

INFLUENCE OF THE PLACEMENT PERIOD ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY FOR SOCIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

INFLUENCIA DE LAS PRÁCTICAS EN EL DESARROLLO DE LA IDENTIDAD PROFESIONAL DE LOS ESTUDIANTES DE EDUCACIÓN SOCIAL

A INFLUÊNCIA DOS ESTÁGIOS NO DESENVOLVIMENTO DA IDENTIDADE PROFISSIONAL DOS ESTUDANTES DE EDUCAÇÃO SOCIAL

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<p>KEYWORDS: professional identity social educators initial training professional placement previous experience</p>	<p>ABSTRACT: The Social Education Degree placement for the National University for Distance Education (UNED) allows students to experience and reflect upon the labour situation. Its influence on the development of the student professional identity is an important subject for both placement tutors and teachers. The study combines the search for and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data to assess the influence of the Professional Placement III course, the students' first contact with the real business world, on the development of their professional identity. Throughout the research it has been possible to determine an emerging concept in the professional identity of students before the start of the placement, which changes and consolidates depending on their experience within the placement programme; these results are similar to those obtained in research relating to other professions similar to Social Education (Pontes, Ariza & Del Rey, 2010). Therefore, it can be stated that this course is an important variable that especially influences the development of the professional identities of future social educators.</p>
<p>PALABRAS CLAVE: identidad profesional educadores sociales formación inicial prácticas profesionales experiencia previa</p>	<p>RESUMEN: La materia de prácticas en el Grado de Educación Social de la Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED) permite a los estudiantes vivenciar y reflexionar sobre la realidad laboral. Su influencia en el desarrollo de la identidad profesional del estudiante es un tema importante para los docentes y tutores de prácticas. El estudio realizado combina la búsqueda y el análisis de datos cuantitativos y cualitativos para conocer la influencia de la asignatura Prácticas Profesionales III, que supone la primera toma de contacto con el mundo real de la empresa sobre el desarrollo de la identidad profesional de los estudiantes. A lo largo de la investigación se ha podido constatar la existencia de un incipiente concepto de identidad profesional en el estudiante antes del inicio de sus prácticas, que cambia y se consolida en función de las experiencias vividas en las mismas; resultados similares a los obtenidos en investigaciones de otras profesiones cercanas a la del educador social (Pontes, Ariza & Del Rey, 2010). Por tanto, se puede afirmar que esta asignatura es una variable importante que influye especialmente en el desarrollo de la identidad profesional de los futuros educadores sociales.</p>

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PALAVRAS-CHAVE:
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RESUMO: O estágio na graduação em Educação Social da Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED) permite aos estudantes experimentar e refletir sobre a realidade do emprego. A sua influência sobre o desenvolvimento da identidade profissional do aluno é uma questão importante para os professores e tutores dos estágios. O presente estudo combina pesquisa e análise de dados quantitativos e qualitativos para conhecer a influência da disciplina Estágio Profissional III, a qual constitui o primeiro contacto com o mundo empresarial para o desenvolvimento da identidade profissional dos estudantes. Ao longo da pesquisa, foi sendo confirmada a existência de um conceito emergente de identidade profissional no aluno antes do início dos seus estágios, mudando e se consolidado com base nas experiências deles decorrentes, com resultados semelhantes aos obtidos em investigações de outras profissões análogas à de educador social (Pontes, Ariza & Del Rey, 2010). Por consequência, pode-se dizer que a disciplina de Estágio é uma variável importante que influencia particularmente o desenvolvimento da identidade profissional dos futuros educadores sociais.

