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Miguel Anxo Santos Rego
Alexandre Sotelino Losada
Mar Lorenzo Moledo

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Promoting students competence through counseling by a practicum-tutor

Moch, Matthias

Aparicio, Pablo

*Duale Hochschule Baden-Württemberg Stuttgart
Faculty of Social Work*

matthias.moch@dhw-stuttgart.de

pabloaparicio@usal.es

ABSTRACT

The dual study program of social work includes a continuous interchange between theory and practice in the course of three years of study. In the phases of the practicum the students are assisted by professional social workers as tutors. The study investigates the different aspects of tutoring as well as the students estimates on this. Results show that the frequency of tutoring and the theory-orientation of the tutor's advice have influence on the social and actional competences. Professional knowledge arise from the theoretical orientation of the tutor. Personal skills depend on the tutor's appreciation of students work.

Keywords: practicum; tutoring; social work; study program.

Potenciando las competencias de los estudiantes a través de la consultoría en la relación práctica-tutoría

RESUMEN

El programa de estudio dual correspondiente a la carrera de Trabajo Social incluye un proceso de formación de 3 años de duración que articula permanentemente la teoría y la práctica. El presente estudio indaga sobre los diferentes aspectos implicados en la tutoría, así como también analiza la evaluación que realizan los estudiantes sobre la misma. Los resultados de nuestra investigación demuestran que la frecuencia de la tutoría y la teoría que orienta el desempeño del tutor impactan significativamente en las competencias sociales y emocionales de los estudiantes. En este escenario, el conocimiento profesional surge de la orientación teórica del tutor. Y del mismo modo, las habilidades personales tiene una fuerte correlación con la valoración que haga tenga el tutor acerca del trabajo de los estudiantes.

Palabras clave: práctica; tutoría; Trabajo Social; programa de estudio.

Introduction: The dual study concept of Social Work

The dual study concept or cooperative higher education combines academic learning with workplace training. The study program of the Baden-Wuerttemberg Cooperative State University (DHBW, 2015) offers alternating theoretical phases at the university and practical phases at a specific training partner. Students are not only taught theoretical knowledge, but also learn to apply this knowledge in practice.

The core principle of the dual study concept at DHBW is the combination between gaining theoretical knowledge and applying this knowledge in practice. Academic theory and workplace training are closely coordinated and incorporate current developments. The close cooperation between the university and selected social institutions as corporate partners is one of the central features of the dual study concept at DHBW. Theoretical content and practical working experience are closely coordinated. Current developments in science and society are incorporated in the curricula. The work performed during the practical phases represents an integral part of the programs (Moch, 2016). The Bachelor programs of our school of Social Work leads to the degrees "Bachelor of Arts in Social Work". The six-semester Bachelor courses are accredited with a student work load of 210 ECTS points and rated as intensive programs.

The university is not just a place of study. Here also new concepts can be developed, how necessary skills can be taught and acquired. The innovative study concept of the cooperative model includes alternating theoretical phases at the university and practical phases at a specific training partner. Students are not only taught theoretical knowledge, but also learn to apply this knowledge in practice. So the cooperative degree program is designed according to the real requirements in social institutions, and guarantees a unique combination of theory and practical work. It is undisputed that the acquisition of skills not only can be made inside the lecture hall. Certainly, the student first needs concepts and theories, so he can think about that. But immediately for him or her the question arises, whether a theoretical insight can be successfully implemented in practice. The students in the dual curriculum are given the option to change the place of learning every three months. For three months they attend the College, for the next three months they learn at work in practice.

1. Theoretical framework: Acquiring competencies

The determination and the definition of competences play a major role since the reform of Bologna in studying social work. The teaching at universities is based less on specific subjects and content but rather on the skills that students should achieve at the end of their studies. Therefore curricula must be designed to support in a comprehensible manner these goals. A major reason for this view is that the basic studies shall lead to the employability of the students first and foremost (Moch, Meyer, & Bense, 2013). With the emphasis on employability but also the risk is connected to lose a critical distance from the professional field.

