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Analysing the dimensions of social pedagogy from an international perspective

Análisis de las dimensiones de la Pedagogía Social desde una perspectiva internacional

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ABSTRACT

Over recent years, social pedagogy has emerged or undergone transformation processes in many countries, justifying the need to understand how it is being shaped and transformed throughout the world. However, conceptual ambiguity and lack of a homogenous and unified theoretical body accentuate the dilemma of whether social pedagogy is a specific area of knowledge, a professional field, a research field or all of these at once. We have moved into a stage where we do not have an immediate answer as to what social pedagogy is, what kind of knowledge it is or what its specific working methods are. This research aims to provide a comprehensive and rigorous analysis of social pedagogy from an international perspective. The methodology employed herein is the Delphi method, using three questionnaires in three different phases. Based on the individual contributions of a group of renowned experts from different countries, our aim is to build a global, current and integrated view of social pedagogy.

RESUMEN

A lo largo de los últimos años la Pedagogía Social ha pasado por procesos de emergencia y transformación en numerosos países. Esto justifica la necesidad de comprender el movimiento de formación y transformación de la Pedagogía Social en el mundo. Pero la ambigüedad conceptual y la carencia de un cuerpo teórico homogéneo y unificado acentúan el dilema sobre si la Pedagogía Social es un área de conocimiento específico, un campo de trabajo profesional, un campo de investigación o todos ellos a la vez. Nos trasladamos a un escenario donde no tenemos una respuesta inmediata sobre qué es la Pedagogía Social, qué tipo de saber es o cuáles son sus métodos específicos de trabajo. Esta investigación pretende aportar un análisis exhaustivo y riguroso sobre la Pedagogía Social desde un contexto internacional. La metodología utilizada en la investigación es el método Delphi, aplicando tres cuestionarios en tres fases diferentes. A partir de las aportaciones particulares de un conjunto de expertos de reconocido prestigio de diferentes países, se pretende construir una mirada global, actual e integrada de la Pedagogía Social.

KEYWORDS

International social pedagogy; Delphi methodology; social pedagogy indicators

PALABRAS CLAVE

Pedagogía Social Internacional; metodología Delphi; indicadores de la Pedagogía Social

What is social pedagogy: a science, a practice or an art form? Or is it all three at once? What is its working objective? Does it differ depending on the particular country in which it is performed? Can

we talk of a common and universal epistemological, theoretical and practical core? Is it pedagogy; is it education; is it social work; or is it three at once? These are some of the questions we continue to ask ourselves after more than a century and a half of social pedagogy's existence. History shows, moreover, that academics and practitioners have followed separate paths (Branches-Chyrek & Süncker, 2009; Kornbeck, 2009; Rosendal, 2009; Úcar, 2011), making it even more difficult to provide an integrated definition of social pedagogy work (Coussée, Bradt, Roose, & Bouverne-De Bie, 2010).

Social pedagogy is an innovative and complex discipline and practice. But the lack of a general model or a unified and homogeneous theory for it hinders the forming of a definition and a body of knowledge that might be universally accepted (Caride, 2004).

Numerous authors have highlighted that social pedagogy historically originated from the need to provide a response to situations and problems generated by processes of vulnerability, social risk, poverty, etc. (Eriksson, 2013; Hämäläinen, 2013; Lorenz, 2008). Úcar (2012b) says 'social pedagogy is a highly complex theoretical and practical field, which is subject to multiple and varied interpretations not only between countries and traditions but also within the very national contexts' (p. 735).

In recent years, social pedagogy thinking has begun to take shape in countries where there was no previous tradition of it. In Latin America, it is an emerging field of theorizing and intervention that connects with the experiences and practices of popular education developed in that context since the second half of the last century (Úcar, 2012a).

In the European context, it has mainly been in the UK where the study, analysis and application of these ideas and practices have begun to take place in earnest. The usefulness of social pedagogy approaches in this context lies, as shown by many authors, in its contribution to the improvement of care and social work for children and young people in residential care centres (Boddy & Statham, 2009; Cameron, McQuall, & Petrie, 2007; Eichsteller & Holthoff, 2012; Úcar, 2013b). The literature on social pedagogy in the English-speaking world from the first decade of the twenty-first century questioned whether it was suitable or appropriate to introduce social pedagogy models into practices conducted in the UK. However, in this second decade the potential of this model has been found to improve the practices of social work with children and young people (Cameron & Moss, 2011; Hatton, 2013).

