of categories table containing the general theme, as well as related words and phrases included in all reports; iii) clustering of elements (words or phrases) of the general category into subcategories. We coded only once for each subject in each report for the frequency counting process. Conditions pointed in literature (Bardin, 2015; Mayrind, 2014), as the comprehensiveness, objectivity and exclusivity, were fulfilled on the content analysis. Moreover, the fidelity between encoders was guaranteed (final result of agreement between encoders of 99%), involving three investigators in the discussions necessary before the final categorization and ensuring that the creation of the categories was performed independently by them, as suggested by the same authors.

6. Findings

From analyzing the students' perspectives about the personal impact of the internship from their final reports, four categories and their respective subcategories emerged. Table 1 presents examples of the content of each and Table 2 information on its distribution.

Table 1. Assessment of the Personal Impact of the Internship: Examples of the Recording Units (R=Report).

Categories	Subcategories	Recording unit
Knowledge acquisition and management	Informal expansion of knowledge	"the internship allows us to learn things that would not be possible to learn sitting in a classroom" (R11); "we learn with the people we deal with during our internship" (R37)
	Mobilising curricular learning	"I found myself compelled to take advantage of everything addressed in the theoretical part (...) to be able to deal with the real problems" (R14); "Everything that was learned (...) before the internship is quite lacking (...) and I think it only gets clear for us when we are interning (R49)
Development of technical skills	Technical skills in general	"it allowed me to get the technical perspective of the social educator, to look at a whole as being more than the sum of its parts" (R2); "All of this allowed me (...) to acquire technical skills that will help me as a future social educator" (R42)
	Teamwork skills	"I learned that any socio-educational intervention is valued and makes sense when developed in a network" (R1); "getting to know and deal with various professionals who have different working methods, which will be an asset for the future" (R3)
	Technical intervention adapted to populations and/or contexts	"I came into contact with different contexts (...) for this reason I developed a set of professional skills that will undoubtedly be an asset for the future" (R24); "The gratification felt by the possibility of such diverse activities (...) resulting in complementary learning of knowledge alluding to the specificity of actions" (R32)
Personal and relational development	Personal skills in general	"interning with these people, in addition to helping me to improve personal skills (...)" (R7); "I feel I was given the opportunity to grow as (...) a person" (R28)
	Improvement of personal characteristics	"in terms of my personality, it made me more uninhibited, I learned to relax more (...) but also to be a little less transparent and more serious" (R6); "I tend to be too much of a perfectionist but I learned to be happy with achieving small goals, step by step" (R9)
	Identity and socio-moral enrichment	"personally, I began to realize that everyone deserves a new opportunity (...) they often only need someone to make them go in a new direction" (R34); "it was important to get to know myself when it was time to play the role of social educator with students" (R45)
	Resilience of the intern	"I now understand that resilience is a characteristic (...) to take into account (...) a specialist must know how to overcome and face adversity, unforeseen events and constraints" (R1); "I learned to find solutions to problems that may arise" (R46)
Strengthening professional identity	Reinforcement of bond to profession	"it helped me to be even more certain that it is this [target group] I want to work with during my professional life" (R7); "direct contact with reality made me realize that it's really what I want to do for the rest of my life" (R11)
	Importance of experiences provided	"with this internship (...) I witnessed large and valuable moments that will leave marks" (R1); "With the internship (...) I will take one of the best experiences of my academic career with me for life" (R33)

The first category, which we call "knowledge acquisition and management," was encoded in 19.2% of total entries and aggregates two subcategories that refer to it: the first and most representative (66.7% of category entries) is informal expansion of knowledge provided by the practice in context and the second is the need to mobilize curricular learning (33.3%). The interns demonstrated the ability not only to resort to learning already acquired, but also to recognize its indispensability. Similarly, they were shown to be capable of continuing to learn in contexts with people, which is expressed in statements such as "I can say that I have received as much as I have given" (R24) or "it was a constant learning and growing a little more every day" (R49).

The second category, "development of technical skills," it is divided into three sub-categories and represents 22.9% of mentions. Among these subcategories, technical skills in general that the social educator should develop was shown to be the most representative (49.1%). The reference to developing teamwork/networking skills (19.3%) and intervention adapted to situations (31.6%) enhanced by the possibility, for example, of coming into contact with different contexts, were also found.

