

Social Pedagogy in the World Today: An Analysis of the Academic, Training and Professional Perspectives

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Abstract

We present a study of social pedagogy from a comparative perspective with the aim of offering an international overview of the current status of social pedagogy in the world. The lack of a universal conceptual definition for the term causes epistemological confusion and inaccuracy and has led to the emergence of multiple polarised perspectives on the concept in different contexts. Our study analyses the current situation from the academic, training and professional viewpoints, with the aim of developing a series of indicators to construct an updated, global and integrated view of social pedagogy. Each of these three visions forms a phase of research and uses a specific methodology: the academic perspective (qualitative methodology with the Delphi method), the training perspective (quantitative methodology with a statistical analysis) and the professional perspective (qualitative methodology with semi-structured interviews). Based On the triangulation of all results in different phases, our principal findings define the main dimensions of social pedagogy: contextual, historical, epistemological, functional, professional, methodological, normative and ethical and political. It also confirms that it is possible to define a theoretical, transdisciplinary and international common ground on social pedagogy and describe the specific features characteristic of each context.

Keywords: academic perspective, comparative study, professional perspective, social pedagogy, training perspective

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Introduction

Since the beginning of this millennium, social pedagogy has spread across different parts of the world. This is due, on the one hand, to the introduction of the model of socio-pedagogic intervention in the English-speaking world, specifically in the field of residential care for children and young people (Cameron and Moss, 2011). After almost a decade in which authors questioned its applicability in that context, its usefulness would appear to have been confirmed (Hatton, 2013). And, on the other hand, due to the ever-expanding spread of social pedagogy in Latin America, attested by the number of congresses and publications generated on this subject in the last decade (Kornbeck and Úcar, 2015).

If to these emerging processes in different countries we add the existence of heterogeneous and often polarised opinions regarding the aims, actions and methodologies of social pedagogy (Úcar, 2011), it appears necessary to analyse the current movements and transformations undergone by social pedagogy around the world.

In recent years, various comparative studies have been conducted on the development of social pedagogy, especially in the European and Latin American contexts (Kornbeck and Rosendal, 2012; CGCEES, 2013; Kornbeck and Úcar, 2015; Hämäläinen and Eriksson, 2016; Janer and Úcar, 2016, 2018). However, among these, there is a predominance of studies comparing models, traditions or situations between two or three countries rather than globally.

The research question we are considering here and intend to answer with this research is the following: 'Is there a cross-cultural and transdisciplinary—theoretical or methodological—organizational core to social pedagogy or, on the contrary, is it necessary to define as many social pedagogies as there are cultural and disciplinary development contexts?' (Úcar, 2013, p. 2).

Our general aim is, therefore, to determine the current state of social pedagogy in the world via the global analysis of the academic, training and professional perspectives. In doing so, we will, as far as possible, attempt to develop and define a theoretical, transdisciplinary and international core for social pedagogy.

This text begins with the presentation of the theoretical framework of the study. We then describe the structure and methodology used in the different phases of the research. The next section provides the most relevant results obtained. Finally, in the last section, we present our conclusions.

Theoretical framework

A review of the existing pedagogical literature on the theoretical and professional conceptualisation of social pedagogy depicts a

complex scenario in which the following controversial points can be identified:

The fact of it being an ambiguous, complex and problematic concept from which many perspectives and approaches are derived, which are often divergent

Social pedagogy has been involved in the dynamics of problematisation and paradigm shifts (Nájera, 2010). Its complexity and ambiguity derive from three aspects:

1. The term 'social' being attributed to pedagogy (Caride, 2004). The term 'social' is ambiguous, has different meanings and can be used in different ways in multiple contexts (Hämäläinen, 2012). Consequently, it seems that the use of the concept of social pedagogy varies according to different ways of interpreting and applying the term 'social'.
2. The multiplicity and heterogeneity of existing approaches in social pedagogy as regards objectives, scopes, methodologies, techniques, spaces and participants (Kornbeck and Rosendal, 2009; Úcar, 2011).
3. Lastly, due to its dual theoretical and practical status, which generates different perspectives and approaches in relation to its professionalisation. Still today, the dilemma remains of whether social pedagogy is an area of knowledge, a professional field of work, a field of research or all three simultaneously (Kornbeck, 2009; Hämäläinen, 2013).

The lack of a unified and homogeneous theory on social pedagogy

As a result of the multiple interpretations and perspectives regarding the concept of social pedagogy, 'it is largely a semantic mess and the theoretical self-conception of social pedagogy is incoherent' (Hämäläinen, 2012, p. 3). The lack of a single and unified model or theory on social pedagogy creates difficulties with regard to developing a universally accepted definition of it (Hämäläinen, 2003; Caride, 2004; Smith and Whyte, 2008; Braches-Cyrek and Sünker, 2009; Úcar, 2013; Janer and Úcar, 2016).