1. Introduction

Professional identity is a complex subject of study, and even more so if associated with social education professionals. On the one hand, this profession is considered to be emerging due, mainly, to the materialisation of a multicultural society and the emergence of social needs requiring the intervention of a versatile professional who, on many occasions, overlaps with the activities of other more established professionals, generating labour conflicts. The definition of professional profiles in social intervention is necessary to establish and consolidate this profession (Ruíz-Corbella, Martín-Cuadrado & Cano-Ramos, 2015). On the other hand, and in line with the previous approach, it is necessary to identify the very nature of the daily work carried out in the different areas of socio-educational intervention, taking into account the information collected from other countries. The comparison carried out amongst social education professionals in Latin American countries and Spain shows both differences and similarities that help us to understand the development of professional identity (Martín-Cuadrado et al., 2014). From a European perspective, in countries like Germany and France social educators are considered 'specialised' professionals, with a multi-purpose role in relation to the types of services that the work entails and the type of 'users' they relate to (Scarpa & Corrente, 2007). The growing social demands of this professional figure in various real-life socio-cultural situations has drawn socio-educational areas and contexts that interact and multiply, generating a multitude of intervention situations. But professional identity is not only determined by environmental or contextual factors; in this paper, we will provide information about other factors which influence, in some way, the evolution of the concept, like the practical training of the undergraduate student (García-Vargas et al., 2015).

The study of the relationship between practical training and the professional identity development

of the social education student is the project designed to be eligible for one of the Ministry for Education, Culture and Sport collaboration grants (2014), with the intention of getting university students started on research tasks within the didactics department. The project was developed and accepted during the academic year 2014-2015 in the field of Professional Placements, for the Professional Placement III course (henceforth, PPIII), Didactics Department, School Organisation and Special Didactics, Education Faculty, National University of Distance Education (UNED). At that time, we initiated the research to find out the impact of practical training on the professional identity of the undergraduate student at the UNED, considering it another link within the chain that makes up the professional identity of the student.

Professional Placements are developed through five subjects, each of them comprising 6 ECTS (credits). The PPIII and Professional Placement IV courses are the only opportunity that the student will have to experiment and put into action, at the placement centre, the competences that are acquired throughout the process, enriching their basic training (Table 1).

Table 1. General Overview of the PPIII and PPIV courses for the Social Education Degree (UNED)

Course	Placement III	Placement IV
Contents	-Analysis of Needs. -Intervention Plan Design in a real-life context.	-Intervention in a real-life context. -Evaluation of the intervention.

The analysis of professional identity focuses on the PPIII course and on its training process shared between the university and the placement centre, maintaining a symmetric relationship between the two institutions (Zabalza, 2011). The European Higher Education Area considers placement cen-

tres as training areas from the point of view of student competence training, given that they are places where they can put into practice the training acquired during their degree studies. Therefore, it is fundamental to establish good coordination and joint responsibility amongst the different agents that take part in the practical training (Novella, Pérez-Escoda & Freixa, 2012), thus facilitating the development of the professional identity of the student throughout the placement period.

For this reason, the study attempts to discover how placements influence the professional identity of the Social Education undergraduate students, while offering us, at the same time, the opportunity to find out the training needs that may exist in the established initial training proposals. This will enable us to set up new, innovative and responsive strategies so that the students achieve an unbiased view of their pre-work experience, allowing them to position themselves as future social educators by acquiring continuously a professional identity throughout their placement (García-Vargas et al., 2015).

After researching the subject within existing literature, we noted that published material is scarce. This may be due to the fact that the Social Education consolidation process has been an intense journey travelled in a very short time (Vilar, 2006). Also, the studies carried out focus on disciplines within the social theory framework, in a placement process with delimited sociocultural significance; for example, the fields of teaching, specially the initial training of Secondary School teachers (Pontes, Ariza & del Rey, 2010), social work (Morales, 2010), pedagogy (Molina, 2013) and health.

It can be seen that the difficulty arises from it being a discipline which, according to Vilar (2011) and in contrast to other professions, has an inductive nature; it stems from specialised activities in different fields which, subsequently, must be abandoned to be integrated into a greater organisation, and be publicly recognised as a profession that integrates all of the previous specialisations. Therefore, it is a profession that begins with a learning process limited by the experiential context, and where the richness of its training is related to and linked with context-specific characteristics. For this reason it needs, subsequently, a more systematic and structured academic teaching process in order to guarantee learning and to be integrated within the social professions.

