

Prepared enough to practise? Evaluating a study programme in social work

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Abstract

- *Summary:* Following the so-called Bologna reform in Luxembourg, 70 supervisors assessed the knowledge and skills of employees having qualified with a Bachelor's degree under the recently introduced curriculum in social work and pedagogy. The supervisors were solicited as part of quality assurance regarding the study programme and their assessments were gathered by means of a questionnaire. The University of Luxembourg funded the study.
- *Findings:* The newly qualified practitioners were evaluated as adequately trained, while the need was highlighted for a better understanding of the process through which beginner practitioners are socialised into the profession. The results furthermore suggest that practice proficiency extensively draws on generic skills of particular relevance to the social professions.
- *Applications:* The findings prompt a more specific focus on generic skills and their role in developing proficiency during practice placements as well as during the first year of employment. Overall, the study serves as one example of how to evaluate the readiness to practise of newly qualified practitioners in the social professions. The output of such skills assessments could inform on any need for curriculum revision at a local level. With a cross-national and comparative approach, evaluations of this kind could potentially guide any adaptations needed in response to the increasing internationalisation of social problems.

Keywords

Social work, competence, evaluation, fitness to practise, quantitative research, social work education, social work skills

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Evaluating the effectiveness of social work education has recently been the focus of considerable attention (e.g., Grady, 2010; Longhofer & Floersch, 2012; Sullivan, Antle, Barbee, & Egbert, 2009; Wilson & Kelly, 2010), and this coincides with the call throughout Europe for some strategy of continuous quality assurance of higher education in general (Rauhvargers, 2010). Naturally, the basic aim of any effort towards quality assurance should be to obtain input on how to improve the preparation of social work students. These students represent a group of future professionals who are expected to make the transition into the work environment with enough proficiency to care for service users with complex needs. Thus, evaluations of the extent to which beginner practitioners meet the qualifying standards, or simply evaluations of their readiness to practise, should be useful. The outcomes of such evaluations could serve a vital purpose at both local and global levels. Educators could use evaluations to determine a possible need for curriculum revision, while cross-national and comparative efforts in social work practice could use evaluations for adaptations that will probably be required owing to the increasing internationalisation of social problems (cf. Dominelli, 2010; Lyons, 2006; Trygged, 2010).

Nonetheless, the literature review reveals that few attempts have been made to evaluate the knowledge and skills of newly qualified practitioners in the domain of social work (Bates et al., 2010; Bogo et al., 2012; Gambrill, 2011; Orme et al., 2009; Pithouse & Scourfield, 2002). The present study makes a contribution towards such an effort by assessing practitioners who have qualified under a new system in Luxembourg that adheres to the so-called Bologna reform, which made imperative the overhaul of social work curricula on the European continent.

The purpose of the Bologna reform was to promote the recognition of professional qualifications across borders of the member states of the European Union, the ultimate aim being to facilitate labour mobility. The reform thus set in motion a series of measures to establish uniform credit and recognition systems (Birtwistle, 2009). As a result, many programmes underwent major reorganisation to align their curricula with the Bologna system, which is based on a three-year Bachelor's degree followed by a two-year Master's degree. For example, in Austria, Germany and the Netherlands, a three-year Bachelor's programme replaced the former three-and-a-half or four-year programmes in social work at the college, polytechnic, or university level of applied science (for a comprehensive overview, see Matthies, 2011).

In Luxembourg, by contrast, the Bologna reform brought about a completely new system for preparing practitioners in social work as well as in the field of social pedagogy. Social work has a longer tradition in the country, due partly to the reliance on resources in neighbouring countries, while social pedagogues were being trained domestically. The introduction of a Bachelor's programme basically replaced two former and rather different traditions of social welfare work. This was achieved by bringing the two professions of social pedagogy and social work together, and to a shared venue of training and education (see Haas, Gaitsch,

Limbach-Reich, & Peters, 2009). The resultant situation naturally prompted an evaluation of how well the students who qualified under the new system lived up to the expectations of the social services sector.

Before presenting the study in greater detail, we will briefly review the development leading up to the launching of the Bachelor's programme. The review will explain how the change was significant for Luxembourg, in addition to how the new study programme was envisaged to cater to both the sector of social work and that of social pedagogy.