The tension existing between academics and professionals

Over time, the distance between academics and practitioners (Braches-Cyrek and Sünker, 2009; Kornbeck and Rosendal, 2009; Úcar, 2011) has

made the difficult task of delimiting the practice of social pedagogy in an integrated way even more difficult (Coussée *et al.*, 2010). One possible reason for this distance between academics and professionals could be a growing academisation taking place within the social sciences (Storø, 2012).

At a macro level, academics use more scientific and rigorous terms to refer to socio-educational actions and interventions. In contrast, professionals prefer to use a language that is closer to the people they work with so as to promote socio-educational relationships (Madsen, 2006).

The different ways in which social pedagogy is expressed and configured in different countries

The way in which social pedagogy manifests itself in different practices derives from the ideological, political and cultural approaches characteristic of each country where it is developed, leading to the concept of social pedagogy being used with different meanings in different contexts (Lorenz, 2008; Kornbeck and Rosendal, 2009; Coussée *et al.*, 2010; Smith, 2012; Storø, 2012; Hämäläinen, 2013; Janer and Úcar, 2016).

Social pedagogy is confused with, identified with or viewed differently by other disciplines and social professions

The professions in the social field are intrinsically linked to the historical, political and social development of each country. This causes great difficulty when seeking out both linguistic and conceptual equivalences in the policies, structures, systems and role of the professions in each country (CGCEES, 2013).

Hämäläinen (2012) characterises social pedagogy as an umbrella concept that is externalised as an educational practice through other disciplines that work in the social field, such as social education, social work, sociocultural animation and community development. These scenarios for intervention share a common denominator that must be located within the framework of the social and cultural policies of the country.

Research methodology

The comparative approach was selected as the methodology for analysing the data in this research, situating the study within the Comparative Social Pedagogy movement (Kornbeck and Rosendal, 2012).

Conducting comparative research allows, on the one hand, the contrasting of views, content and results from the different phases undertaken and, on the other, a comparison of the characteristics of social pedagogy in different countries. However, it should be noted that

although this research falls under the comparative perspective, we do not strictly apply the comparative method. The reasons that make it currently impossible to apply the comparative method are as follows:

- a. Multiple and diverse approaches and characteristics in the implementation of social pedagogy in different countries.
- b. Great heterogeneity of realities existing within each country.
- c. Although it is possible to speak of a common and universal core of social pedagogy, there is still too great a variability between countries to apply a comparative methodology.

The aforementioned factors, derived from the current state of development of social pedagogy in the world today, prevent the systematic and exhaustive drawing up of international comparison indicators that make it possible to conduct a scientifically rigorous juxtaposition of factors. Our research aims to offer a current international panorama. We do not seek to generalise the results either in each particular country or between them. The purpose of this work is exclusively to describe the current trends and define a common framework that paves the way for future lines of research.

The statements presented in this research are based on:

- a. A systematic analysis of the theory,
- b. the empirical work carried out and
- c. triangulation of the results obtained in the different phases.

Structure and phases of the research

Social pedagogy is analysed through three perspectives: academic, training and professional. The confluence of these three perspectives provides a complete and rigorous conceptualisation of what social pedagogy entails. Following the idea of [Hämäläinen \(2013\)](#), it is a model that integrates science (research), education (discipline) and occupation (professional work):

- On an ‘academic level’, the contributions and reflections made by scholars regarding what social pedagogy entails are the starting point for defining it. They offer a scientific, historical and systematic view, which are the keys to its comprehension.
- On a ‘training level’, for years the study of social professions in higher education has appeared as a recurring theme in research. However, unlike specific professions that are already established, such as social work or social education, social pedagogy has not managed to become itself as a concrete profession in many countries (e.g. Spain or Nordic countries). This may be because it has not been specified within a single profession or considered the same profession in different countries,

or also due to the already pointed out lack of a unified, homogeneous and universally agreed theory.

- On a ‘professional level’, it is important to consider the contributions of different social pedagogy professionals working in different areas of intervention equally. Their contributions are a key to understanding what social pedagogy entails in different contexts.

The research has a circular structure (Figure 1), that is, it begins with the review of the pedagogical literature on what social pedagogy entails, but our aim is to rethink and question the theoretical bases analysed as the different phases of the study are developed. The research comprises the following five phases:

Phase 1

On the basis of a review of the state of the art in social pedagogy, comparison dimensions were developed that allow us to define and validate a theoretical, transdisciplinary and international nucleus of the concept.