The different manifestations of social pedagogy are, according to Hämäläinen (2013), due to the ideological, political and cultural approaches specific to each country, leading to the concept of social pedagogy being used in different contexts and with different meanings (López-Blasco, 1998; Lorenz, 2008; Kornbeck & Rosendal Jensen, 2009; Smith, 2012; Smith & Whyte, 2008). In this respect, very few comparative international studies exist that account for this diversity (Kornbeck & Rosendal Jensen, 2009), hence the need for an analysis of the trajectory and evolution of social pedagogy throughout history and of its position in different countries, so as to develop a set of indicators upon which to build an updated, global and integrated view thereof.

This text begins with the presentation of the main objective of this study and the research questions it is intended to address. The second section describes the methodology used, the process for selecting the international experts participating in the study and the different questions analysed. We then provide the most relevant results from the Delphi process. Finally, in the fourth section, we present our conclusions and proposals for further progress in the construction of social pedagogy.

General framework for the research

This study forms part of a wider investigation into social pedagogy. It is research aimed at conducting a thorough and rigorous analysis of how to conceptualize social pedagogy as a discipline, its training and professional practice from a comparative perspective.

The results presented here comprise part of the first of three phases of research. The objective of this phase is to develop a set of internationally comparable indicators to help establish a definition for the theoretical, cross-disciplinary and international core of social pedagogy. In the following two phases, we shall carry out an in-depth analysis of the educational and professional dimensions of

social pedagogy in different countries. The research aims to build a global, up-to-date and integrated view of social pedagogy from the contributions of a number of prestigious academics and practitioners from different countries.

These are some of the research questions that have guided this first phase of research: *What are the key elements that define and characterize social pedagogy? Is it possible to define universal indicators for social pedagogy? What are the specific features that identify social pedagogy in each country? Can we agree on a definition and a cross-disciplinary and universal theoretical body for social pedagogy?*

Research methodology

We used qualitative methodology in this study, in the form of the Delphi method: a group forecasting method that feeds off the opinions of different experts. It is a systematic, group process aimed at obtaining opinions and building consensus from the experiences and judgements of a group of experts (Landeta, 1999). It comprises ongoing work with experts over time to build a consolidated, specific and rigorous view of the problem addressed and is conducted in three phases. In each phase, a questionnaire is administered to the participating experts; in the final two phases, the questionnaire also includes the results obtained from the previous phases.

Using the Delphi method allows us to compare different experts' views regarding the most important aspects of social pedagogy. It is a methodology that we believe will provide an understanding of the complexity inherent in a concept and practices which are demonstrating their usefulness in different contexts but resisting different authors' attempts to demarcate and structure them as a discipline.

We are aware of the limitations of the method chosen for this research, especially as regards the possible loss of information from individual experts in reaching a consensus or any possible bias existing in the questionnaires (García, Aquino, Guzmán, & Medina, 2012). We also understand, however, that it is a scientifically validated method that has been used in numerous studies in the field of social sciences (Landeta, 2006; Orte, Ballester, Vives, & Amer, 2015; Rowe & Wright, 2012) and can be especially useful for the purposes of this first phase of the research, namely, to establish some order in a field of broad, diverse and multidisciplinary knowledge in which authors have often adopted opposing or polarized stances (Úcar, 2011, 2013a).

We would argue that the chequered continental history of social pedagogy as a discipline, the fact that it has differentiated professional profiles and practices in different countries and finally, its positioning somewhere between the social and educational fields provide sufficient complexity to warrant a qualitative approach like the one offered by the Delphi method.

The sample: selecting experts

The sample is purposive. Experts were selected using the following criteria:

- They work in the academic field;
- They have a high level of knowledge of social pedagogy;¹
- They know how social pedagogy has evolved in their country;
- They have a degree of prestige and academic renown in the field of social pedagogy.