The context of the study

The social work profession in Luxembourg dates back to 1935, when a law was passed that enabled citizens to apply for a licence as a social welfare worker. This certification was issued by the board of directors presiding over national health and welfare to successful candidates who had completed studies in social welfare and passed a final examination before the board. At that time, no such study programme was offered domestically. The majority of candidates in pursuit of this career therefore went to the neighbouring country of Belgium to earn the degree of *Assistant d'Hygiène Social*.¹

The conditions for certification as a social worker in Luxembourg were slightly changed in 1967 with an amendment stipulating that, in addition to three years of studies in social work, one additional year of training was required. All applicants with a social work degree and at least one prior practice placement in Luxembourg were granted permission by the Ministry of Education to complete the extra year. In addition to attending a course in Luxembourgish social legislation, which was administrated by the Ministry, applicants were expected to find, on their own initiative, a supervisor who was willing to take them on for a full-time traineeship of at least 1500 hours and for which there was no remuneration. After passing written and practical examinations, the right was granted by the Ministry of Health to assume the professional title of *Assistant Social (AS)*. The work performed by the AS largely involved helping children, adolescents, and families at risk, as well as dealing with issues related to migration, homelessness, drug dependency, domestic violence, and delinquency.

With the introduction of the *Bachelor en Sciences Sociales et Educatives (BSSE)* degree, the Ministry did not change what was required during the extra year. In fact, the requirement of the extra year for an AS licence was abolished in 2012, on the grounds that the University of Luxembourg was now the more pertinent institute to administer such additional training, preferably by launching a Master's programme.

In contrast, the profession of social pedagogue was introduced with the decision taken in 1973 to open schools for disabled children. A two-year training programme to become a *Moniteur*, later styled as *Educateur*, was established. This programme was continually being adapted to meet ever-increasing demands to prepare social pedagogues for work in other areas not necessarily related to

disability, such as day-care centres, various support services to adolescents, and intervention in matters of foster care. In response to such needs, the training was replaced in 1990 by a three-year programme, which was firmly rooted in the traditions of social pedagogy and social welfare work and which led to the degree of *Educateur Gradué* (EG). The curriculum kept evolving to include the teaching of skills and knowledge to enable work with adolescents and the elderly in addition to work in hospitals and prisons.

This development eventually meant that social workers and social pedagogues came to be interchangeable, in that they worked with the same categories of service users, much like the current situation in social work in Germany, where it is generally acknowledged that the two traditions have merged (Hämäläinen, 2003). Although casework traditionally characterised the professional role of the AS, and group-work that of the EG, it was implicitly understood that both professions fundamentally drew on the methods of social work. Therefore, in retrospect, it would already have seemed appropriate at that time to offer a programme integrating the two professions. The ultimate impetus was the founding of the first and only university in Luxembourg in 2003. The curriculum for vocational training in social pedagogy was integrated into the syllabus of the university. It was more precisely integrated as part of the three-year programme, which consisted of a newly created social work curriculum, leading to the degree of BSSE. The first class of students was enrolled in 2005 and graduated with this degree in 2008.

Whereas all applicants with an upper secondary school degree were admitted to the former EG training, enrolment in the BSSE programme is based upon a combination of indicators. These indicators consist of the marks obtained in specific subjects during the final year of upper secondary school, the level of language skills,² and the degree of personal maturity and interest in the social professions, as assessed through an interview with the teaching staff. Applicants generally express their desire to help those affected by social inequalities and/or dysfunctional life circumstances. By way of comparison, EG applicants were mainly motivated by the prospect of working with children and adolescents in educational settings.

The current curriculum

The current curriculum embraces coherent theories that underlie practice and are drawn from the social, pedagogical and behavioural sciences. It covers material aimed at imparting (a) an understanding of human growth and development over the lifespan, mental health, disability, and special needs, as well as knowledge of the code of ethics, and (b) skills in case management, group-work, inter-disciplinary cooperation, reflective practice, self-management, and administrative knowhow. In order to qualify as a BSSE, students must pass oral and written examinations on this material throughout the programme, satisfactorily complete two separate practice placements, and receive a pass mark on their undergraduate thesis. On the whole, the programme synthesises academic training with the development of personal and practical skills for work with persons of all ages, regardless of whether

they are in need of a social welfare intervention. In short, the BSSE programme aims to prepare future practitioners who can combine the skills of a social worker with those of a social pedagogue and vice versa.

The study and research questions

In view of the major reorganisation that has taken place in training and education, it was deemed crucial to investigate how practitioners holding a BSSE degree were being received by the social services sector. Our approach was to ask supervisors working in this sector to make assessments based on their perception of the knowledge and skills of these practitioners.