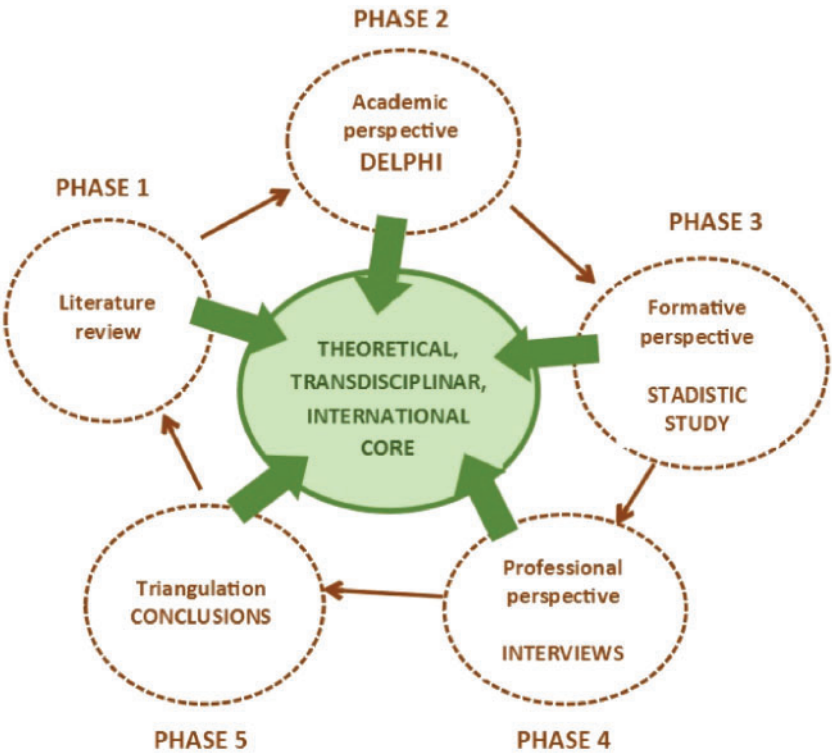


Figure 1: Phases of the research. Author’s own work.

Phase 2: Academic perspective

The dimensions defined in the previous phase were agreed and validated by various academic experts from different countries using the Delphi method (Janer and Úcar, 2016):

Methodology:

- Qualitative methodology
- Intentional sample: Eighteen academic experts from twelve different countries. These countries have been chosen because of their important trajectory and interest in the development of social pedagogy.
- Selection criteria of the sample: They work in the academic field; they have a high level of knowledge of social pedagogy and they have a degree of prestige and academic renown in the field of social pedagogy.
- Techniques and instruments: The Delphi method comprises ongoing work with experts over time. It 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 allowed us to compare different experts' views regarding the most important aspects of social pedagogy.
- Timing of this phase: December 2013 to October 2014.

Phase 3: Training perspective

A descriptive analysis was conducted of the current educational courses on offer in social pedagogy at different universities around the world in order to determine whether this training includes the most important dimensions of social pedagogy validated by academic experts (Janer and Úcar, 2018).

Methodology:

- Quantitative methodology with a descriptive approach, which had no inferential purpose.
- Intentional sample: Two hundred and sixty-six universities from fifty different countries
- Selection criteria of the sample: There is a very broad range of universities that deal with social pedagogy in some way around the world. This hinders the development of a comparative international study because there is no cartography available to determine the relevant population. The sample has, therefore, been taken from the world's best universities in Social Sciences and Education according to the QS World University Rankings

for 2015. This means that some countries had a greater sample of universities than others and that some countries have none. We attempted to address this limitation by adding universities from a Google keyword search. Only the top fifty hits were considered from the search, which was done for all five continents.

- Techniques and instruments: The data were encoded using quantitative variables and processed via the statistical programme SPSS. v17.
- Timing of this phase: November 2014 to December 2015.

Phase 4. Professional perspective

An analysis was conducted that reflects social pedagogy professionals' views on socio-educational action in different countries by means of semi-structured interviews.

Methodology:

- Qualitative methodology
- Intentional sample: Ten professionals from ten different countries
- Selection criteria of the sample: They work in the field of social pedagogy, social education or social work; they are professionally recognised and have a minimum of ten years' practical experience in the field.
- Techniques and instruments: The semi-structured interview was designed using data obtained from two previous phases of research. After collecting the data, an analysis of the discourse and content was conducted using Atlas.ti software (version 6.2.). The discourse analysis considered two dimensions: the text (interviewees' different ideas and arguments) and context (the interviewee's specific country). The data processing and analysis followed these steps: (i) creating categories for analysis; (ii) organising data; (iii) encoding data and (iv) presenting the main results.
- Timing of this phase: October 2015 to September 2016.

Phase 5. Triangulation of content and results and conclusions

This is a phase in which the results were contrasted and triangulated in order to determine whether concordance could be found between the views of the academic experts and the professionals and the content of higher education courses in social pedagogy (see Online Annex 1, sample of all countries).

This study conforms to internationally accepted ethical guidelines and relevant professional ethical guidelines. The CEEAH (Ethics Committee on Animal and Human Experimentation) approved this study on 25 May 2018 (reference 4270).

All experts participating in this study gave us verbal consent for publication of these results.