The number of experts considered necessary to conduct a Delphi study in the scientific literature ranges from 7 to 30 participants (Godet, 1996; Guix, 2003; Landeta, 1999).

The study had an initial sample of 32 experts from 19 different countries, although we were aware that not all would be willing to participate. Eleven selected experts did not start the study, citing lack of time or insufficient knowledge of the subject matter; a further four abandoned the study during the process. The final sample of participants² consisted of a total of 18 academic experts from 12 different countries. Table 1 shows the initial and final samples of experts and their countries of origin. Figure 1 shows the geographical distribution of the experts in graphic form.

Table 1. Initial and final samples, distributed by country and gender.

Country	Initial sample		Final sample	
	♂	♀	♂	♀
Finland	1		1	
Norway	2		1	
Denmark	1		1	
Sweden		1		1
Belgium	2		1	
Germany	3		1	
UK	2	1	2	
Spain	3	1	3	1
Portugal		1		1
USA	1		1	
Chile	1		1	
Brazil	3	1	2	1
Argentina		1		
Russia	1	1		
Japan	1			
Estonia	1			
Uruguay	1			
Italy	1			
Slovakia	1			
TOTAL	25	7	14	4
	32		18	

Source: Own data.



Figure 1. Geographical distribution of study participants.

Conducting the Delphi method: phases and analysis of information

As previously noted, the Delphi method was carried out in three phases, involving the administration of a questionnaire at three different points in time. We used professional survey creation software³ that the experts could respond to online. The questionnaires were semi-structured – that is, they consisted of both open and closed items (see Table 2) – and were administered in three different languages: English, Spanish and Portuguese. The duration of the study was 10 months.

Table 2. Timing of Delphi study.

Phases	Calendar		Items	
	Ship date	Filing date	Open	Closed
Initial	December 2013		–	–
First	15/01/2014	29/01/2014	18	22
Second	15/05/2014	29/05/2014	14	13
Third	13/06/2014	27/07/2014	9	2
Final	August–September 2014		–	–
	Send final report 1/10/2014			

The following table shows the duration of the study and the approximate timing of the different phases, as in some specific cases more time was needed due to specific problems given by the experts.

The different phases of the study and characteristics of each questionnaire are detailed below.

(1) *Initial phase.* Design and contact with experts

Planning the study, contacting experts via email and drafting the first questionnaire. The questionnaire was constructed using the definition of the eight major dimensions of social pedagogy constructed on the basis of an exhaustive analysis of the current literature.

(2) *Phase I.* First questionnaire

The first questionnaire consists of open and closed questions on each evaluated dimension. Some freedom of response is given in reference to both the content and the terms used, so that experts adopt a position in relation to the issue at hand. It is divided into three parts:

- Issues related to experts' personal information: academic background, current job, professional experience, country, etc.;
- Issues related to the 8 dimensions to be evaluated: an open question on their opinion with respect to each dimension and a closed question aimed at defining the most relevant indicators (between 5 and 10) encompassing each dimension;
- Issues related to the questionnaire itself: items to modify, specify, add and prioritize.

(3) *Phase II.* Second questionnaire.

The second questionnaire was drafted on the basis of responses to the first. It focuses on obtaining more detail with regard to those aspects where there is less consensus among the experts. It is structured into three parts:

- Main results from the first phase;
- New issues to address following the same structure as the first questionnaire, but more concrete and related to the specific evolution of social pedagogy in their country of origin;
- An optional space dedicated to other comments to add, propose, refute or suggest.

(4) *Phase III.* Third questionnaire

The third and final questionnaire summarizes the main agreements reached throughout the entire process in order for the experts to validate them. Like the previous two, it is also structured into three parts:

- Main findings and conclusions of the second questionnaire;
- Definition of social pedagogy, encompassing the six most relevant aspects (definition constructed via consensus of the whole group throughout the whole process). This space is dedicated to validating these aspects;
- Evaluation of the process, in terms of content and methodology.

(5) *Final phase*. Final report

The report contains all results obtained throughout the process. The report was sent to all of the experts and their permission was requested to use their name in this research.

Processing of data

The information obtained in the open questions was analysed qualitatively. Using discourse analysis, we detected key indicators in the different opinions of experts to identify the most relevant points of each dimension analysed.