Supervisors were asked to assess the overall competency of the newly qualified practitioners, although we were aware of the controversy surrounding the notion of 'competence'. The competence-based approach has been criticised for fragmenting the complex skills base of social work into many separate abilities (Froggett & Sapey, 1997; Lymbery, Charles, Christopherson, & Eadie, 2000), the risk being that one may neglect the intricacy of professional practice as such. Social workers are constantly challenged by situations in which they have to rely on the ability to solve problems while dealing with complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty (Lymbery, 2003). The argument has similarly been put forth that the skills fragmentation inherent in the competence-based models runs counter to the notion of anti-oppressive practice, the prerequisite of which is engagement with the whole person (Dominelli, 1996). Nonetheless, research on skills development seems to be viably rooted in the concept of 'competence', such as in studies on collaborative competence (Sims, 2011) and cultural competence (Harrison & Turner, 2011).

More importantly, however, the literature reveals that the social work community has perceived the need for a comprehensive description of the skills necessary for professional practice. There are, in fact, a handful of published studies aimed at providing inventories of such skills (Dalton & Wright, 1999; Engelberg & Limbach-Reich, 2010; Forte & Matthews, 1994; Mayrhofer & Raab-Steiner, 2007; Miller & Koerin, 1998). Interestingly, these studies show striking similarities in what recruiters and practitioners reported: the importance of communication skills, adaptability, openness, inter-personal effectiveness, and capacity for teamwork, in addition to creativity, analytical thinking, and an understanding of ethics and multiculturalism. This input reflects nothing less than the generalist character of social work practice. The practitioner must routinely solve problems related to complex situations, and yet effective intervention usually depends on his/her ability to build rapport with service users, to negotiate with and motivate different support systems, and to network and cooperate with the relevant experts and public authorities.

The above-mentioned studies further highlight the value attributed by respondents to personal qualities that are amenable to engaging both the heart and mind in social work practice: qualities such as warmth and empathy, the ability to involve service users in problem-solving, and a willingness to examine personal

values, beliefs, and biases, as well as a commitment to personal growth and life-long learning. It is worth noting that, in the study by Mayrhofer and Raab-Steiner (2007), practitioners often discussed such qualities as being crucial components of how one interacts and goes about interventions with service users, and this is in some respects consistent with the recent emergence of a reflective practice paradigm in social work (e.g., Marthinsen, 2004; Ruch, 2005; Skilton, 2011). This term refers to a self-regulated process through which the practitioner continuously engages in reflection on situations encountered during the course of practice in order to learn and improve as a professional.

These previous studies strongly suggest that skills of a more generic kind are key to proficiency in the practice of social work and, therefore, question the extent to which practice proficiency actually hinges on such generic skills. Consequently, one additional aim of the present study was formulated to examine the relationship between so-called generic skills and the methods used in the social professions. For the sake of clarity, the term 'generic skills' basically refers to the abilities discussed above. In short, they are skills that people possess in addition to their academic qualifications and that can be used across a number of different occupations. The literature on generic skills reveals a consensus on their importance, although there is no theoretical basis underlying the choice and definition of the skills themselves (e.g., Barrie, 2006; Bridgstock, 2009). By 'methods', we are referring to proficiency in implementing the methods that the BSSE programme has been designed to impart to its students and that are skills underlying case management and group-work, along with the methods used in social pedagogy (see Maus, Nodes, & Röh, 2008).

In summary, the present study investigated two key issues. One issue concerned quality assurance with regard to the BSSE programme and, therefore, entailed an evaluation of the proficiency of practitioners who had recently graduated with a BSSE degree. The present study could in this capacity serve as one example of how to evaluate the readiness to practise of newly qualified practitioners. The second issue concerned the role of generic skills in the practice of the social professions. In this regard, the outcome of the evaluation could potentially advance the current learning of skills and ultimately provide guidance on possible improvements to the curriculum.

Procedure

The data were collected by means of a questionnaire. A quantitative method was deemed most appropriate given our goal of collecting data over the course of three consecutive years. It was therefore important to apply identical data collection methods throughout the period, which is possible when using a questionnaire with the same content on each occasion.

Respondents

The respondents were supervisors in the social services sector where the newly qualified practitioners had gained employment. The supervisors were identified

through information provided by these practitioners, whom we had previously approached as part of a follow-up on their career trajectory. There were 29 students in the first class to graduate with a BSSE degree in 2008, another 29 in 2009, and 30 in 2010, resulting in a total of 88 graduates.