As general guidelines for the description of study programs in the context of the Bologna-reform serve the so-called "Dublin descriptors". This guideline defines the aspired competencies of an academic bachelor study program as follows (Joint Quality Initiative, 2004, pp. 2-3):

Qualifications that signify completion of the higher education short cycle (within the first cycle) are awarded to students who:

- Have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon general secondary education and is typically at a level supported by advanced textbooks; such knowledge provides an underpinning for a field of work or vocation, personal development, and further studies to complete the first cycle;
- Can apply their knowledge and understanding in occupational contexts;
- Have the ability to identify and use data to formulate responses to well-defined concrete and abstract problems;
- Can communicate about their understanding, skills and activities, with peers, supervisors and clients;
- Have the learning skills to undertake further studies with some autonomy (...).

In this characterization of the aims of a bachelor program the term “competence” is defined in an extensive sense “in regard to the graduation of skills or knowledge”. This means that in the course of the study program a gradually buildup of competencies takes place.

This aspect of *actional skills* which are gradually developed –in contrast to a distinction between given or not given– takes a large space in the academic discussion. There are four points of view to consider:

(1) It is more and more appreciated that competent acting has to be understood in the sense as a basic and successive acquirement of skills in the life course. Respectively the skills of effective acting are not first acquired in the academic study. In fact, the study is built on skills which are just acquired long time before. To such preparation we can call “readiness to act” (Moch, 2009).

(2) In regard to Social Work, the competence concept cannot be limited on academic skills. Rather it includes competences of the conduct of everyday life in complex modern societies (Erpenbeck, 2014). The competence of a professional in Social Work to act effectively is the outcome of an interchange between academic based theory and the challenges in practice. But many of these challenges cannot be objects of scientific considerations. In this sense everyday-life competences are a key-concept in the discussion about the way how Social Work can be professional.

(3) Social action depends not only on the skills of an individual social worker. Rather it always means the cooperation with a client. In this interplay one can see the mutuality of skills which are given and skills which have to be developed. The basis, therefore, is at first the mutual understanding of a social problem as such (Treptow, 2011).

(4) Finally the competence concept includes not only the handling of given tasks. The special feature of problem solving in Social Work lies in the imponderability of upcoming difficulties and requirements. In this way, the competence of a social worker has to be demonstrated in coping with uncertain and difficult situations which require innovative ways of problem solving. Actional competence has to be a form of “critical practice” (Moch, 2013) in situations in which former attempts had failed.

The faculties of Social Work in the German universities are discussing a common list of qualifications as guidelines of the study program of Social Work. Because of the fact that it is very difficult to evaluate competences in the course of a study program this guidelines are limited to a general framework which can include different single skills. This "Quality Framework of the study of social work" (Bartosch, Maile, & Speth, 2008) defines seven different areas:

- Knowledge and understanding.
- Description, analysis and judgment.
- Planning and conceptioning.
- Investigation and research.
- Implementation, organisation and evaluation.
- Professional and general skills.
- Personality and attitude.

In this way, the framework covers a broad field of skills which have to be acquired in the course of the study program. But also it arises the question whether it contains all the requirements which are needed for a successful examination in the sense of employability. Because in the above mentioned "Dublin descriptors", in the European norm of key competencies (OECD, 2005; Rynchen & Salganik, 2003) as well as in the general "German Quality Frame" (AK DQR, 2011) the claim of employability (in the sense of acting effectively in real workplace-situations) plays an important role. But in the "Quality Framework of the study of social work" we find only very abstract phrases as "implementation" and "general skills".

Out of this reason we developed a concept in which we have the following four areas of skills:

Social competences as for example: empathy, self-reflection, giving and receiving feedback, ability to communicate in teams, dealing with closeness and distance, define and enforce limits, building up relationships.