In the more closed questions, a qualitative and quantitative analysis was performed. In simple response (Yes/No) or multiple response items, data were processed quantitatively and have been presented in the form of graphs. In the items related to the definition of a set of indicators, we analysed them according to their frequency of occurrence and prioritization in the responses of each expert.

Dimensions of social pedagogy obtained from an analysis of the current literature

The dimensions of social pedagogy analysed in our study are those that have been seen as key in interpreting social pedagogy based on a comprehensive review of the existing pedagogical literature. These dimensions refer to both theoretical and practical aspects. Each one comprises a definition and some resulting questions that pose specific problems detected in the field of social pedagogy or that can help to construct a more or less shared vision of it:

- *Contextual dimension*: the importance given to context when developing proposals for social pedagogy projects. *Is it possible to define an organizational, cross-disciplinary and transcultural core of social pedagogy or should we define as many social pedagogies as there are cultural and disciplinary contexts?*
- *Historical dimension*: key historical elements in the conceptualization and development of social pedagogy over time. *What elements identify the origins and evolution of social pedagogy? What motivated the birth of social pedagogy in each specific context?*
- *Epistemological dimension*: the consideration or considerations social pedagogy has in terms of science, art or practice, and the specific weight of each of these dimensions in shaping social pedagogy. *Is social pedagogy a science, a practice or an art, or is it a combination of all or some of these?*
- *Functional dimension*: the roles social pedagogy does or can fulfil in our modern-day societies.
- *Professional dimension*: which specific professions in the social sphere are related to social pedagogy and to what degree? We establish three levels of relationship with social pedagogy for different professions in the social field:
 - (1) Professions with a core relationship with social pedagogy.
 - (2) Professions with a close relationship with social pedagogy.
 - (3) Professions with some type of relationship with social pedagogy.
- *Methodological dimension*: what methodologies are used primarily in the sphere of social pedagogy? *Is there a single specific methodology of social pedagogy or are there several? Is the methodology or are the methodologies used in social pedagogy its own or taken from other sciences?*

- *Normative dimension (theoretical and practical)*: what role is awarded to pedagogical norms in the socio-pedagogical relationship? *What are the most important theoretical and methodological principles used to guide practices in social pedagogy?*
- *Ethical and political dimension*: what impact or importance do ideological and political frameworks have in the conceptualization and practices of social pedagogy? *How are social pedagogy and politics related? What value is assigned to ideology and socio-educational relationships?*

Results of the study

The main findings of each phase of the study are presented below, together with the degree of agreement among experts throughout each phase.⁴

Phase I findings

The great diversity and variability in the responses given by experts in some of the dimensions made it difficult to categorize indicators. There is complete agreement in relation to the historical, functional, ethical-political and methodological dimensions. There is also a high level of agreement with regard to the professional dimension. The contextual and epistemological dimensions obtain agreement among half of the participants, and only with respect to the normative dimension can we say that there is no agreement among participants.

- **Historical dimension** (100% agreement). There are two key issues that define the birth of social pedagogy and its subsequent evolution:
 - *Works and Authors*: Those authors who stand out as proponents of social pedagogy are Pestalozzi, on the concept of integral education; Paul Nartop, in German social philosophy; and finally, Paulo Freire, with his thinking on popular education.
 - *Historical events that lead to circumstances of social vulnerability and risk in people and communities*: Social pedagogy emerges in moments of rupture, when the school and the more traditional pedagogies are no longer sufficient to address conflicts existing in certain societies. Social pedagogy is born out of situations and circumstances arising from the historical events that led to poverty, risks of social exclusion, deficiencies, etc., in each particular context.
- **Functional dimension** (100% agreement). Social pedagogy influences the social integration of people and groups; it aims to respond to social problems and conflicts; it promotes structural changes in people and communities and it fosters a critical and transformative view of reality.
- **Methodological dimension** (100% agreement). Social pedagogy employs diverse methodologies mostly taken from other sciences. The main sciences are sociology, psychology and social work. The most frequently used methodology is qualitative.
- **Ethical-political dimension** (100% agreement). Social pedagogy is political because it contributes or should contribute to the debate on educational and social policies. Social pedagogy has an ideological foundation because on the one hand it integrates values, and on the other the socio-educational relationships it promotes are inscribed, produced and reproduced in the ideological fields that comprise strategic political actions. Social pedagogy is aimed at achieving equity and equality in society, ensuring the quality of life and well-being of all people and communities. Social pedagogy has a strong commitment to social justice.
- **Professional dimension** (75% agreement). Social work, pedagogy and social education are the professions that have the most direct relationship with social pedagogy. Some of the professions appear on two of our levels (core relationship/close relationship), making it impossible to determine which are more related to social pedagogy.
- **Contextual dimension** (50% agreement). We can talk of the existence of a common nucleus or core of social pedagogy and also give a precise and concrete definition of it according to the