2. Training and Development of Professional Identity

The concept of identity is found within the mental representations of the individual, and it develops from a socialisation process. This is the way

in which the sense of belonging to a social group appears, and also the meaning one develops for the self. When the information is stored in the self, it allows it to be organised depending on our experiences, at the same time that the attitude and identity towards the things around us is formed. This is due to the fact that no one can create their identity separate from the considerations others make (Botia, Fernández & Ruiz, 2005; Greenwald et al., 2002; Dubar, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Thus, two types of identities are established: a personal and a social one (Bolívar & Segovia, 2004).

The personal identity of the Self is configured from a biographical process, but it needs the identity attributed by others and the assumed identity in order to establish itself. It is independent of time and responds to historical determinisms that arise at each period and moment in life from the personal and social point of view (Botia, Fernández Cruz & Ruiz, 2005). This process nurtures from all types of experiences, that initially begin with parents and family, where the individual begins to know who he or she is. Later, it develops further within the educational institution, where the work of the teachers is not just to enable learning, but also to guide and awaken curiosity and critical thinking, opening oneself to others, until the time of the first work experiences and employability. Here, one develops autonomous thought and reasoning, creating one's own professional judgement.

During the identity process developed by the individual, there also begins to appear traces of the professional identity of the subject, that can be known through their life history. That history illustrates the first steps showing the professional identity of the student through the reading of their own biography. In it, the individual finds the motives that form the basis of and give meaning to their choice of profession as social educator.

The narrative allows articulation according to themes, showing some characters, some interaction contexts, some relationships; all through a social-biographic journey. This allows us to understand both the peculiarities of the subject's life as well as the social-historic contexts in which they occur (Merino, Nieto & Solbes, 2013, p. 77).

In the development of their placement training, students have the possibility to confront the real purpose of their professional working future. This, in turn, allows them to manage their social-emotional competences and, at the same time, it reflects the individual aspects of the training situation that the placement offers. This may, on occasions, lead to anxiety episodes when taking charge of profes-

sional activities in real-life contexts and with tangible consequences, as they are yet not fully trained (Andreozi, 1996). Even so, negative experiences also contribute to forging the professional identity of the students.

It is evident that the direct experiential learning of the student in their day-to-day professional placement allows them to develop their professional identity, linking the 'doing' and the 'being'. These are two of the four basic pillars of education determined by UNESCO (1996) which, together with the 'how to be' element, allow the coaching and training of the future professional in such a way that they are not simply protagonists, but also an active part of their training (García-Vargas et al., 2015; Novella, Pérez-Escoda & Freixa, 2012; Beltrán, Iparraguirre, Castagno, Fornasari & Gutiérrez, 2012).

The role that the initial training of the Social Education professional is one of the factors that make up the acquisition of professional identity. This must be taken into account when thinking about what social-educational work means, and deciding how is configured and developed during the practical training process of the student. This will not arise in an automatic and spontaneous manner, but will occur during a sustained process over time, triggering critical understanding through symbolic systems, experiences and subjective representations.

Thus, the Professional Placement subject is a fundamental period in the development of the future Social Education professional. During this period, the professional searches for the rationale, the support and the consolidation of the knowledge and competences that arise in the different professional scenarios as future social educators. Enriching their abilities and skills to dominate situations, this makes students learn how to relate theoretical contents with practical professional experience in a real and simulated way.

3. Research Approach

3.1. Context

As mentioned above, the research focuses on the PPIII course for the Social Education Degree (UNED). It offers students their first opportunity to come into contact with the working world through their degree studies; it seems inevitable that it constitutes an important milestone in their training and the development of their professional identity.

The PPIII course began in the 2011-12 academic year, and it was then that the research started to take shape. Data has been collected up until the 2014-15 academic year.

