



## Self-knowledge is the formation of professional identity in social work students

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**ABSTRACT:** This article analyzes the importance of self-knowledge as basic and transversal competence in social work studies. The university training stage is the most suitable space and time for the future professional to incorporate a look at oneself, to situate oneself in reality in a more conscious and critical way and to reflect on knowledge and skills in a highly complex and changing context where the professional practice is going to be developed. Under this premise and within the framework of a teaching innovation project funded by the Complutense University of Madrid, the impact of a series of pedagogical practices will be evaluated in a group of 72 new Social Work students.

This teaching project aims to contribute to the following Sustainable Development Goals 2030 agenda: Quality Education (SDG 4); Gender Equality (SDG 5), and Reducing Inequalities (SDG10). A quality education must encourage students to acquire knowledge about themselves that translates into a better relationship with society; to consciously position themselves in the face of situations of vulnerability, inequality and social exclusion and imagine the most appropriate responses to intervene in them (SDG 10). Likewise, social work is still a highly feminized profession. The processes of reflection on gender as a hallmark of identity can contribute to the greater empowerment of these professional women (SDG 5).

**Keywords:** self-knowledge, social work, student, identity, meaningful learning, quality education



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Although the university training stage is a brief and initial phase in professional life, it is understood as the most suitable space and time to begin to incorporate the disposition and view of oneself in relation to the task that one intends to develop and put at the service of others. In other words, the exercise of self-knowledge, or self-care as Socrates proposed in the First Alcibiades (Aristotle, 2014), must encourage students to situate themselves in the professional reality and

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question themselves about the meaning of their choices, in a more conscious and critical way, before intervening in a highly complex and changing social context, i.e. before experiencing it in society. In the same perspective, Concepción Arenal (1863), one of the great Spanish thinkers and moral reformers, spoke of the need to incorporate reflexivity and empathy as an exercise before the intervening-interventionist relationship (Who am I? How do I place myself before the other? How do I explain and experience his or her problems?) This disposition allows social work, and any profession dedicated to caring, to recover that breath of moral and human elevation in social, political, legal and economic relations.

In this sense, the first questions about the expectations and motivations of students in their choice of university studies are significant, as they sometimes respond to a wide, fragile or insufficient range of images and knowledge with which they begin their education (Azpeitia, 2019). In turn, socializing institutions - including the education system and the media - disseminate and amplify ideas about professions that do not go beyond the surface level knowledge of the individual or perimetric knowledge of society, or put *efficiency* interests first, establishing themselves without contrast and reflection among the student and professional collective (Herrán Gascón, 2003). Also thinking about social work, these images perpetuate a negative conception of the studies and their students, even affecting their quality (Hanley, 2019).

Likewise, *self-awareness* or *self-care* is conceived, according to Kaushik (2017), as the fundamental tool or instrument for social intervention, just as the phonendoscope is for the doctor or the paint or chisel is for the artist. This is because self-awareness sets in motion the rational and effective use of knowledge, skills and values, and all this is the fundamental basis of the professional relationship. Therefore, this author states that knowing the real self is the precondition for using it in social work and, often, starting from ignorance is the best way to pave the way and gain access to authenticity. Chinnery and Beddoe (2011) stress the importance of exploring different variables such as personal, relational, cultural, political or organizational situations. "The use of the self is seen as an essential component of reflective practice, of different ways of accessing knowledge" (p. 91). Although this knowledge is seen as a potential resource, the *self-care* or the gaze on which people rely is not an unquestionable or fixed recipe, as it does not dominate, does not judge, does not seek rigidity, but rather enables, contains, and modulates to live care/self-knowledge as a political exercise in the framework of social relations.