All of the 88 Bachelors provided information about their whereabouts upon graduation: 74 had entered the social services sector, while the remaining 14 graduates reported being in the process of either pursuing a Master's degree abroad or completing the extra year towards AS certification.

Between eight and 10 months after the newly qualified practitioners were employed, their respective supervisors were contacted by post. Each supervisor received a questionnaire in his/her name and a cover letter specifying that only the recipient should fill out the questionnaire. In order to ensure the respondents' anonymity, they were instructed to return the questionnaire in the attached stamped envelope. The envelope was then opened by the member of university staff designated the task of erasing any information in the questionnaire that could identify the respondent, before passing it along to the research team. After one or two reminders, all of the 74 supervisors had returned the questionnaire. Four of them had failed to fill it out in its entirety and were therefore excluded. Hence, the net response rate was 95%, leaving a final sample of 70 supervisors.

Supervisors in the social services sector of Luxembourg typically received their training under the previous system, either as an EG or by becoming an *Assistant Hygiène Social* in Belgium, and completing the extra year to become licensed as an AS. In exceptional cases, supervisors received their training in Germany for a degree in *Sozialarbeit/Sozialpädagogik* (social work/social pedagogy). When not appointed on the basis of seniority, there is usually a minimum requirement of five years of professional experience before assuming a vacant position as supervisor.

A supervisor is the person in charge of a work unit with a specific operational purpose (e.g., day-care centre, communal foster home, shelter for victims of domestic violence) and generally with a maximum of 10 staff members. This arrangement means that the performance of each staff member is quite tangible, making assessment by his/her supervisor appropriate and valid.

Questionnaire

There were four parts to the questionnaire. In the introductory part, the respondent was asked to specify the scope of tasks and category of service users at his/her particular work unit. Using these specifications, the data were sorted into one of two groups of supervisors: (1) those in charge of a work unit typically employing EG practitioners and (2) those in charge of AS practitioners.

The second part was added to the questionnaires in 2009 and 2010 for the purpose of monitoring whether supervisors had previously received and completed the questionnaire at hand. In the pool of supervisors at typical AS work units, one and three respondents answered in the affirmative in the 2009 and 2010 waves

respectively. In the EG pool, there were none, presumably due to the increase in traditional EG positions as instigated by the government's decision to expand the day-care system. In order to monitor prior experience with BSSE trainees not yet qualified as practitioners, the respondent was asked to indicate whether he/she had previously and/or was currently supervising one or several BSSE student/s in practice placement. There were eight respondents in the AS pool and seven in the EG pool who indicated prior or current experience with students in practice placement.

The third part of the questionnaire consisted of a list of 14 items on generic skills that are taught to a varying degree in the BSSE programme, and that previous research has shown are considered particularly relevant to the social work field (see Table 1). The respondent was instructed to assess the BSSE practitioner who had started working at the unit during the previous 12 months, by rating him/her with regard to each of the generic skills on a 6-point scale (1 = shows no or little skill; 2 = shows some skill; 3 = shows near to adequate skill; 4 = shows adequate skill; 5 = performs at a higher level than expected; 6 = performs at a much higher level than expected).

The fourth part of the questionnaire consisted of a list of methods taught in the BSSE programme. There were four items on social pedagogy with children, adolescents, adults, and the elderly, respectively. There were another four items on

Table 1. Factor loadings of generic skills items (Varimax).

Item	1	2	3
Verbal communication	.81		
Inter-professional cooperation	.80		
Facilitating self-empowerment of service users	.72		
Working as a team-member	.70		
Effective engagement with service users	.66		
Ease in adjusting to changing circumstances	.61		
Interest in continuous learning	.56		
Understanding his/her legal powers as practitioner		.81	
Inter-cultural understanding		.76	
Knowledge about the Luxembourgish social system		.73	
Writing case notes		.60	
Conceiving new ideas and solutions to problems			.76
Evaluating his/her own work			.71
Analytical abilities			.67
Internal consistency	.88	.78	.70
Mean	4.49	4.21	4.19
Standard Deviation	0.66	0.67	0.76

social work: assessment/diagnostics, implementation of intervention measures, understanding group dynamics and processes, and management of members of a service user entity. The respondent was instructed to mark the methods for which the need was equal to half or more than half of the total working hours at his/her particular workplace. Using the same 6-point scale as above, the respondent then proceeded to rate the BSSE practitioner's proficiency with regard to each of the methods.