Dimensions of social pedagogy analysed

Based on the state of the art and the controversial points analysed, a series of key dimensions were developed to understand, explain and interpret social pedagogy. These dimensions refer to both theoretical and practical aspects and are the central thread of the entire study. During each phase, these dimensions were analysed from the corresponding perspectives:

1. Contextual: The importance given to context when developing proposals for social pedagogy projects.
2. Historical: Key historical elements in the conceptualisation and development of social pedagogy over time.
3. Epistemological: The considerations social pedagogy has in terms of science, art or practice and the specific weight of each of these dimensions in shaping social pedagogy.
4. Functional: The roles social pedagogy does or can fulfil in our modern-day societies.
5. Professional: Which specific professions in the social sphere are related to social pedagogy. We establish three levels of relationship with social pedagogy for different professions in the social field: (i) professions with a core relationship with social pedagogy; (ii) professions with a close relationship with social pedagogy and (iii) professions with some type of relationship with social pedagogy.
6. Methodological: Which methodologies are primarily used in the sphere of social pedagogy.
7. Normative (theoretical and practical): What role is awarded to pedagogical norms in the socio-pedagogical relationship.
8. Ethical and political: What impact or importance ideological and political frameworks have in the conceptualisation and practices of social pedagogy.

Results of the study

The views of experts, content and most relevant results were contrasted and triangulated for each of the dimensions studied. The state of the art dimensions, validated by academic experts, were analysed in relation to educational content and professional action. [Figure 2](#) depicts the process followed.

[Table 1](#) summarises the main aspects of the dimensions in social pedagogy for each of the three perspectives analysed (A: academic; T: training; P: professional). The most relevant concordances in each dimension are presented, together with other key issues that were not addressed in them.

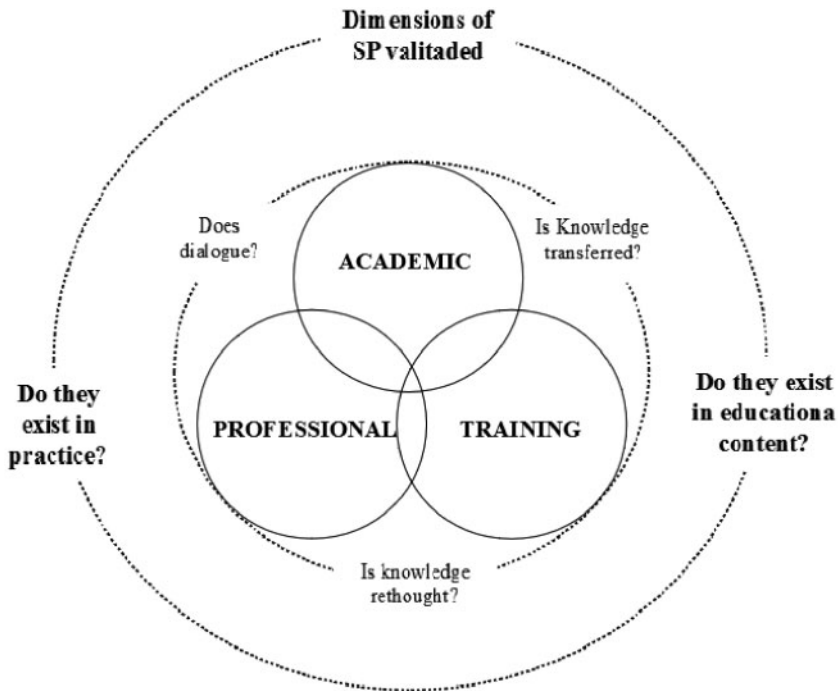


Figure 2: Triangulation process for the three key perspectives of social pedagogy. Author's own work.

It is worth noting that for the training perspective, we specify the percentage of syllabuses that include each studied dimension. We have classified them as follows: low presence (from 0 to 30 per cent), average presence (from 30 to 60 per cent) and high presence (from 60 to 100 per cent) (Table 1).

One of the relevant aspects observed in the triangulation of the results is the different views held by academics and professionals with regard to certain aspects of social pedagogy. Table 2 shows the main ideas derived from the analysis of the academic and professional perspectives in the form of statements made by these experts. The statements presented are those in which there was a high degree of consensus among academics and among professionals. This allows us to deduce on which points academics and professionals may differ.

Each of the ideas presented is based on literal excerpts taken from the academics participating in the Delphi (Phase 2) and the professionals interviewed (Phase 4) (see Online Annex 2, coding used for each academic and professional participant).