Self-knowledge and the formation of the identity of the student and future professional must allow him/her to maintain the tension between stability, protection and security; that which by being a reference and founding itself as a structure that enables him/her to confront *otherness*. However, it must provide sufficient openness to modulate in contexts where life does not allow itself to be trapped and the awareness of new ways of being and doing in the social world is crucial. For, as Manuel Cruz (1996) would say, the capacity for openness is the essential or distinctive feature of the human being. Along with this tension, there is a need to underline the complexity of the pedagogical process. Its struggle to incorporate into university space and time and conceive the task as something never-ending. Along these lines, Fiona Gardner (2001) argues that there is widespread agreement in Australian academia that one of the primary aims of social work education is to increase self-awareness (Ariño, M., Berasaluze, A. and Ovejas, C., 2016 & Catalonia,

Bañez, T., Matulic, V., Falcon, A. and Boixadós, A., 2016) and the capacity for meaningful reflection on the values, ideology, implicit models of practice and personal difficulties of the student body. However, it also recognizes the difficulty of creating spaces for learning and, even more challenging when it comes to assessing its acquisition.

In Gardner's qualitative study (2001), we can observe and analyze some of the elements that influence students' self-knowledge, such as the change of attitudes and values throughout their training process: a) That the new ideas or contents presented, on the one hand, broaden the knowledge and perspective on the causes of social or individual problems - social policy - and, on the other hand, that they can be connected with known experiences or reactions - this happens, for example, with the subject of social work with families. b) The possibility of listening to other students talk about their attitudes and values, the debate about problems and approaches to tackling them. c) Group work allows for exchange and discussion to take place before it is taken to the large group. d) Student interaction with peers and the teacher. e) Informal discussions outside the classroom. f) The teacher as a role model and expression of values and positions.

Grant and Kinman (2012) argue that reflective practice is a self-protection mechanism that can help future professionals manage stressful situations better and improve performance and resilience. The authors value its incorporation in the early stage of job training as vitally important, as the professional literature warns of the resistance that emerges when trying to propose it during the daily task of social intervention, justified by its complexity and lack of time.

To conclude this preamble, self-knowledge can be portrayed as the art of knowing and asking oneself honestly about desires, interpretations, attitudes, and expectations. If part of the professional essence can be acquired in other ways, some questions can only be answered by the social worker him/herself - as our predecessor Mary Richmond warned us. Furthermore, as already underlined above, "what a caseworker 'thinks internally' about the life of the individual and the responsibility of society has a significant influence on his/her daily work. This is a question that each social worker must answer separately and in his or her own words" (2005, p. 441).

This is the setting for the following pedagogical experience, the purpose of which is, on the one hand, to make students aware of their motivations in their choice of studies and to ask themselves about their belief system through which they interpret social situations and, on the other hand, to relate the knowledge and questions that refer to the construction of their identity as a future social worker, fundamental at the beginning of their training and companions throughout their professional career.

### **Method and resources**

The pedagogical experience presented below was carried out with the collaboration of 72 first-year students of the Degree in Social Work at the Complutense University of Madrid, all of them enrolled in the compulsory subject Theoretical Foundations of Social Work. In turn, four students from the second year of the degree in Social Work, one Ph.D. student, two social work professionals and five lecturers from the Social Work and Social Services knowledge area and the Sociology: Methodology and Theory knowledge area, all of them with a shared background in innovative teaching practices, participated as mentors.

The project was articulated around two general objectives: a) To promote self-knowledge

as competence to be acquired by students of the Degree in Social Work. b) To incorporate the student-professional relationship to increase the interest and satisfaction of students and teaching staff, articulating and revitalizing theoretical knowledge with practical knowledge. This will result in the reciprocal enrichment of the academic community and the professional community.