Results

Factor analysis

The purpose of a factor analysis is to reduce a set of items that describe various aspects of a phenomenon and that, therefore, tend to be inter-correlated. Our reason for applying this statistical reduction technique to the 14 items on generic skills was twofold. First, the analysis enabled us to gain insights into the underlying dimensions of the total data set. Second, it generated a more convenient set of variables to be included in further statistical analyses.

The generic skills items were subjected to a principal factor analysis (PCA). The suitability of these data for PCA is indicated by the Keiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy, which was .861, and Bartlett's test of sphericity, which was significant at $p < .001$. The Kaiser's criterion (eigenvalues of 1 or more) revealed three components, which extracted 61.32% of the total variance.

After rotation by means of Varimax, the analysis yielded components that accounted for 26.60%, 18.36%, and 16.36%, respectively. Results are shown in Table 1. The items loading onto the first factor pertain to the interpersonal effectiveness needed to successfully interact with service users, colleagues and other professionals. The items loading onto the second factor capture skills that will inevitably improve with an extended experience, such as the extra year of training required for the AS licence. The items loading onto the third factor capture much of the essence of the reflective practice paradigm: reflective skills amenable to improving upon one's work performance and enhancing overall proficiency. The factors were denoted Interpersonal Skills, Extra Year Skills, and Reflective Skills, respectively.

Analysis of variance

One purpose of the present study was to examine whether the two categories of supervisors differed in their assessments of the practitioners who had qualified under the newly implemented BSSE programme. Therefore, we conducted statistical analyses to compare the actual difference between groups with regard to their ratings of the items that are presented in Table 2. This table also presents the proportion of the need, equal to half or more than half of the total working hours, for each of the methods in the respective workplace categories.

Table 2. Mean values of the generic skills factors, methods in the social professions, and proportions of the need for these methods equal to half or more of the total working hours, in two workplace categories.

	EG (<i>n</i> = 36)			AS (<i>n</i> = 34)		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	%
Generic skills factors:						
Interpersonal Skills	4.61	0.71		4.37	0.59	
Extra Year Skills	4.41	0.62		4.01	0.66	
Reflective Skills	4.32	0.79		4.06	0.70	
Social pedagogy methods:						
Children	4.24	0.69	.47	3.70	1.06	.38
Adolescents	4.18	0.67	.39	3.76	1.13	.62
Adults	3.84	0.85	.50	3.86	1.03	.76
Elderly	3.94	0.65	.33	3.48	1.09	.26
Social work methods:						
Assessment and Diagnostics	4.12	0.88	.70	4.03	0.99	.91
Implementing Measures of Intervention	4.03	0.72	.64	3.85	0.85	.91
Understanding Group Dynamics	4.50	0.71	.81	4.07	0.81	.91
Managing groups	3.78	1.01	.75	3.54	0.95	.85

To begin, the three generic skills factors were subjected to a one-way multivariate analysis of variance due to their inter-relatedness, as indicated by Bartlett's test of sphericity ($p < .001$). Assumptions of homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices and equality of variance were confirmed. There was a marginally significant difference between the groups of supervisors in the means of the three generic skills factors, Wilk's $\lambda = .90$, $F(3.66) = 2.21$, $p < .09$. Analysis of each skills factor, using a Bonferroni-adjusted alpha level of .017, showed that there was a significant difference between groups with regard to the factor Extra Year Skills, $F(1.69) = 6.60$, $p < .012$, suggesting that supervisors at traditional EG work units tended to perceive the BSSE practitioners as more proficient in such skills, as compared to supervisors at traditional AS units. The remaining two analyses did not reveal significant differences between supervisor groups in their assessments of Interpersonal ($F = 2.36$, $p = .13$) and Reflective Skills ($F = 2.11$, $p = .15$).

T-tests

Next, we examined whether supervisor groups differed in their perceptions of the practitioners' skills in the respective methods of social pedagogy and social work. There were low to moderate correlations between the items of each skills set and the statistical procedure of the *t*-test was therefore applied. The analyses suggested

that practitioners were assessed as being more proficient by supervisors at EG work units with regard to methods required for social pedagogy with children, t (df 1.69) = 2.56, and the elderly, t = 2.16, as well as for cognisance of group dynamics, t = 2.37, $p_s < .05$. The ratings for the remaining items did not differ between supervisor groups: social pedagogy involving adolescents (t = 1.93, p = .06), and adults (t = -.09, p = .93), as well as assessment/diagnostics (t = 0.42, p = .67), intervention implementation (t = 0.98, p = .32), and management of service user entities (t = 1.43, p = .16).