Table 2. Assessment of the Personal Impact of the Internship: absolute and relative frequencies

Categories	Subcategories	Freq.	% of the subcategories	% of the categories
Knowledge acquisition and management	Informal expansion of knowledge	32	66.7	
	Mobilising curricular learning	16	33.3	19.2
	Total for the category	48	100	
Development of technical skills	Technical skills in general	28	49.1	
	Teamwork skills	11	19.3	
	Technical intervention adapted to populations and/or contexts	18	31.6	
	Total for the category	57	100	22.9
Personal and relational development	Personal skills in general	29	28.2	
	Improvement of personal characteristics	16	15.5	
	Identity and socio-moral enrichment	30	29.1	
	Resilience of the intern	28	27.2	
	Total for the category	103	100	41.4
Strengthening professional identity	Reinforcement of bond to profession	21	51.2	
	Importance of experiences provided	20	48.8	
	Total for the category	41	100	16.5
	Total	249		100

The impact on "personal and relational development" was the category that was most evident, with 41.4% of the total entries. The variety and magnitude of the gains perceived by the students are distributed in personal skills in general (28.2%), improvement of personal characteristics (15.5%), identity and socio-moral enrichment (29.1%) and resilience of the intern (27.2%). The developmental changes are mirrored in multiple apprehended discourses: "the students and elderly clients helped me overcome situations [of dismay] because in being with them I discovered a strength I did not know I had (...) I found facets in myself that I did not know" (R20) [identity and socio-moral enrichment]; "the fact of dealing with a variety of egos, with natures that are constantly putting people to the test (...) stretched my explosive impulses and my patience" (R10), "the internship...helped me to strengthen, to gain more autonomy and secureness in my attitudes" (R20), "in the course of the internship I noticed a great desire to surpass myself day after day" (R46) [improvement of personal characteristics]; "we learned to smile even in great difficulties just as they [the prisoners] do" (R34), "we think we are prepared to deal with certain situations and when we are facing the reality we find out that it is not quite so. The internship is very important to create certain defence mechanisms to manage to deal with certain emotions" (R37) [resilience].

Finally, there is the category "strengthening professional identity," with 16.5% of the entries comprising aspects on strengthening the bond to the profession (51.2%), as well as the repository of experiences (48.8%) regarded as gains from their academic path and to the professional future, which reflect the contribution of practices in strengthening and motivating students for the future exercise of the profession. This is also expressed in the following statement "it is difficult to transcribe onto the report the affectionate way the children and elderly people treated us (...) and that motivated me to do more and better" (R29).

7. Conclusions

Assessing the personal impact of the internship from the students' reports brings us to the purpose of the study, stressing as analysis guidance, the most relevant impact dimensions as well as the

reflection of the results according to what is expected in higher education, in agreement with Bologna Declaration (García-Jiménez & Guzman-Simon, 2016) and the supervision model applied in the internship of the institution concerned. Thus, the emerging dimensions of impact show us a clear preponderance of the category "personal and relational development" (especially for identity and socio-moral enrichment and personal skills in general), followed by the development of technical skills (technical skills in general and specific intervention). These data are consistent with the literature that emphasizes personal and relational competences/skills and formal technical skills (AEIJI, 2006; Carvalho & Baptista, 2004; Gómez, 2008). Recognition of relationship and communication skills is consensual as central and structural features of the professional action of the educator (Rosa et al., 2014).

Given that the interpersonal process is the main tool of the educator, the results are auspicious if we take into account that they are professionals of human relationships. In fact, the social educator, as actor and social mediator, should be able to establish relationships with individuals and groups, in order to optimize and support the construction of their support networks (primary, secondary and tertiary), thereby promoting spaces of socio-affective reference and belonging (Carvalho & Baptista, 2004). This desideratum is especially significant in working with people who are more fragile and who have social difficulties, so the social educator should be able to promote participation and progressive emancipation of individuals and groups (ASEDES, 2007) inducing personal (re)construction (Carvalho, 2008) within the framework of social inclusion.

The results also lead us to reflect on the supervision model of the internship in the social education degree at School of Education of the Polytechnic Institute of Viseu (Portugal). First, it is important to ensure that the profession learning occurs in the context of socio-educational practice (Dominguez & Blanch, 2011), using a proximity supervision, which actually happens in this training model and seems to be reflected by the results. The supervision model we advocate, anchored in a dialogic framework and open to permanent (re)construction (Garavan, 2013) conceives the internship as a space for reflection, in a process of close proximity to supervisor-tutors, which encourages the personal and professional development of the interns. This design is consistent with the literature (Calvo, 2014; Garavan, 2013; Zabalza, 2011), embodying the interactions held between supervisors, co-operators at internship contexts and interns, in order to promote the human and relational dimension of social education (Ribeiro, 2013). The supervision is understood as a space for teaching and learning, which is embodied in the support and guidance provided by the supervisor within the socio-employment placement of the intern. Thus, the model is based on a system of supervision/mentoring, in which the actin of the proximity supervisor plays a central role in the training process, reflected in the dynamics of supervision which include in particular, supervisors going directly to the context, fortnightly meetings with interns (reflection on supervision), fortnightly meetings of the monitoring team of supervisors, valuing the learning by competencies component, in accordance with the Bologna Declaration recommendations (Gómez, 2008; Ureta, 2008). Given the results, we may conclude on the recognition, by the internees, of the importance of the supervision model implemented, in order to foster the construction and development of essential skills to the exercise of the profession. Among these skills, as we have seen, those relating to their own development stand out. Therefore, it is

incumbent upon us to continue assessing and studying the supervision model implemented using other actors involved in the process.

Acknowledgements

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