Thus, the teaching project has been developed in two directions, both of which are interrelated and which transcend the stipulated academic year:

- During the 2020/2021 academic year, three teaching practices have been identified, developed, and evaluated that are best suited to the objective of incorporating self-knowledge as a transversal competence in social work. All these practices are articulated around the knowledge of the subject and, among these activities, the interview with a professional take on special relevance. This experience aims at meaningful learning (Novak, 1998), deep and interrelated, which puts students in contact with social work professionals and their institutions and contexts of social intervention. Alongside the exchange of images and experiences, which is part of any identity task (Aranguren, 1998), it has been ensured that the student plays a leading role as the historical subject of his/her own learning; the resulting learning is related to the curriculum of the subject; it is contextualized learning that favours the capacity for critical reflection in contact with and the knowledge of the surrounding reality, and it generates informal collaboration networks between the university and the professional world. All this was evaluated through a self-completed questionnaire of 35 questions to the whole group of students.

- At the same time, a longitudinal qualitative study of a representative sample of 10 students was initiated, considering selection criteria such as gender, age, the access route to studies and preference. In addition to delving deeper into the discourses on the classroom experience, these in-depth interviews initiate a broader investigation with the aim of studying the process of identity construction of potential social workers over seven years. In this way, we will be able to explore and delve deeper into the self questions that are interwoven throughout the training process and their integration into the future professional practice, an ideal time and process for researching professional identity (Caïs, Folguera and Formoso, 2014).

### **Analysis of results**

The expected impact is related to showing the potential of the activity of self-knowledge as a necessary tool in university education that allows for more conscious, meaningful, and relational learning. Together with this, other transversal learnings and other skills emerge, such as group work, creativity, conflict management, communication skills, etc. This section will describe the most significant elements that emerged from the practices carried out.

*Group photography: a starting point for reflection on the choice of studies.*

The first exercise is a questionnaire, which provides with a photograph, image or diagnosis of the student body from which to reflect individually and in groups, and to elaborate the first questions about personal reality and the choice of studies. It is a starting point to begin to look at *oneself* and a simple exercise in recognizing oneself in the community. There are two characteristic elements of social work that are reproduced and maintained over time: gender and social class (Azpeitia, 2019; Nebreda, 2018). In the group analyzed, among 72 students, 90.3% are women it shows a trend that continues and is still the majority today when it comes to the caring

professions. To get closer to the social class, the information provided by the residence and the parents' level of studies were analyzed. More than 65% of the student body resides in a municipality in the Community of Madrid - with a special location in the southern beltway or in a district of the capital with a per capita income below the average for the region. In turn, 22.2% of fathers and 35.2% of mothers in this study population have a university education. Although this figure has increased considerably with respect to previous decades, due to the increase in the educational level of the Spanish population, the percentage is below the average for high school students and below the average for universities (Azpeitia, 2019). It is striking that in the first research on the profile of social workers in Spain at the end of the 1960s (Vázquez, 1969), 68% of respondents were in the upper or upper-middle social class, 28% in the lower-middle class and 4% in the working class (with 4% who did not answer or did not know). These data show a slippage of social class in the choice of these studies in recent decades, and, in turn, this has an impact on the ideology and positions of the new professionals.

Two doctoral theses carried out at the Complutense University develop the analysis of social class and the choice of university studies. On the one hand, Langa's research (2003) warns that parents' cultural capital influences their children's choice of university studies and points out those degrees with a lower educational level, among which social work stands out. On the other hand, Azpeitia (2019) places social work as one of the degrees with a clear gender and social class profile. Although women have a higher average preference for these studies, it is not the priority of those who have a high level of family studies in the social space of choice. It is curious to observe how the researcher finds attitudes of resistance, denial or invisibility when attempting to delve into the discourses on gender and social class as key elements in the configuration of professional identity. The discourse of inferiority and social conditioning disappears or is avoided. This aspect will be addressed in future research.

It is worth highlighting the access route to university studies regarding the academic profile. A total of 77.8% access through the University Entrance Examination (EvAU) after having completed the Baccalaureate in Human and Social Sciences (63.9%), the Baccalaureate in Sciences (11.1%) and the Baccalaureate in Arts (2.8%). The rest of the students entered through a related Higher Level Training Cycle (22.2%). In turn, 12.5% work full or part-time while combining it with their studies. In the order of choice of the bachelor's degree in social work, 59.7% enrolled as their first choice and the remaining percentage prioritized degrees such as psychology, social education and criminology.