Multiple regression analyses

Another purpose of the present study was to examine the importance of generic skills for proficiency in the methods of social pedagogy and social work. For this reason, we had to apply a statistical procedure that allows us to learn more about the relationship between a set of so-called predictor variables and a criterion variable. Using multiple regression analyses, we were able to measure the contribution that each of the generic skills factors made to the value of the criterion variable.

In the first analysis, the criterion variable was the pooled measure of the methods used in social pedagogy. This measure is the average mean of the ratings with regard to the four items in the questionnaire denoting social pedagogical work with individuals of different ages (i.e., children, adolescents, adults, and the elderly). The three generic skills factors were entered as predictor variables. Using the 'Enter' method, a significant model emerged, as shown in Table 3. The adjusted R square is a measure of the extent to which the set of generic skills factors contribute to proficiency in methods. It suggests that about one third of this proficiency among the BSSE practitioners is dependent on their generic skills.

The standardised regression coefficient provides a measure of how strongly each of the generic skills factors influences the level of skills in methods. As shown in Table 3, the beta value for Interpersonal Skills suggested that this factor, in relation to the other two predictors, tends to have a greater impact on proficiency in methods for social pedagogy.

In the second analysis, the pooled measure of the social work methods was entered as the criterion variable. This measure is the average mean of the ratings with regard to the items denoting social work methods that are a vital part of the BSSE programme (i.e., assessment/diagnostics, implementation of intervention measures, understanding group dynamics and processes, and management of members of a service user entity). The results revealed the emergence of a significant regression model, which accounted for about 40% of the variance in social work methods, as indicated by the adjusted R square. The standardised regression coefficients showed that proficiency in social work methods was dependent on the Extra Year Skills in particular, but also on reflective practitioner skills. This outcome suggests that formal knowledge of practice on the part of the BSSE practitioners, as well as their reflective ability, largely sustains their knowhow when it comes to assisting people in various forms of social distress.

Table 3. Results of the multiple regression analyses by method ($N = 70$).

Method	t	p	β	F	df	p	Adj R^2
Social Pedagogy							
Overall model				12.96	3, 69	.001	.34
Interpersonal skills	3.96	.001	.48				
Extra Year skills	0.39	.69	.05				
Reflective skills	1.27	.21	.15				
Social Work							
Overall model				17.18	3, 69	.001	.41
Interpersonal skills	0.67	.50	.08				
Extra Year skills	4.30	.001	.47				
Reflective skills	2.06	.05	.24				

Discussion

The present study investigated two key issues, which we deemed to be necessary for information on how to improve on the recently introduced education and training of future social workers in Luxembourg. The first issue related to acquiring a measurement of the level of overall proficiency of practitioners who had recently graduated from the study programme. This issue was prompted by our desire to identify the parts of the curriculum that might need further elaboration in order to better prepare students for the demands they face as a professional in the social services sector. The second issue concerned the importance of generic skills in the practice of the social professions. A better understanding of their role in this regard should possibly motivate a more deliberate effort to integrate generic skills in the teaching of methods during the course of education and training.

The skills evaluation

The overall results essentially suggest that the BSSE practitioners were adequately prepared, based on the judgement of their supervisors, although there seems to be some room for improvement. The tendency for the two groups of supervisors to differ slightly in some of their assessments could be interpreted as a reflection of the advantage of more extensive professional practice upon entry into AS work units, where practitioners often face problems of somewhat greater complexity. We need to bear in mind, however, that these results were obtained on data from a non-randomised sample, as the group assignment of the respondents (the supervisors) was determined by the tradition of their workplace. Their educational background as either an EG or an AS therefore represents a bias, which should have been

entered into the analyses as a confounding variable, and could have been had we been less strict in safeguarding their anonymity and specifically asked them to state the nature of their professional training.

Our evaluation demonstrates, nonetheless, how educators may gain insights into the way newly qualified practitioners are introduced into the profession and further moulded by the social services sector. In this sense, evaluations could be viewed as instruments for quality assurance, not only with regard to the curriculum as such, but also with regard to the process of continued nurturing of practice skills by the supervisors under whose guidance beginners start their professional life.