Personal competences as for example: reliability, flexibility, ability to work under pressure, self-management, engagement, responsibility, self-assurance, self-confidence.

Professional knowledge and application as for example: theoretical knowledge and its application, knowledge about the clients/the organization/the legislation, professional role, taking part in conferences, conception work, construct plans of individual help.

Actional competence as for example: coping with every-day-problems, interacting and counseling with clients, activities with clients, autonomy at the workplace, practical projects (DHBW, 2015).

1.1. Tutor counseling as an integrated part of the practicum

At the beginning of this paper the character of a dual study program was described as a continuous changeover between theory and practice. One of the core concepts of the practicum phases is the role of the practicum tutor. Every student works in close contact to a

professional social worker who has to supervise his work. From him or her the student receives projects and assignments according to their growing abilities. The practicum tutor is responsible for the development of their skills.

To fulfill this role we give the practicum tutor explicit advises how to accomplish his or her tasks. There are different ways to do this: through conversations with and monitoring the student, to give feedback, to explicate professional knowledge, to give him or her specific tasks and so on. The main role of the practicum tutor is to facilitate the skills of the student in the course of every-day practical work. Therefore, he or she must communicate directly with the student but also must to work out his or her autonomy. The practicum tutor has to encourage the student to undertake new tasks and explain theoretical backgrounds.

In our research project we wanted to find out, how this process of tutor counseling is going on. Because –as you can expect– in the very different institutions we find a great variance of ways, how the tutor accompanies the student. So we were interested to find out which are important aspects in this core element of the practicum.

Our specific research-questions were: 1. Which aspects of tutor counseling do determine the subjective judgment of the perceived benefit? 2. Does the competence-development of the students depend on the frequency of tutor-counseling during the practicum phase? 3. What does the theory-orientation of the tutor`s instruction contribute to the competence-development of the students? 4. Does the appreciation of students work affect the development of competences?

2. Method

The data were gathered from written questionnaires which contained over all twenty questions concerning the ultimate practicum phase. In the years 2009–2013 students of all semesters answered the questions in the first session at the university after each practicum phase. The questions obtained different aspects of the practicum so as over-all-satisfaction with the practicum and with the tutor, agreement of learning outcomes, gathered skills, theory-practice-transfer, conditions and frequency of communication with the tutor, further goals, suggestions to improve the practicum etc.

There were two items in the questionnaire which are in the focus of this paper: (1) “How do you estimate your subjective benefit of tutor counseling during the ultimate practicum phase?” and (2) “What competences did you acquire or extend during the ultimate practicum phase?” The answers to the first question were quantified in a 4-point scale. In regard to the second question, the students could answer in free words (there were no categories given). These verbal answers were coded into 20 categories in regard to the four main competencies mentioned before. There was a maximum of three coded items in one questionnaire.

The data were analyzed through statistical procedures by SPSS (regression-analysis, ANOVA and t-test) using the general estimated benefit of tutor-counseling and the number of items regarding different forms of gathered competences as dependent variables and tutor-relevant aspects as independent variables. These aspects were: 1. How frequently did the consultations with the tutor take place during the practicum (= frequency of tutor-counseling)?