context where it is implemented. To understand and assess the essence of social pedagogy, some basic universal principles are required regarding its concept, object, aims and methodology; it is also essential to consider the institutional and political framework of a country in order to implement social pedagogy actions and interventions appropriate to each context.

- **Epistemological dimension** (50% agreement). Social pedagogy is a science, a practice and, in some cases, an art. Not all experts believe that social pedagogy has artistic connotations.
- **Normative dimension** (0% agreement). The great variability of responses given by the experts reveal that this is either a confusing dimension that requires more precision and clarification or, conversely, it is a dimension that is not taken into account or is considered to be integrated within one of the other dimensions.

Phase II findings

Full agreement remains in the dimensions where it already existed: historical, ethical-political and methodological, and important elements are added in the functional dimension. The second questionnaire allows us to define and specify the most relevant aspects: total agreement is achieved in the contextual and professional dimensions; in the normative dimension, where there was no agreement, more precision is achieved and consensus reached on some aspects; and progress is also made on the epistemological dimension.

- **Functional dimension** (100% agreement). The experts see a need to differentiate between the functions of social pedagogy as a discipline and as a practice. The main function of social pedagogy as a discipline is the theoretical systematization of knowledge related to social pedagogy, contributing to academic development, from its theoretical and conceptual, epistemological and methodological foundations. The primary function of social pedagogy as a practice is to respond to the social needs and educational problems of society through intervention projects.
- **Contextual dimension** (100% agreement). Those indicators that comprise the common core of social pedagogy are as follows: (a) it provides educational solutions to social problems; (b) it is implemented in the social and cultural context; (c) it is intentional, axiological and teleological; (d) it has a commitment to social justice; (e) it is constituted as scientific educational knowledge; (f) it has an important political dimension and finally, (g) it is oriented towards practice. However, the concrete characteristics of its professionalization and the centres and institutions where social pedagogy is conducted vary according to the specific context and country where it takes place.
- **Professional dimension** (100% agreement). Social education, social work, pedagogy, youth work and socio-community intervention are the main professions in social pedagogy.
- **Normative dimension** (85% agreement). A definition of the normative dimension is proposed and a high acceptance is achieved. It is considered as an element to be taken into account in social pedagogy actions and refers to the norms and methodologies for action that lead to learning and specific behaviours in participants.
- **Epistemological dimension** (75% agreement). There is agreement that social pedagogy has a theoretical basis and provides educational solutions to social problems. It is a way of interpreting the world and explaining life, and is, therefore, not limited to being an academic discipline but has a commitment to educational practice. Some of the experts revised their opinion and now begin to appreciate the artistic side of social pedagogy.

Phase III findings: final results

The results from the last phase of the study are the fruit of the entire process. There is full agreement among the experts and social pedagogy is defined and characterized according to the eight dimensions analysed:

Social pedagogy is a science, a practice and an art that originates from the need to respond to the individual and social problems facing individuals, groups and communities. It is a form of knowledge that develops educational processes; a knowledge that is articulated as an academic discipline and in different professional spheres which have a direct relationship with the professions of social work, social education, pedagogy, work with children, young people and adults, and socio-community intervention. The experts clarify that some of these professions may have particular names in each specific country where they are exercised. For example, in some cases we speak of 'socio-community intervention' and in others of 'community education' or 'community development'. This is one of the aspects to compare in the next phase of research, an analysis of the training sphere of social pedagogy, in order to delineate the differences between these professions in different countries (**Historical, epistemological and professional dimensions**).