In Table 2, those statements in which there is agreement between the two views are marked in green; those in which there is still some

Table 1. Triangulation of the results of phases 2, 3 and 4

Contextual	A	It is possible to define a common core of social pedagogy but considering the specificities of each context. <u>Common indicators:</u> (a) provide educational solutions to social problems, (b) social and cultural framework, (c) be intentional, axiological and teleological, (d) commitment to social justice, freedom and equity, (e) educational scientific knowledge, (f) have an important political dimension and (g) oriented in, through and towards practice. <u>Specific indicators:</u> (a) centres and infrastructures where it is implemented, (b) available resources, (c) socio-educational intervention projects and (d) specific professions or occupations in which it is embodied.
	T	Presence in the educational content (36.8 per cent)
	P	It is possible to define a common framework but considering the specificities of each context. It is essential to consider the institutional and political framework of each country in order to develop appropriate interventions. It does not translate directly to one profession, but there are efforts to develop and publicise the discipline as a powerful tool for working with people, groups and communities with difficulties and social problems through education.
Historical	A	Reference to relevant pedagogical authors and works, such as the Pestalozzi's concept of integral education, the German social philosophy led by Paul Natorp and Paulo Freire's thoughts on Popular Education. It is born out of the need to respond to individual and social problems facing people, groups and communities.
	T	Average presence in the educational content (34.2 per cent).
	P	Not analysed.
Epistemological	A	Social pedagogy is a science, a practice and an art. It is also considered a scientific academic discipline that develops educational content.
	T	High presence in educational content with regard to conceptual and theoretical issues (64.5 per cent). Epistemological issues are present in 50 per cent of the syllabuses analysed.
	P	There is no agreement on its epistemological status. Need to create environments for dialogue between theory and practice.
Functional	A	As a discipline, it systematises knowledge into theory and contributes to academic scientific advancement. As a practice, it provides educational solutions to social problems.
	T	Low presence in educational content (9.7 per cent).
	P	Its specific functions vary according to context, scope, project and participants. Its functions related to accompaniment, teaching, mediation and permanent analysis are emphasised, always within a context of empowerment and equality.
Professional	A	Different professional fields, with social work, social education, pedagogy, working with children, young people and adults and socio-community-based intervention being the professions that have the most direct relationship to it.
	T	High presence in educational content with respect to the heterogeneity of intervention areas (81.5 per cent) and professionalisation of social pedagogy (67.1 per cent).
		Low presence in educational content with regard to analysis of the relationship between social pedagogy and other professions.

(continued)

Methodological	P	Importance of work and coordination with other professionals and disciplines. Heterogeneity of intervention fields. Professionals' specific areas of action depend on the specific context.
	A	Qualitative (ethnography, interviews, participatory observation, action research, comparative studies, case studies, sociobiographic methods). Quantitative (official statistics, comparative studies, questionnaires). Creative (artistic and recreational workshops, theatre, art, photography, dance, music).
	T	High presence in educational content (68.4 per cent).
Normative	P	Basically qualitative. Some techniques reported by professionals may be considered as creative methodology (artistic theatre workshops, photography, art, music). The techniques used are suited to the scope, project and participants. They promote, as far as possible, participatory techniques. Difficulty in evaluating results. Lack of systematic and continuous evaluation.
	A	It responds to a normative social purpose: its mission is to act and intervene in reality with criteria that guide decision-making and socio-pedagogical action in favour of what is deemed necessary and desirable to improve people's lives and social cohesion.
	T	No presence in educational content.
	P	The pedagogical guidelines that guide actions are a key in any socio-educational intervention. Establish spheres of action and decision between professional and participant, but non-negotiable rules do exist. Pedagogical rules vary and depend on the specific context, project and participants involved in the intervention.
Ethical and Political	A	It has a clear political and ideological dimension and a strong commitment to social justice. Its historical, economic and social trajectory influences the position awarded to social pedagogy in the development of the Welfare State and educational policies.
	T	High presence in educational content (77.6 per cent).
	P	The political system and ethical and social values of the context have a direct influence on socio-educational action. Professionals should participate in developing social and educational policies.
Other important information	A	Importance of the organisational and economic dimension in relation to resources allocated to promoting projects and interventions in the field of social pedagogy.
	T	A total of forty-five university degrees in social pedagogy have been found. Social pedagogy still plays a secondary role on the syllabuses of the universities analysed, constituting a subject on other degree courses such as social work or social education. Increased interest in the field of social pedagogy.
	P	What social pedagogy entails will change and expand over time due to the new social and cultural circumstances surrounding the problem of refugees and border closures. According to professionals, social pedagogy training is still too theoretical, with little connection to professional practice. Rise in the privatisation of services.

Source: Author's own data.

