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## WORK IN SMALL GROUPS – A MEANS OF DEVELOPING PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCES IN FUTURE SOCIAL PEDAGOGUES

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### ABSTRACT

Work in small groups is represented as a pedagogical method aimed at the participation of every student in the solving of a social problem, the workout of interactions with the rest of the participants and the group affiliation, the development of the creative potential and self-knowledge. An opportunity to enrich personal experience and develop readiness for its further application on the job.

**Key words:** social work, social pedagogue, competency, work in small groups

A major tendency in the educational process at the contemporary school of higher education is the mastering of knowledge about reality – to interpret it through personal experience and various manifestations of socioeconomic reality, rather than mere acquisition (teaching - learning) of such knowledge. This reality is complex and diverse enough that theoretical models do not apply definitely and straightforwardly. This calls for the development and stimulation through the educational process of the students' ability to think logically and the skills required for application of acquired knowledge into practical tasks. In this respect, methods for active and interactive training are among the most prospective methods for professional training of experts in the field. In general, they stimulate the cognitive activity of the students. They are based on the free exchange of opinions on the way to the solution of one problem or another. High student activity is a typical feature. In other words, interactive methods are a specific form of organization of cognitive and communication activities which engages the students in the process of cognition and provides them with the opportunity to express their knowledge, past experience and concepts. In contemporary pedagogy, this is achieved through a number of interactive approaches (methods), such as:

creative tasks, work in small groups, role plays, social projects, discussions, problem solving and the like. Work in small groups, for instance, is aimed at the participation of each and every student in the solving of a problem, the workout of his interactions with the rest of the participants and his group affiliation, the development of his creative potential and self-knowledge.

Interactive exercises and tasks serve for teaching new material and provide opportunity for developing particular skills, rather than practicing previously taught material (1). In this respect, work in small groups is used as a pedagogical means of forming professional competencies in third-year Social Pedagogy students on the subject "Methods of Social Work" at the Trakia University of Stara Zagora.

We should note that in this case we assume the concept for the notion "professional competences" from the point of view of personnel (human resources) management, i.e. we take into account the personal ability of the specialist (social pedagogue or social worker) to solve a particular category of professional problems. The professional duties of an expert are defined in a job description where "competencies" most often stands for the formal description of the requirements to the expert's personal, professional and other qualities (2). We find a similar type of formality in the job description of a social worker at the Social Assistance Agency as

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well. Acquaintance (knowledge) with main laws and subdelegated legislation in or related to the social field, acquaintance (knowledge) with the demographic structure of the service region, risk groups and their priority needs, acquaintance (knowledge) with the internal regulations of the Social Assistance Agency and The Ministry of Labor and Social Policy. Skills are listed separately. At the same time, a number of domestic and international sources (2, 3, 4) define competence or competencies as, in general, a combination of skills, knowledge, abilities and attitudes for action. The social worker, and the social pedagogue respectively, works with the risk groups of a society – children in the streets, children from incomplete families, children and persons with permanent disabilities, persons in the lowest income bracket and elderly persons, minority groups, etc. He is expected and required to apply an individual approach in the communication with their representatives. This is possible only if, besides the acquisition of knowledge on the principles and methods of social work he has managed to look at those through the prism of his personal philosophy and experience of life. We should bear in mind that the personal experience of life of most Social Pedagogy students is limited within the family and the next of kin, and communication with the friends from school and university and the teachers. It can be broadened and enriched in the process of education through the application of proper practical methods and techniques.

Team work – in both constant and dynamic interdepartmental and interorganizational teams – ranks high in recent social work tendencies. A team is formed on a particular social problem, as well as in order to render help or provide assistance to a person in temporary or permanent social isolation. Social attitudes towards such a team are related to a prompt, radical solution to the problems of the person - client of the social institutions. There is no way to meet expectations of this kind if the team is a team just formally, which would be the case if team members do not possess relevant professional competencies – knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes for team work.

In this regard I would like to share how the pedagogical method 'Work in small groups' is used (applied) with third grade Social Pedagogy students. The purpose of the group work is for the students to develop/improve

team work skills. They have been divided into groups of 5. Each group has been presented a practical case, which has, in one way or another, turned from a problem of a particular person in social risk into a problem of the society. Each group got the same task: to offer their own solution of the problem as well as to develop an algorithm for efficient team action, based on the presented case. In the course of work each group received the requested additional information on various procedures of the practice of social workers and social pedagogues, i. e.:

- procedure for accommodating in a specialized social service establishment;
- procedure for interdiction and procedure for appointing legal guardian;
- procedure for determining permanent activity limitations or degree of disability.

In the course of work the students from all three groups demonstrated skills, defined as basic in the job description of a social worker, i. e.:

- skill to identify the problems of the client;
- skill to make an impartial assessment of the specific needs of different risk groups;
- skill to apply individual approach in solving the problems of the client;
- skill for cooperation and team work.

Bearing in mind that in the course of education legislative acts in the social field are not introduced elaborately to the students, I should note that all three groups asked questions related to the legislation. This indicates that consequences which may result from the decision are considered in regard to standard norms and purposes.

Working process in small groups provokes and facilitates the display of different components of general competencies:

- ability to make decisions, which include different points of view;
- ability to analyze the roots of a problem from different points of view;
- ability to present ideas, to listen and accept other people's ideas;
- defining priorities;
- proposing alternative decisions.

Each small group presented their work in the big group. The end result was the development of an Algorithm for reaction of a team of social workers to a signal for a person from the lowest income brackets in distress, summarizing the products of all three groups:

**Algorithm for reaction to signals:**

1. ascertain the identity of the client;
2. ascertain permanent and residence address of the client;
3. determine the specific problem of the client;
4. assess the needs and necessities of the client;
5. assess the potential of the client;
6. assess the risks to the client;
7. obtain client's consent for rendering specific assistance;
8. contact other authorities (when required);
9. render specific assistance.

The final result from the work in small groups and subsequently – in the big group, shows that the group charges the students with work energy, motivates them and provides support for completion of complex tasks. Group work helps students to successfully analyze, systematize information, do situation assessment and put knowledge into practice.

**IN CONCLUSION**

It is essential to social workers and pedagogues to possess conversation skills and to master the principles of partnership, especially in a situation of cooperation. Sharing, feedback and respect for the other party's opinion are social skills which make true social work possible. These are skills which can be developed and improved in the course of higher education through pragmatically oriented strategies and techniques.

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