It has a clear political dimension and a strong commitment to social justice. Social pedagogy responds to a normative social purpose: its mission is to act and intervene in different situations and contexts using criteria to guide decision-making and social pedagogical action in favour of what is deemed necessary and desirable to improve the lives of people and social cohesion (**Normative dimension**).

Its primary function as a discipline is the systematization of knowledge relating to social pedagogy, contributing to academic and scientific development, on the basis of its theoretical and conceptual, epistemological and methodological foundations. The primary function of social pedagogy as a practice is to provide educational solutions to social needs and problems via actions and intervention projects (**Functional dimension**).

Primarily, it uses qualitative, quantitative and creative methodologies (**Methodological dimension**). These methodologies mainly comprise the following techniques and strategies:

- Qualitative methodology: ethnography, interviews, participant observation, action research, comparative studies, case studies and socio-biographical methods.
- Quantitative methodology: official statistics, comparative studies and questionnaires.
- Creative methodology: artistic and recreational workshops (theatre, art, photography, dance and music), and action research.

Social pedagogy has particular features for its specific definition and implementation in each context. These refer to (a) the specific centres and infrastructures where it is implemented; (b) the available resources employed; (c) the socio-educational intervention projects that are tailored to the specific characteristics of the context and (d) the specific professions or occupations in which it is embodied (**Contextual dimension**).

Although social pedagogy is tailored to each specific context, it is possible to establish its common core. Those indicators that comprise this common core of social pedagogy are:

- Providing educational solutions to social problems;
- Constituting a framework for social and cultural work;
- Being intentional, axiological and teleological;
- Maintaining a commitment to social justice, freedom and equality;
- Being established as (or in the process of becoming) scientific educational knowledge;
- Having an important political dimension;
- Being oriented in, by and towards practice.

The political and ideological framework of each country and its historical, economic and social history influence the position awarded to social pedagogy in developing the welfare state, social policy and education policy (**Political and ethical dimension**).

Table 3 presents a more synthesized form of the main indicators for each of the assessed dimensions agreed by experts in relation to social pedagogy.

Table 3. Main indicators of social pedagogy.

Dimension	Most relevant indicators
Contextual	Oriented towards practice Importance of the political, historical, economic and social dimensions of each context Oriented towards professionalization It takes place in specific centres and institutions Socio-educational intervention projects adapted to the context
Historical	Reference to relevant pedagogical authors and works Crisis and repair of the welfare state Response to the individual and social needs and problems facing people, groups and communities New demands and emergence of new professional profiles Rehabilitation and socialization of the most vulnerable
Epistemological	Science, practice and art Scientific-academic discipline Existence of a theoretical foundation Intentional, axiological and teleological Scientific educational knowledge Object of scientific research and practice
Functional	Systematizes knowledge in theoretical terms Contributes to academic-scientific development Provides educational solutions to social problems
Professional	Social work Social education Pedagogy Socio-community intervention Work with children, young people and adults
Methodological	Qualitative methodology (ethnography, interviews, participant observation, action research, comparative studies, case studies, socio-biographical methods) Quantitative methodology (official statistics, comparative studies, questionnaires) Creative methodology (artistic and recreational workshops (theatre, art, photography, dance, music), action research)
Normative	Relational principles Principles directly linked to individuals or groups Norms and methodologies for action that guide pedagogical practice
Ethical-political	Equity and equality Commitment to social justice Political and ideological framework in each context

Source: Own data.

Conclusions and discussion

Our results have enabled us to develop the comparative view of social pedagogy that we set out to achieve at the beginning of this research and discern common features in its different traditions. This work is, in this respect, a first step that will serve as a reference for the next two phases of this research, aimed at comparing these data with the social pedagogy training given and practices implemented in different countries.

Analysis of the Delphi process as a whole allows us to highlight a number of issues that seem relevant in relation to social pedagogy:

- We can speak of the existence of a common core of social pedagogy and also give a precise and concrete definition of it in a specific context where it is implemented. For an understanding and assessment of social pedagogy, we must start from some basic and universal principles regarding its concept, object, aims and methodology; it is also essential to consider the institutional and political framework of each country if we are to carry out social pedagogy actions and interventions appropriate to each context.