Table 2. Agreements and disagreements between academics and professionals on the dimensions of social pedagogy

Statements regarding social pedagogy	A	P
Contextual		
It is possible to define a common framework of social pedagogy		
'It is not only possible but also desirable to promote the debate around an integrative epistemological nucleus. Only a debate of this kind, nourished by both academics and professionals, will show the richness of knowledge in the transdisciplinary and transcultural vocation of social pedagogy' (A13)		
'There should be a common corpus and a group of educators thinking about and reflecting on the aspects of social pedagogy' (P10)		
It is essential to consider the institutional and political framework of each country in order to develop actions and interventions appropriate to each context		
'Social pedagogy is constructed according to the particular historical, political, economic, social and cultural contexts' (A15)		
'The term of social pedagogy must be put in context to know what we mean when we talk about social pedagogy' (P9)		
Epistemological		
Social pedagogy is a science, a practice and an art		
'Social pedagogy is a science, a practice and an art' (A14)		
'I think it's something between a science and a practice' (P3)		
Social pedagogy provides a system of theory for other disciplines		
'Knowing that it projects the knowledge that articulate it in an academic discipline and in different professional fields, among which Social Education is its main point of reference' (A10)		
'Social pedagogy it's kind of a big wing. Education, social work, social politics, it's somewhere in this big wing' (P5)		
The connection between theory and practice is emphasised		
'The crucial aspect about social pedagogy is the connection of theory and practice' (A8)		
'I think they are integrated; you can't take out one of the parts. Both are necessary' (P9)		
Functional		
It is possible to define common functions for all social professionals		
'Social pedagogy fulfils two basic social functions: helping people and groups to integrate socially, avoiding social exclusion and committing to social inclusion. And re-socialising those groups with social difficulties' (A11)		
'When you talk about functions, it will obviously always depend on the sphere [...] the specific features of the intervention, action, because I think that these are specific for each type of group' (P8)		
A social pedagogue has a theoretical function and a practical function		
'Social pedagogues are both practitioners and users of the discipline' (A5)		
'The social pedagogue does not go down into the practical field, but leaves that in the hands of the educator; the one who plays the dual role and makes double the effort is the educator, not the social pedagogue' (P8)		
Professional		
There is a terminological problem when defining social professions because they all involve different types of work according to the characteristics of each context		
'The profession social education has different understandings in different countries' (A4)		
'It's a language problem [...] is always the problem in research, difficult the contact with people from other countries, with all the cultural and social norms, and political' (P4)		
Social pedagogy can intervene in a wide variety of fields of action		
'All professions potentially have educational value, so they can all use the foundations of social pedagogy' (A16)		
'Our scope of work is very broad' (P3)		
Methodological		
Social pedagogy uses quantitative, qualitative and creative methods		
'It mainly uses qualitative, quantitative and creative methodologies' (A10)		
'It's more qualitative [...]. We think about it very much as the hands on directly in connection with the children and young people. So it's very much relationship based' (P3)		

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Statements regarding social pedagogy	A	P
Normative		
As far as possible, pedagogical rules must be agreed with participants		
'It isn't so much about giving rules, about prescribing them, but about helping to guide action within a framework of shared decision-making, through democratic processes, taking into account commitments and responsibilities acquired with the rights of individuals and society' (A10)		
'We invite the participants in their own decisions. We involve them in their life and the decisions made around them' (P3)		
Ethical and Political		
Social pedagogy has a strong political component		
'As a value-based human rights profession, it has an ethical dimension. And ethical practice is always political practice too' (A8)		
'I think this is a kind of political statement also [...] I would say that social consciousness is the political aspect that is leading our work' (P5)		
The ethics and politics of the context have a direct influence on social pedagogy		
'Political and ideological frameworks shape the conditions we work in and are the frameworks that we constantly have to make explicit and to make them subject of our debate on how to organise society so that all people can live a dignified life' (A5)		
'The political context and social context has a huge effect on practical action and that's local as well as national' (P4)		

Source: Author's own data.

distance between what academics and professionals think are marked in red.

Conclusions and discussion

The conclusions allow us to describe the current state of social pedagogy in the world and define the trends and points where there is still controversy. The reflections presented here have one single objective—to show a current snapshot of the different ways of understanding and developing social pedagogy in order to begin to compile a sound and rigorous corpus for its scientific, training and practical aspects.

In order to develop a solid and common vision of social pedagogy, we have analysed the three perspectives key to understanding it: academic, training and professional. Following the idea posited by [Hämäläinen \(2012\)](#), we understand social pedagogy as an academic discipline that develops training knowledge articulated in different social professions.

The results obtained allow us to define a common core of social pedagogy and also identify its specific features in each context. Social pedagogy is adapted to the different scenarios of each society and, therefore, requires a common macro-theoretical framework and a micro-theoretical framework for each particular context.

Although social pedagogy is still in a stage of constructing its own identity as a discipline and field of practice, a strong social pedagogical tradition exists that can influence the process of discovering its potential to transform society (RYWU, 2010).

In order to understand and award value to social pedagogy, some basic and universal principles are needed regarding its concept, object, objectives and methodology. That said, it is also essential to consider the institutional and political frameworks in place in different countries so as to develop social pedagogy actions and interventions appropriate to each context.

Based on the results obtained from the three analytical perspectives, we can conclude a series of common and consensual aspects:

Social pedagogy was born out of circumstances of social vulnerability and risk (Otto, 2006) to provide an educational response to social problems (Lorenz, 2008; Hämäläinen, 2013). It influences the social integration of individuals and groups, fosters structural changes in people and communities and promotes a critical and transformative view of reality.

