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RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AS AN ELEMENT OF THE PROFESSIONAL CULTURE AND TRAINING OF THE SOCIAL PEDAGOGUE

Abstract: *This paper investigates the intersection between religious education and the professional training of social pedagogues. Utilizing content analysis as the primary research method, the study examines curricula in social pedagogy to identify courses that could enhance the professional culture of social pedagogues. Education plays a critical role in the holistic development of individuals and societies, encompassing psychosocial, emotional, and intellectual growth. Within the field of social pedagogy, the principle of tolerance is paramount, as this discipline addresses the recognition, prevention, and correction of social phenomena, with a particular focus on negative behavioral manifestations. Religion significantly influences social interactions, values, and behaviors, underscoring the necessity of integrating religious tolerance into the training of social pedagogues. The research highlights a notable gap in Bulgarian curricula, which currently lack dedicated courses on religious education. This absence highlights an urgent need for standardization in the professional preparation of social pedagogues, ensuring they are adequately equipped to navigate and address the complexities of a diverse and dynamic society. The paper conducts a comparative analysis of international practices in social pedagogy, revealing a range of approaches to religious education across Europe, North America, Asia, Africa, and Australia. This analysis serves to underscore the need for the establishment of unified standards in Bulgaria to enhance the effectiveness and comprehensiveness of social pedagogue training programs.*

Key words: *religious education, professional training, social pedagogue, tolerance, curriculum*

ВЕРСКО ОБРАЗОВАЊЕ КАО ЕЛЕМЕНТ ПРОФЕСИОНАЛНЕ КУЛТУРЕ И ОБУКА СОЦИЈАЛНОГ ПЕДАГОГА

Сажетак: *У раду се истражује укрштање веронауке и стручног усавршавања социјалних педагога. Користећи анализу садржаја као примарну истраживачку методу, студија испитује наставне планове и програме социјалне педагогије како би идентификовала предмете који би могли да унапреде професионалну културу социјалних педагога. образовање игра кључну улогу у холистичком развоју поје-*

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динаца и друштава, обухватајући психосоцијални, емоционални и интелектуални раст. У области социјалне педагогије, принцип толеранције је најважнији, јер се ова дисциплина бави препознавањем, превенцијом и корекцијом друштвених појава, са посебним фокусом на негативне манифестације понашања. Религија значајно утиче на друштвене интеракције, вредности и понашања, наглашавајући неопходност интегрисања верске толеранције у обуци социјалних педагога. Истраживање наглашава приметну празнину у бугарским наставним плановима и програмима, којима тренутно недостају наменски предмети о верском образовању. Ово одсуство наглашава хитну потребу за стандардизацијом у професионалној припреми социјалних педагога, обезбеђујући да буду адекватно опремљени за навигацију и решавање сложености разноликог и динамичног друштва. У раду се врши компаративна анализа међународне праксе у социјалној педагогији, откривајући низ приступа верском образовању широм Европе, Северне Америке, Азије, Африке и Аустралије. Ова анализа служи да подвуче потребу за успостављањем јединствених стандарда у Бугарској како би се побољшала ефективност и свеобухватност програма обуке социјалног педагога.

Кључне речи: веронаука, стручно усавршавање, социјални педагог, толеранција, наставни план и програм.

Education is one of the foundations of society. It is a prerequisite and a means for the holistic development of the human factor, including its psychosocial, emotional, and intellectual enrichment at every stage of the process. In general, a variety of approaches and principles are positioned in educational systems, which determine their methodological status. At the present stage of their application in educational institutions, organisations and centres, the priority is given to the principle of tolerance among the subjects actively involved in them. The importance of this principle in the scientific field of social pedagogy is special. In essence, it is a dynamic scientific field aimed at the recognition, prevention and correction of social phenomena, with priority given to negative behavioural manifestations of subjects in the community.

In the interest of the scientific field of social pedagogy, it is important to identify the whole diversity of social spheres that have a bearing on the solution of the more global and more specific goals and tasks of science and, of course, on its practical implementation. One of these areas is **religion**. Religion, as a fundamental part of human experience, often has a significant influence on social interactions, values and behaviours. Therefore, understanding the relationship between religion and social pedagogy is essential for future professionals in this field.

It is also very important to focus on the controversial issue of the place of religion in educational institutions and the extent to which this is compatible with the training of social pedagogues as well as with the normative provision on the secular character of Bulgarian education.

This paper does not intend to pursue a polemic on the issue raised, as it will primarily focus on so-called **religious tolerance**. "Religious tolerance is the positive expression of the prohibition of discrimination on the discriminatory ground

of 'religion'. Religious tolerance can be seen as one of the hallmarks of the modern democratic state and society" (Staykov: 1).