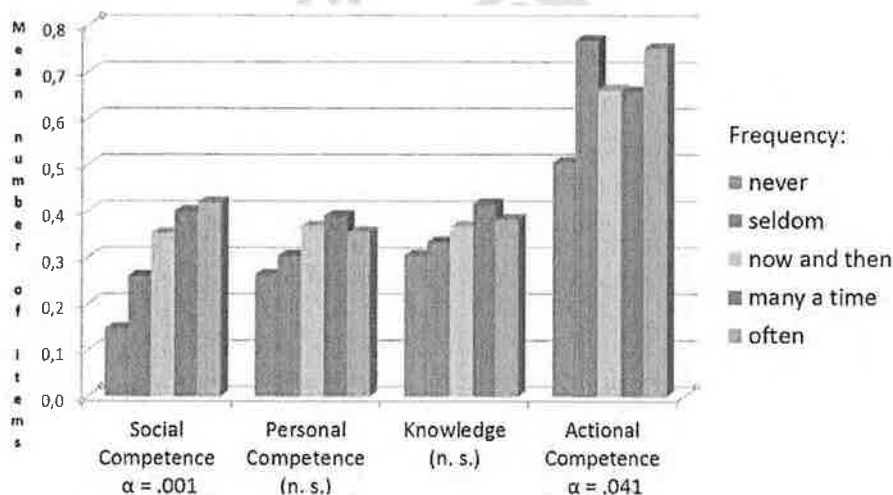
2. Up to which extent did the tutor refer to theory-aspects of the study-program (= theory-orientation of the tutor-counseling)? and 3. Up to which amount was your practical work appreciated (= appreciation)?

3. Results

The results show at first very clear that the subjective benefit of tutor counseling is highly influenced by all the three tutor-variables as frequency, theory-orientation and appreciation (regression-analysis: $\beta = .327$; $\alpha < .000$; $\alpha = .216$; $\alpha < .000$; $\beta = .203$; $\alpha < .000$ respectively).

The further analysis of these three independent variables show clear effects on the development of different competences: as shown in figure 1 the frequency of counseling is effective in regard to social and actional competences (ANOVA: $F = 4,6$, $df = 4$, $\alpha = .001$; $F = 2,5$, $df = 4$, $\alpha = .041$ respectively). There are no significant effects on personal and knowledge-related competencies.

FIGURE 1. Competence-development by frequency of tutor-counseling (N=847)

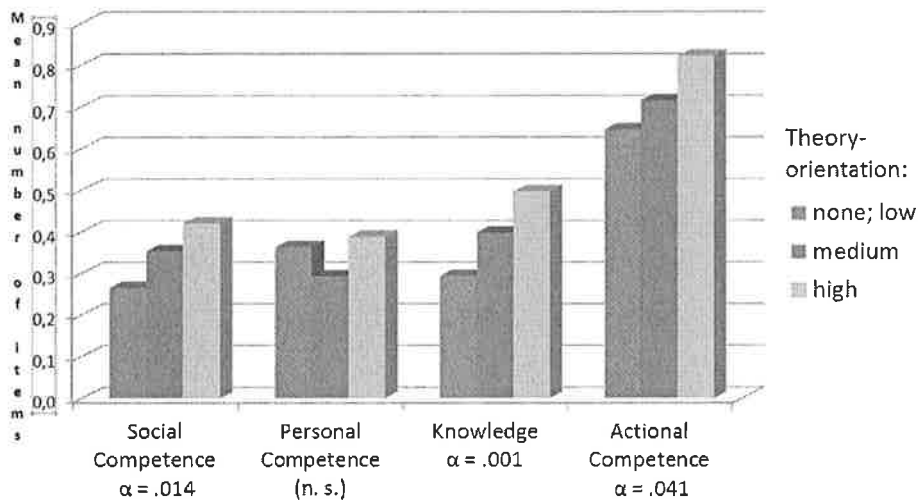


Source: Own Elaboration.

In regard to the requirement of a professional guided practicum the students should estimate the extent, to which the tutor regards to theoretical aspects of the study program (s. figure 2).

In accordance to our expectation there is a clear influence of this aspect on the knowledge acquired during the practicum ($F = 7,2$; $df = 2$; $\alpha = .001$). But also the social and the actional competences are affected by the theoretical orientation of tutor-counseling ($F = 4,3$, $df = 2$, $\alpha = .014$; $F = 3,2$; $df = 2$; $\alpha = .041$ respectively). The personal competences are not affected by theory-orientation.