In relation to previous experiences: 70.8% have known a social worker before this choice, and 50% have had direct or indirect contact with social services. This information refers us to a possible personal and/or family/social experience that has participated in driving the choice process, as Azpeitia points out in his study (2019, p. 544), and, in turn, refers us back to the issue of the students' social class. Likewise, half of the group has been volunteers in some NGO, entity, association or religious institution. They position themselves politically as people of the left (66.7%), center-left (8.3%), center (5.6%), center-right (6.9%), right (4.2%) and apolitical (8.3%). 23.6% also consider themselves religious, 40.3% environmentalist, 87.5% feminist and 63.2% animalist.

The reasons that motivated their choice of studies were based on the five most frequently

mentioned statements out of 13 options: "because I want to fight against social injustice and for equality" (79.45%), "because it will develop me as a person" (76.4%), "because I like direct contact with people" (71.23%), "because it is a very important profession for society" (56.16%) and "because I want to acquire theoretical and technical knowledge for social intervention" (54.79%).

The reasons most frequently given indicate that the choice is value-driven is a means for social and structural change, and, in turn, personal change is pursued. On the other hand, the answers that situate social work as a means of work and professional and material development take second place. In other words, the profession is expected to improve and develop in the person involved and in the person being helped. This already appears in two reference studies of the profession, such as those undertaken by Llovet and Usieto (1990) and Estruch and Güell (1976), where the choice of profession is linked to the therapeutic desire to solve personal problems. They interpret that the motivation to help others seems to conceal a desire to solve one's problems.

*The pedagogical experience: analysis of three practices for self-knowledge.*

Although the exercise of reflective practice is transversal in the approach of the subject, this study focused on evaluating the impact of the three training activities that have structured the academic curriculum and based on which the students have been assessed. We could summarize all these activities in a time and work focused on reflection on oneself, on the other-professional and on the conception of social problems, all of which are fundamental for acquiring the Theoretical bases of social work (title of the subject).

The most relevant data from this evaluation indicate that more than 95% of the students have continued the entire process of professional self-knowledge, showing interest, curiosity, and willingness in the development of the project, have passed the subject and agree that it is a basic competence to incorporate in their training and in their professional future. Similarly, 78% of the students have increased their motivation to study the degree course after completing the self-knowledge and reflection exercises proposed in the subject; 84.7% recognize that there are significant relationships between self-knowledge and professional decision-making; and more than 40% of the students consider that these self-knowledge exercises have helped them to confront their prejudices, biases or stereotypes. On the overall satisfaction with the subject, 87% rate it at seven or more points on a scale of 1 to 10, and 53% of this percentage rate it between 9 and 10.

However, beyond the percentages, it is important to analyze how they express the training experience in their own words, based on the in-depth interviews carried out:

*E. 9. "The truth is that for me the experience has been great...what I said before, that freedom of expression and creativity are very much curtailed in this educational system, and I think it is a great opportunity to make an introspection about everything and to be able to think for yourself and say what you want".*

*E. 2. "We are all tired of studying by memorizing. If you tell me about other careers, maybe it's not so important, but in this one it is. Being able to think about these things... if you don't stop to think about some things, it isn't easy to answer. I was thinking: I'm going to get through this, but it's going to take me a while. But then you see the result,*

*and you say: I'm very happy with what I've achieved, and it's a process that you learn from if you work with dedication".*

*E.5. "It is something that we have never been asked to do at the High School, to reflect on how you are going to see yourself, what you want to do, what your qualities are. It's like you reflect on yourself from the start, on your own identity as a social worker and as a student. In the second job, the interview with a professional, you enter the world of social work, and you think about everything you said in the first job, for example, how I want my future users to see me. The third job is the one I liked the most because I got to know the different ways and views I have of developing my work. All the theories that have been offered to analyze social work... I found it quite incredible, to be honest, how the subject was approached".*