Nowadays, social pedagogy as a practice has begun to position itself more in the sphere of community and human development (Hämäläinen, 2012, Schugurensky and Silver, 2013) and not so much in that of social needs and care. The professionals interviewed stated that the function of their professional action was more educational and pedagogical, in contrast with the more therapeutic work of a social worker. As an academic discipline, social pedagogy provides a theoretical system of knowledge that contributes to academic scientific development on the basis of its theoretical, conceptual, epistemological and methodological foundations. These functions of social pedagogy are adapted to each specific context, each work situation and each specific project.

Social pedagogy is a form of political knowledge, since it contributes to the debate on educational and social policy (Hämäläinen, 2003; Otto, 2006; Lorenz, 2008; Kornbeck and Rosendal, 2012; Ücar, 2013; March *et al.*, 2016). Social pedagogy plays a role in politics in that it creates new knowledge from academic research to reorient public policy design, institutional reorganisation and improvements in legislation. Thus, it offers a theoretical framework for the welfare society. According to the professionals interviewed, educational and social policy should be defined in collaboration with social professionals.

The political system and moral values of each country have a direct influence on socio-educational actions (Lorenz, 2008, Kornbeck and Rosendal, 2012; Ücar, 2013; March *et al.*, 2016). 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 fall and are produced and reproduced within ideological fields

that shape strategic political actions. It has a commitment to social justice and community education, the promotion of equality and the active participation of citizens.

Social pedagogy is a normative science (Hämäläinen, 2003; Petrie *et al.*, 2009; Braches-Cyrek and Süunker, 2009). Pedagogical principles are necessary to guide socio-educational action, as they lead to specific learning and behaviours by individuals and the community. The social, political, ethical and cultural contexts play an important role in defining these pedagogical principles, and these are, therefore, defined within and adapted to the specific context of action by taking into account the characteristics of the field in which the work is being done, the project is being developed and the individuals, groups or communities on which it is intervening. These principles can, depending on the context or situation, be prescribed by the pedagogue or agreed upon and constructed with the participant (Úcar, 2013). This dimension refers to the intentional, teleological and axiological sense of the educational processes promoted by social pedagogy, pedagogical-social work being conceived as a reflexive, conscious and strategic response to citizens' social needs, demands or problems, committed to social well-being and human development.

We have observed that the normative dimension is not contemplated in the curricula analysed. One possible reason for this is that it could be applied to all training content, since the pedagogical principles guiding action could be studied within other dimensions of social pedagogy, such as the professional, ethical or methodological dimensions.

The professional field of social pedagogy is very broad and heterogeneous. Social pedagogy is constituted as a theoretical body based on educational, social and cultural work oriented in, by and towards practice. To characterise the professional dimension of social pedagogy, we must talk about two key aspects: a) its relationship with other social disciplines and professions and b) its multiple areas of intervention.

Regarding the former aspect, the academics participating in this study stated that social pedagogy projects its knowledge into different professional fields. Social work, social education, pedagogy, work with children, young people and adults and socio-community intervention are the professions with which it has a more direct relationship. The professionals emphasised the importance of there being coordination between these social professions. This refers not only to how individual practitioners should work but also how the team, organisation and system in general are coordinated and interrelated on the basis of similar, shared and interdisciplinary principles (Petrie *et al.*, 2009; Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2012).

The second aspect refers to the diversity and multiple areas of action inherent in social pedagogy. Attention to children, young people, adults,

the family and the community (Coussée *et al.*, 2010; Storø, 2013; Janer and Úcar, 2018) are the more prominent areas of intervention addressed in the contents of the social pedagogy curricula analysed. School pedagogy and social pedagogy related to free time appear as relevant contexts of action (March *et al.*, 2016).

Quintana (1997) presents a classification of the intervention areas in social pedagogy. From the data obtained in this research, we propose an updated version of his classification (Table 3).

Social pedagogy employs a variety of different methods according to the type of work and participants involved. The professionals interviewed stated that these methods are mostly qualitative. However, according to the academics, these can be quantitative (statistics, comparative studies, questionnaires), qualitative (ethnography, interviews, participatory observation, action research, comparative studies, case studies, socio-biographical methods) and creative (artistic and recreational workshops, theatre, art, photography, dance, music, action research). This differing view regarding the use of methods makes sense if we consider that academics are more dedicated to research, which is why they add

Table 3. Areas of intervention in social pedagogy

Areas of intervention in social pedagogy
Care for children
Family care
Hospital pedagogy (social care)
Care for young people
Social pedagogy for leisure
Care for marginalised groups
Pedagogy in school
Intercultural issues
Care in the community
Pedagogy in prisons (judicial pedagogy)
Public and private organisations
Adult care
Care for special educational needs
Civic education
Care for the elderly persons
Volunteering
Environmental education
Social services
Prevention of juvenile delinquency
Socio-cultural animation
Religious issues
Violence prevention
Adolescent care
Prevention and treatment of drug addiction
Pedagogy in the workplace
Social movements
Public administration
Care for women

Source: Janer and Úcar, 2018, p. 14.

quantitative methods to qualitative and creative ones. All of these methods and techniques are also studied as part of the training curricula analysed.