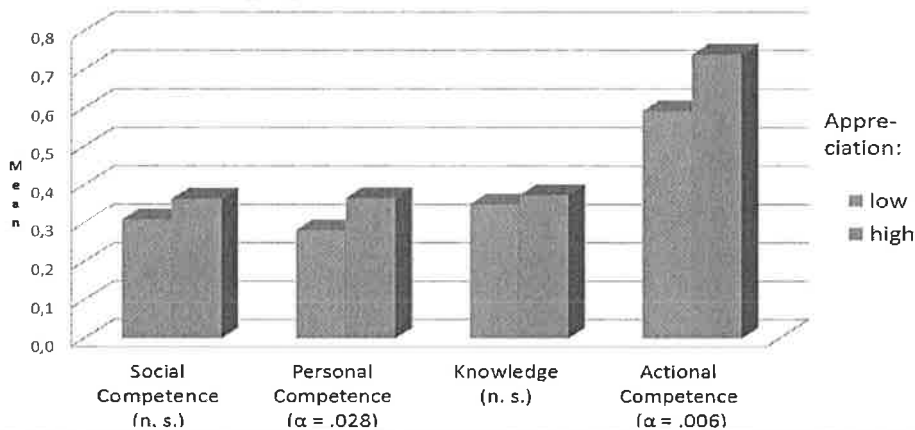
FIGURE 2. Competence-development by theory-orientation in tutor-counseling (N=883)



Source: Own Elaboration.

Furthermore, we had the expectation, that the appreciation of the students work would be important in regard to the acquirement of competences. And here (s. figure 3) we can see the first influence on personal competences ($T = -2,2; \alpha = .028$). Competences like: flexibility, self-management, ability to work under pressure, self-confidence are influenced by the recognition and appreciation of students work in the institution. There is also a significant effect on actional competences ($T = -2,8; \alpha = .006$).

FIGURE 3. Competence-development by appreciation of students work (N=943)



Source: Own Elaboration.

4. Discussion

Our main question was: how does the personal counseling of a practicum-tutor affect the acquisition of student's competences in the practicum phases of an academic study program of Social Work? We found clear evidences on the effect of different aspects of tutor- counseling. Frequency and theory-orientation are of high importance for the acquisition of social and actional skills. The tutor encourages the student to interact with the clients and gives specific advices in regard of activities and possibilities of communication. Theoretical aspects might inform the students to find appropriate forms of interventions in specific cases. Especially the theory-orientation equips the student with knowledge about the behavioral background of clients who need specific forms of help, about the legal rules of the care system or about the administrative structure of the institution.

How the data show it seems not to be easy to promote personal skills. Neither the frequency nor the theoretical orientation of tutoring might affect competences of self-management, personal responsibility and self-confidence. To promote these skills the tutor has to pay particular attention to the student's activities and appreciate his/her (small or big) contributions to the every-day problem-solving in the institution.

When we think about the propositions of effective tutoring in the curriculum-integrated practicum, we can not only refer on the tutor's knowledge or on the time he or she spends in conversation with the student. It seems to be necessary, that he/she is able to combine several skills of tutoring including the ability to recognize the relationship between the actual tasks which have to be done and the skills of the student to cope with them.

But a critical view on this analysis shows as well, that there might be no clear discrimination between independent and dependent variables. For example, the appreciation of student's work depends itself on the student's competences and social skills might be a prerequisite of the frequency of communication. So we have to think about a more complex interrelationship between the circumstances and conditions of tutoring in this context.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to substantiate competences as objectives of tutoring. Its results reinforce the requirement that seems to be worthy to investigate in professional tutor-counseling in respect of time, transmission of professional knowledge, personal instruction and individual approval. The aim of the academic study program is not only knowledge and analysis of existing problems but also to understand and to act effectively and adequate in interactions with clients and colleagues. Students should have the opportunity to train their skills continuously and under professional supervision. Therefore the university has to cooperate with competent practice institutions and their professional staff to promote the skills of nascent social workers.

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