These discourses largely represent the general perception. There is a fundamental idea that is related to a change in the way of learning in the transition from high school to university: from memorization to meaningful and experiential learning, allowing freedom of expression, self-expression, and creativity. In this same sense, it is said that this type of training activity has involved a lot of dedication and time; they are not the jobs that can be answered or solved overnight. It involves more work and reflective effort than memorizing information. Nevertheless, this dedication has been rewarded in recognition of the subject's qualification and passing. Finally, it seems that the students have perceived the coherence and interrelation of the three assessment activities and the approach of the subject, as we observed in interview number five.

Next, we can also reflect on those elements suggested by Gardner (2001) in his qualitative research, as promoters and participants in students' learning processes:

The analysis regarding how the student underlines and perceives the practical and relational activities, these being the main or most satisfactory elements in their training process has been completed. As a result of this analysis, the exercise two, interviewing a professional in practice, remains the most highly valued (66.7%), followed by exercise one, self-knowledge and social work (59.7%), where the student reflects on the motivations and expectations that have led him/her to choose this professional training and on his/her abilities, principles and qualities for his/her future development. They also recognize the importance and impact of the rest of those involved: teachers, classmates and the very reality in which their learning takes place.

An important part of the self-completed questionnaire asks about the characteristics, skills, principles, and values of professional practice. In turn, the student identifies their strengths and weaknesses to be taken into account in their training development. The characteristics that stand out significantly are those that have to do with the relational task and the creation of the link: empathic (42.46%) and communicative (36.98%). However, the ability to solve problems (34.24%) and to make demands (32.87%) also have a privileged place, to the detriment of other aspects more linked to technical and professional skills: expert (13.9%), disciplined (8.3%) and organized (5.6%). This prioritization of social skills over intellectual skills coincides with the more in-depth study by Azpeitia (2019).

The students were also asked about the strengths they identified in themselves in relation to their future professional practice and what skills they should improve during these years. Most

of the words they chose about the strengths they identified in themselves coincided with those generally indicated for the professional group. However, it is striking how the skills that also need to be improved coincide with those aimed at the relationship, perception and connection with others: sensitivity, patience, empathy, shyness. In addition to that, the skills aimed at technical and theoretical training: reflection, observation, objectivity, argumentation, theory, are far behind the discourse and the desire for improvement.

Finally, the teaching staff and professional colleagues participating in this teaching innovation project agree that the teaching work is more satisfactory, in so far as being able to conceive the teacher-student relationship as a space for mutual learning and meaningful construction makes it possible to contribute, as proposed, to this construction of identity at the beginning of their training and as colleagues throughout their professional careers.

### Discussion and conclusions

The results of the teaching project presented and the theoretical framework in which it is inscribed presents social work training as a reflective experience, as proposed by Donald Schön's *reflective practitioner* (1983). To this end, one issue that needs to be discussed and reflected upon as teachers are the importance of alternating or balancing the lecture or theory class space with spaces for exchange and debate that allow students to talk about themselves concerning the subject matter. Perhaps, the fact that this experience was carried out during a limited socio-health context due to the World Pandemic has allowed experimentation with different learning methods and the daring to step out of the teaching comfort zone. It has also been a time for self-reflection to the detriment of social interaction, or at least real (non-virtual) interaction. As Gardner's (2001) discussion warns, the results of the experience raise new questions for the next course: How do we foster a sense of community? What group and class sizes allow students to interact sufficiently? How do we balance academic and experiential input? What learning do we aim for? And in line with this author, both teacher and student confirm the importance of demonstrating meaningful learning in social work.

Finally, this study would agree with Herrán Gascón (2003) that self-knowledge should be an educational right of the learner. Suppose this right does not express immediate profitability in social systems. Therefore, in the long term, maturity and personal development will result in a better relationship with society and, consequently, critical, conscious and adequate intervention in contexts where vulnerability, inequality and social exclusion cannot be solved in any way.

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