As shown by the Delphi results, social pedagogy constitutes a theoretical body based on the framework of social and cultural work and oriented in, by and towards practice. As an academic discipline, it projects knowledge in different professional fields. The professions with which

social pedagogy has the most direct relationship are social work, social education, pedagogy, work with children, young people and adults, and socio-community intervention.

- Social pedagogy is a science, a practice and an art. It is a way of interpreting the world and explaining life, and is therefore not limited to being an academic discipline, but has a commitment to educational (Krichesky, 2010) and social practice. However, some tension remains between social pedagogy academics and practitioners, which needs to be addressed (Branches-Chyrek & Süncker, 2009; Kornbeck, 2009; Rosendal, 2009; Storø, 2012). This has recently been done in a decisive manner in the Spanish context, as highlighted by Ortega, Caride, and Úcar (2013).
- Social pedagogy is political as it contributes, or should contribute, to the debate on educational and social policy. Since Nohl characterized the relationship between pedagogy and politics as that which takes place between expiration and inspiration, almost all authors who address the issue believe that social pedagogy has a direct relationship with politics (Hämäläinen, 2003; Otto, 2006; Santos Graciani, 2006; Úcar, 2013a). Social pedagogy is involved in politics in terms of the production of new knowledge from academic research to reorient public policy design, the reorganization of institutions and improvement of legislation. It is in this way that it provides or should provide a theoretical framework for well-being based on an understanding of community education, the promotion of active citizenship and social participation and justice.
- Social pedagogy has an ideological foundation because, on the one hand, it integrates values (Storø, 2013) and on the other, the socio-educational relationships it promotes are inscribed, produced and reproduced in ideological fields that shape strategic political actions (Eichsteller & Holthoff, 2012). It is a normative science (Branches-Chyrek & Süncker, 2009; Eriksson & Markström, 2003; Hämäläinen, 2003; Marynowicz-Hetka, 2007; Petrie et al., 2009; Stephens, 2009; Van Ewijk, 2010), in that the social pedagogue establishes norms and methodologies of action that lead to specific learning and behaviours by individuals and communities. Based on a review of the literature and those authors who address it, we have formed our own definition of the normative dimension, which has subsequently been validated by the academic experts. The normative dimension of social pedagogy refers to the ability of professionals to establish norms, principles, methods and techniques in socio-educational intervention that are conducive to specific learning and behaviours by participants. Depending on the context or situation, these norms may be prescribed by the pedagogue or agreed and constructed jointly with the participant. This dimension refers to the intentional, teleological and axiological sense of the educational processes promoted by social pedagogy, with the pedagogical-social activity conceived as a strategic, conscious and reflective response oriented towards the needs, demands and social problems of citizens, and committed to social welfare and human development.
- It is clear that social pedagogy was first conceived amid circumstances of vulnerability and social risk (Otto, 2006). However, it is still today mainly associated with the sphere of needs and social care. Where are we to situate community education and the importance of human development? (Hämäläinen, 2012). Social pedagogy influences the social integration of people and groups, promotes structural changes in people and communities and, finally, fosters a critical and transformative view of reality.
- Analysing social pedagogy in relation to its professional practice necessarily involves talking of social work or, in the terms used by Kornbeck (2014), the divergence or convergence of social pedagogy and social work. There is no dispute regarding the fact that social pedagogy is both education and pedagogy (Kornbeck & Rosendal Jensen, 2009; Quintana, 1984). The problem arises in its relationship with social work; this is a not well-solved issue at the theoretical level or at the academic or professional level (Úcar, 2012b).

According to Hämäläinen (2013), social pedagogy can be analysed from three different perspectives: as a synonym of social work, as an individual paradigm or as a term that acts in different professional fields, including social work. In some European countries, the tendency has been to mix the concepts, whereas in others the opposite occurs.