An essential feature of any educational system is its ability not only to educate a certain contingent of subjects, but also to educate them, to contribute to their development as valuable individuals with a positive attitude towards themselves and other subjects - peers and adults. The application of appropriate approaches and the use of "appropriate methods ensures the effectiveness of the nature of intercultural social interactions, in addition to educational" (Tsvetanova, 2024: 651). The role of the social pedagogue is to participate in this process of personal growth, to offer mechanisms and resources for orientation and overcoming difficulties in this process, and also to contribute to the moral development of the potential of each subject of the community based on interaction, trust and respect for the opinions of others.

According to M. Mihaylov, morality and religion are social normative systems characterised by a specific purpose of regulating social interactions in the conditions of modern society. Since morality is able to overcome the differences between social normative systems (including religious ones) and to unify the perception of normative regulation, it becomes the main modern meta-legal regulator.

It is natural to comment here on the issue of the preparation of the social pedagogue with higher pedagogical education for the implementation of a process of religious tolerance among children and students in educational institutions, and specifically for overcoming stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination on religious grounds. Because it is essential "how social and personal values are reflected in the moral world of the individual," because "in addition to registering the external influence, the individual (the system) reacts to the influence, evaluating the facts as a natural manifestation of the environment or rebelling against it" (Tsvetanova, 2019: 277).

It is necessary for the social educator to approach the problem from an aspect of so-called cultural relativism, which essentially means accepting and cooperating with others in terms of both their and one's own socio-cultural characteristics.

In this context, the role of the social pedagogue is important:

- sharing the ideas of cultural relativism;
- learning about non-religious diversity;
- passing from the family culture to the school culture and community with its inherent values and norms;
- preventing discrimination in relation to religious differences.

According to M. Kyuchukova, the social pedagogue should be familiar with the social functions of religion, as well as with the basic mechanisms of action and systems of relations inherent in different denominations. "Religious organisations operate according to the legal framework of each country. They develop activities

on social themes and issues and are a good partner for the social educator in the search for modern integrative approaches to their solution. In the context of the modern world, the social pedagogue is able to recognise the symptoms of the harmful manifestations of religious and para-religious cults and organisations, which destabilise the personality” (Kyuchukova M. 2022: 109).

The knowledge of cultural diversity with the resulting differences in traditions, lifestyles, customs, and religious beliefs is often included in the professional training of social pedagogues within the framework of intercultural education, which is usually visible as a teaching discipline within the curricula for the preparation of specialists.

Intercultural competence is of key importance in the context of professional social and socio-pedagogical activity carried out with various vulnerable groups and communities (refugees, migrants, etc.). As B. Zdravkova (2011) put it in the context of professional social and socio-pedagogical activity, the competence in question is measured by a certain amount of knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviour, which are interrelated and interdependent. “The knowledge and practical skills acquired cannot be used effectively if there are prejudices and stereotypes about ‘others’. Negative attitudes towards ethnically and religiously different people have been historically embedded in society and overcoming them is an important prerequisite for the functioning of multicultural society as a whole and for the successful social fulfilment of the individual. For professionals in the helping professions, it is a prerequisite for good communication and effective interaction in the course of the helping process” (Zdravkova, 2011: 135).

Other disciplines relevant to the issue under consideration are religious studies, ethics, sociology, within which issues related to religious diversity and the need not only to recognise but also to accept it can be addressed.

The relevance of the training content or the amount and type of knowledge to be imparted as basic training of social pedagogues through the choice of specific disciplines, as well as the theoretical-practical training relationship in Bulgaria is still based on the experience and vision of individual universities or scientific communities that provide their training, The main reason for this situation is the lack of unified standards for professions and positions in the social sphere and, as a consequence, the absence of regulated requirements for professional education in social pedagogy (Zdravkova, 2020).

Based on the theoretical considerations presented on the issue, it is accepted that the *subject of the current study focuses on the examination of curricula for the training of students in the field of Social Pedagogy.*

The objective of the research implies a comparative analysis between the approaches in foreign universities to the study of religion within undergraduate programmes in social pedagogy and the educational practices in Bulgarian universities.

The main research method is a content analysis of curricula that are publicly available online, visible on the official websites of universities that train teachers. A comparative analysis is based on the data obtained.

Two universities from each of the following continents were selected to achieve the research objective Europe, North America, Asia, Africa and Australia, and two universities in Bulgaria. An in-depth analysis of the curricula was carried out, paying particular attention to the following aspects:

- **Availability of courses directly related to religion:** courses such as “Religion and Society,” “Intercultural Relations,” “Ethics and Moral Values,” etc. were studied.

- **Integration of religious perspectives in other courses:** Courses such as Sociology, Anthropology, History of Education were analysed to see if they included religious components.