To this end, the questionnaire provides streamlined measures as opposed to qualitative methods such as focus groups or individual interviews. Furthermore, data collection by means of a questionnaire allows for comparisons over time and thus for monitoring any changes in the skills assessments of newly qualified practitioners. The next step in the context of Luxembourg could be to ask supervisors to carry out an additional evaluation. Comparing skills assessments made at two different points in time will reveal whether and to what degree practitioners have improved their skills.

The role of generic skills

The results of the regression analyses gave compelling evidence for the assumption that proficiency in methods draws on generic skills (Mayrhofer & Raab-Steiner, 2007), as shown in this sample of BSSE practitioners. Their 'people' skills obviously underlie a rather large portion of the methods used for promoting human welfare through a pedagogy that is oriented towards everyday life (see Table 3). The finding that skills for direct contact with service users draw heavily and exclusively on methods in social pedagogy seems to point to the value of integrating the philosophy of this discipline with social work, as has most clearly been done in Luxembourg and Germany. The holistic approach of social pedagogues, who carry out intervention as important participants in many aspects of people's daily lives (Hämäläinen, 2003), largely resonates with the notion of anti-oppressive social work practice (Dominelli, 1996). The fundamental premise of this notion is that the relationship between service user and social worker is crucial to empowerment (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005).

Limitations

It cannot be ignored, however, that the regression models may in part reflect the limitations of relying on supervisors for skills assessments. In the model for the social work methods, there are three plausible interpretations for the high beta value of Extra Year Skills relative to that for Reflective Skills (see Table 3). The most obvious interpretation would be that this result simply signals a need for educators in the BSSE programme to further underscore reflective practice in

the curriculum. Alternatively, it could reflect the fact that supervisors initially require beginner practitioners to prove their knowledge of, and compliance with, formal work procedures as a way of ascertaining their reliability in this important regard. Yet, we cannot exclude the possibility that this result reveals a tendency for supervisors to favour prescriptive and regulatory aspects of social work (cf. Beddoe, 2009; Curren & Atherton, 2008; Dominelli, 1996; Todd & Schwartz, 2009) at the expense of reflecting on practical experience (as one crucial means of improving overall proficiency, see e.g., Ruch, 2005; Skilton, 2011). The ambiguity here could most likely be resolved by using interviews or focus groups with supervisors, looking at the issue of strategies to introduce beginner practitioners into the social work field. These accounts should ideally be supplemented with feedback from newly qualified practitioners with regard to their work experience during the first year of employment after graduation.

Conclusion

Using multiple regression analyses, we have in some sense dissected the skills base that practitioners and recruiters claim to be vital in the social professions (Dalton & Wright, 1999; Forte & Matthews, 1994; Froggett & Sapey, 1997; Lymbery et al., 2000; Mayrhofer & Raab-Steiner, 2007). By doing so, we have shown that generic skills play far more than a cursory role for proficiency in methods, a finding that invites further research on how these kinds of abilities underlie methods. Given the scarcity of research in this area (Barrie, 2006; Bridgstock, 2009), our findings also support the need to delineate the theoretical basis of such skills as particularly relevant to the social services.

Perhaps research on social work should focus specifically on generic skills and their role in developing methods during practice placements as well as during the first year of employment. This suggestion largely coincides with the call to improve our understanding of the processes through which social work students apply skills and develop professional expertise (see Bates et al., 2010; Orme et al., 2009). In this regard, the present finding could potentially also serve as an incentive for students to reflect on how their generic skills are a valuable and oftentimes overlooked asset in the effort to mature into fully fledged and proficient practitioners (cf. Marthinsen, 2004; Skilton, 2011).

Overall, the findings of the present study justify continued efforts to evaluate newly qualified practitioners. When eventually triangulated with similar data collected from service users and the beginner practitioners themselves, evaluations could provide further insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the study programme. It would also be of interest to know whether the present results could be replicated in other traditions of social work and/or social pedagogy. In the wake of calls to more effectively respond to the internationalisation of social problems, the need to open up curricula for review and cross-national comparison would seem almost inevitable.

Ethics

Ethical approval for this research was given by the Department of Social Work at the University of Luxembourg.

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Notes

1. This particular training was discontinued in the late 1980s and supplanted by a programme in social work.
2. Luxembourgish, German, and French are the official languages of Luxembourg.

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