There are difficulties in evaluating the outcomes of social pedagogy, as these are long-term and often the result of a relational dimension, or in other words, professionals' interaction with people, groups and communities (Úcar, 2011). It is, therefore, important to undertake continuous and systematic evaluation working from a methodological triangulation perspective that integrates both quantitative and qualitative methodologies (March *et al.*, 2016) and adapts techniques and instruments to the needs of the particular context.

To conclude, we present a diagram that represents social pedagogy as we understand it, based on the research carried out (Figure 3). Pedagogy offers a particular theoretical and methodological way of

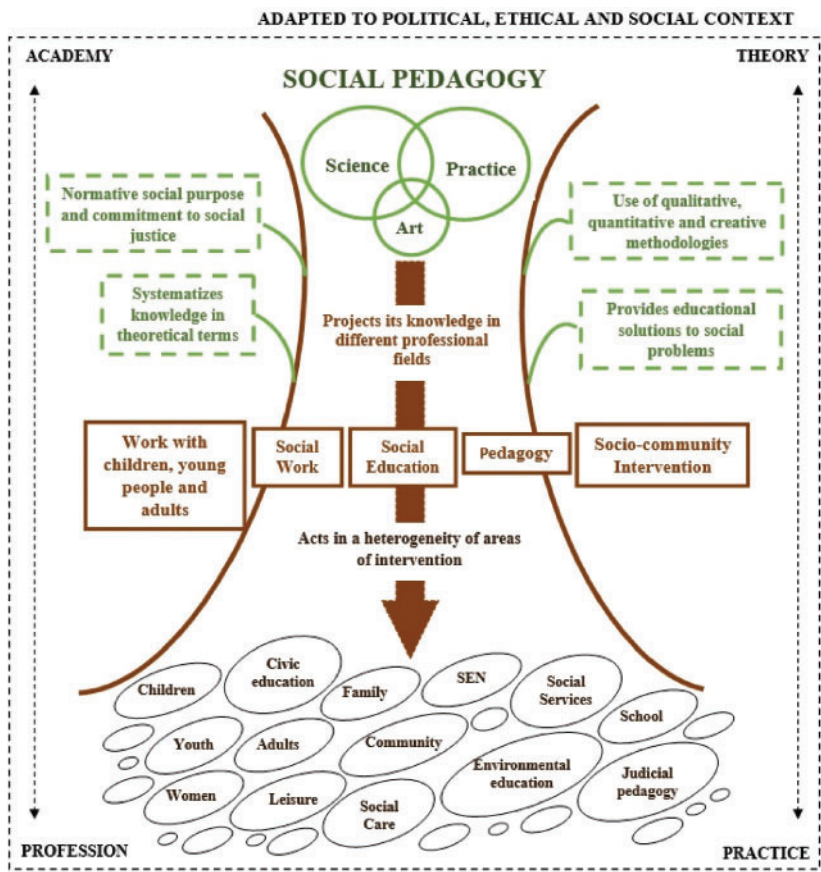


Figure 3: Conceptualisation of social pedagogy. Author's own work.

thinking and, in practice, offers a set of organised pedagogical actions aimed at influencing and changing social and educational mechanisms (Petrie *et al.*, 2009). Following the idea posited by Hämäläinen (2012), which defines social pedagogy as an umbrella concept that is externalised as an educational practice through social education, social work, sociocultural activities and community development, we propose our own way of conceptualising and understanding social pedagogy constructed on the basis of a comparative international outlook.

Positioned within the political, social and cultural framework of each country, social pedagogy is a science, a practice and an art form that is born out of the need to provide an educational response to the sociocultural situations and problems, whether individual or collective, faced by people, groups and communities. On the one hand, as an academic discipline, it is knowledge that leads to the development of training processes articulated in different professional spheres, the professions most directly related to it being social work, social education, pedagogy, work with children, young people and adults and socio-community intervention. And, on the other hand, as a practice, it can be used to intervene in very heterogeneous areas of action.

It uses its own methods, which are adapted to the context, field and participants, and influence and foster change and an improvement in the quality of life of individuals, groups and communities.

It has a clear ethical and political dimension and a strong commitment to social justice, having a normative social purpose: its mission is to act and intervene in reality with criteria that guide decision-making and socio-pedagogical action in favour of what is deemed to be necessary and desirable to improve people's lives and social cohesion.

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Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at *British Journal of Social Work Journal* online.

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