It is rather difficult to identify and compare the country-specific positions due to constantly changing professional boundaries and titles and because the key concepts are used in varying ways in different countries. There is no consensus, and it is rather unclear how social pedagogy and social work relate to each other in theory and practice. (Hämäläinen, 2013, p. 11)

From a theoretical point of view, we can probably say that what they share constitutes more than what differentiates them. We have already pointed out that how they have been treated as professions has differed greatly in different countries. From our point of view, and based on the results of this research, the difference lies mainly in the focus or approach of specific professionals in relation to the social situations and people they interact with. If social work and social pedagogy share a view that is not only about caring, but also about promoting the welfare of the people and communities they engage with, the former is more focused on the specific social situation of a person and ways of improving it, while the latter focuses more on the people themselves and the learning and changes that need to be induced, suggested or provoked in them so that they can work to improve the social situation in which they find themselves. In any case, we might say that, at present, this remains an open question that has been answered in different ways in different countries and traditions.

All the participating experts agreed that this study contributes to the theoretical debate on the nature of social pedagogy. In their view, the contents analysed are relevant from both a scientific and a social perspective.

The definition and characterization of social pedagogy provided in this study represent a first attempt to construct and consolidate it as a disciplinary field, which will be furthered and broadened through the analysis of its educational and professional aspects. The international perspective of social pedagogy we present here must in the next phase lead to the production of a universal map of the discipline that helps to differentiate it and frame it within different territories and contexts.

Notes

1. See [Appendix 2](#). Participating experts' level of knowledge regarding social pedagogy.
2. See [Appendix 1](#). Participating experts' characteristics: name, institution belonged to, research group.
3. www.onlineencuesta.com.
4. The percentages given in reference to degree of agreement are always an approximation, as data were analysed qualitatively.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix 1. Characteristics of participating expert (all participants gave their consent to have their name published in this study).

Table A1. Characteristics of participating expert.

Experts Country	Name	Institution	Research group
Finland	Juha Hämäläinen	University of eastern Finland	Leading position in several research groups concerning research on theory and practice of social pedagogy and social work
Norway	Paul Stephens	University of Stavanger, Norway	This varies, but I work with, for example, the Universities of London and York in England, the University of Athens in Greece and the University of Bergen in Norway
Denmark	Niels Rosendal Jensen	Aarhus University, Department of Education	Research Programme of Social Pedagogy
Sweden	Lisbeth Eriksson	The department of behavioural sciences and learning	No
Belgium	Filip Cousse	Ghent University	Social welfare studies
Germany	Heinz Sünker	Wuppertal University	CUSP/IoE London
UK	Chris Kyriacou	University of York	Social pedagogy research
	Gabriel Eichsteller	ThemPra Social Pedagogy	No
Spain	José Ortega Esteban	Universidad de Salamanca	IUCE
	José Antonio Caride	Universidad de Santiago de Compostela	Grupo de Investigación en 'Pedagogía Social y Educación Ambiental' (SEPA-interea)
	Marti-Xavier March Cerdà	UNIVERSITAT DE LES ILLES BALEARS	Grupo de investigación y formación educativo y social (GIFES)
	Gloria Pérez Serrano	Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED)	Intervención Socioeducativa
Portugal	Isabel Baptista	Centro de Estudos em Desenvolvimento Humano/UCP	Ética Prática Para Profissões Sociais
USA	Daniel Schugurensky	Arizona State University	No
Chile	Eusebio Nájera Martínez	Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso	No
Brazil	Roberto da Silva	Universidade do Sao Paulo USP)	Grupo de Pesquisa Pedagogia Social
	Evelcy Monteiro Machado	Universidade Federal do Parana (UFPR)	Pedagogia Social (USP); NEPS (UFPR)
	Danilo Streck	Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos	Mediações pedagógicas e cidadania

Appendix 2. Participating experts’ level of knowledge in social pedagogy

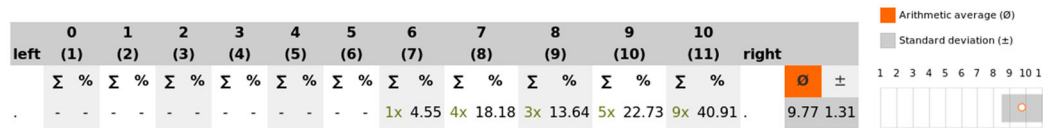


Figure A1. Participating experts’ level of knowledge in social pedagogy.