Table 1. Study results

| Continent | University | Program | Finding |
|---------------|--|-----------------|---|
| Europe | University of Amsterdam, Netherlands /7/ | Social Pedagogy | Focus on cultural diversity and tolerance. Possible references to religion in the context of intercultural relations. |
| | University of Barcelona, Spain /8/ | Social Pedagogy | Courses such as “Cultural Anthropology” and “Human Rights” may address religious issues. |
| North America | University of Minnesota, USA /9/ | Social Pedagogy | Specialization in religion and spirituality, indicating considerable attention to these topics. |
| | University of Toronto, Canada /10/ | Social Pedagogy | Courses examining the role of religion and spirituality in people’s lives and in the provision of social services. |
| Asia | University of Delhi, India /11/ | Social Pedagogy | Focus on religious diversity in India. |
| | University of Tokyo, Japan /12/ | Social Pedagogy | Focus on Buddhism and Shinto in the context of Japanese society. |
| Africa | University of Nairobi, Kenya /13/ | Social Pedagogy | Focus on the role of religion in African communities. |

| | | | |
|------------------|---|-----------------|---|
| | University of Cairo, Egypt /14/ | Social Pedagogy | Focus on Islam as the dominant religion in Egypt. |
| Australia | University of Sydney, Australia /15/ | Social Pedagogy | Focus on cross-cultural communication and understanding, including religious differences. |
| | University of Melbourne, Australia /16/ | Social Pedagogy | Similar to Sydney, focus on intercultural communication and understanding. |

In different regions of the world, universities offering undergraduate programs in social pedagogy have varied approaches to incorporating religion into the curriculum.

Europe: At the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands, the social pedagogy programme focuses on cultural diversity and tolerance, and religion can be considered in the context of intercultural relations. At the University of Barcelona, Spain, disciplines such as Cultural Anthropology and Human Rights can also address religious issues.

North America: At the University of Minnesota, USA, social pedagogy includes a specialisation in religion and spirituality, which underlines the importance of these topics in the curriculum. The University of Toronto, Canada, also offers courses that examine the role of religion and spirituality in people's lives and in the delivery of social services.

Asia: At the University of Delhi in India, great attention is paid to the religious diversity that is characteristic of the country. At the University of Tokyo, Japan, the focus is on Buddhism and Shinto in the context of Japanese society.

Africa: At the University of Nairobi, Kenya, social pedagogy pays considerable attention to the role of religion in African communities, while at the University of Cairo, Egypt, a focus on Islam as the dominant religion is expected.

Australia: The Universities of Sydney and Melbourne place an emphasis on intercultural communication and understanding, with religious differences being considered in this context.

The cultural, social and historical specificities of each country and region are reflected in these different approaches to the inclusion of religion in social pedagogy programmes.

In the two universities studied in **Bulgaria**, the University of Veliko Tarnovo and the University "Prof. Dr. Asen Zlatarov" in Bourgas, the study of a subject directly related to religion is offered. In the first case it is Religious Studies offered as an optional subject with 30 hours of lectures and in the second case it is Philosophy of Religion offered as an optional subject with 15 hours of lectures.

The analysis of the curriculum of the specialisation “Social Pedagogy” at the Southwestern University “Neofit Rilski” shows that it does not include a subject that directly provides training in the field of religion. This subject is only thematically included in the academic discipline “Social Pedagogy” in the part of topics for seminary exercises.

General trends

- **Individual approach:** The inclusion of RE varies considerably from one university to another.

- **Interdisciplinary approach:** Religion is sometimes studied in the context of other disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and philosophy.

- **Focus on cultural diversity:** Many programmes stress the importance of understanding different cultural and religious perspectives.

- **Practical applications:** Knowledge of religion can be applied to work with disadvantaged groups, migrants and refugees.

Conclusion

With increasing cultural diversity, studying religion within socio-educational studies is becoming a necessary prerequisite to building a more just and inclusive society. An analysis of the experiences of other universities shows that such issues are a structural component of their curricula.

This again raises the question of the need to introduce a uniform standard for the training of future social pedagogues. In Bulgaria, the Regulation on the State Requirements for the Acquisition of the Professional Qualification “Teacher” introduced a standard for the professional preparation of future teachers. It describes in detail the competencies of future teachers and the subjects that must be included in the curricula for their training. Other pedagogical specialists are referred to in the context of teamwork and professional interaction. However, although the post of “social pedagogue” is listed in the National Classification of Professions and Positions in the Republic of Bulgaria, no standard for the professional training of specialists has been developed at this stage. From an organisational point of view, the introduction of standards with subsequent requirements is a mechanism that works well in practice and will allow to ensure a uniform minimum in the training of these specialists and at the same time to develop in disciplinary detail the social pedagogical subject matter that is leading in terms of specialised professional training of students - future pedagogical specialists. The data obtained as a result of the research has implications for the process of developing standards for the professional preparation of social pedagogues in Bulgaria, with the aim of ensuring that future specialists are prepared to work effectively in a diverse and dynamic society.

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