3.2. Objectives

The general aim of this research is to discover how the PPIII course influences the professional identity of the UNED Social Education undergraduate student.

The specific objectives are:

- To determine the existence of backgrounds on other professional contexts and fields regarding the students practical training process and its development in the professional identity.
- To carry out an initial diagnostic to discover ideas, motivations, expectations and experiences that the students have at the start of PPIII.
- To obtain information about the development or the initiation of professional identity when completing the professional placement period at the placement centre.
- To review the results collected to determine if PPIII is an important variable for the development of professional identity.
- To identify the causes that influence interest in the social educator profession, and which may help improve initial training programs and, in the future, continuous development programs.

3.3. Methodology

Throughout this research, it being descriptive, a mixed methodology was used, integrating the search for and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, to build, according to Erickman and Roth (2006), two phases of a single process through which relevant information can be gathered for the case in question.

Information collection has been carried out using a variety of tools (surveys, questionnaires, interviews, group discussions and virtual debate forums), prepared for the research project, geared towards the group of PPIII students and aimed at improving the current situation.

Given the wide time spectrum and the variety of tools employed for data collection, the research has been divided into different phases. However, it is necessary to point out that, to be able to adequately propose and discuss the purpose of this research, we selected experiences and texts dealing with professional identity in professions related to social educators, given the lack of research and studies on the subject in question.

The studies on professional identity closest to social education are found in the field of teacher training. Here, the professional identity of the students is influenced by previous positive and negative experiences at different times of life, prior to

Table 2. Professional Identity Questionnaire

Dimension	Categories	Variable	Working Definition of the Variables	Items	Types of Scale
Situational Data	Personal Data	Name	Personal identification	1.1.1	
		Age	Personal time reference	1.1.2	
	Personal Data	Associated centre	The education institution the student came from	1.1.3	
		Self-image	Personal view	Personal professional identification	2.a.1
				2.a.4	
	Initial expectations		What is hoped to be achieved when starting the placement	2.a.3	Likert
		Initial attitude	It identifies the attitude with which they approach the placement	2.a.2	
	Social Mission of the Profession	What they offer to the placement	What they contribute professionally to the institution	2.b.1	Likert
		Professional competences	It determines the acquired attitudes throughout the degree	2.b.5 2.b.9 2.b.8	Likert
		Experience	Practical knowledge acquired prior to the placement in other organisations	2.b.2	Dichotomous/ Likert
		Availability	Positive disposition to cooperate with the centre	2.b.4 2.b.6 2.b.7	Likert
		Motivation	Related to being eager to learn	2.b.3	Likert
	Values	Personal values	Related to the values that the student starts with before the placement, based on the Deontological Principles (professional documents of the State Association of Social Education, 2007).	2.c.1	Dichotomous

university education (Pontes, Ariza & Del Rey, 2010), and it is reaffirmed and established through subsequent professional activity by assimilating knowledge and recognising others within the profession (Bolívar, 2007).

Regarding the training of the social educator, we find studies based on the aforementioned specific competences of 'know how' and 'know to be' to achieve a more precise professional identity, focusing on the acquisition of the personal attitudes of the student for their future insertion into the profession (Esteban, Amador & Pérez de Guzmán, 2013; Monreal, Cárdenas & Terrón, 2013). The research phases were:

1. Initial Phase

Taking, as a point of departure, the sources consulted at the beginning of the research, we thought it necessary to carry out a diagnostic of the initial objectives, interests, motivations, expectations and experiences of the students with respect to the profession and to the Social Education professional.

Based on the ideas put forward by Vilar (2011), the survey 'Evaluation of the professional identity at the end of the placement' was designed to find out some aspects of the professional identity of the students who finished PP3 of the Social Education Degree. Information was collected regarding different dimensions: self-image, the social mission of the profession, and acquired values.

The survey was systematically given, amongst the academic years 2011-2014, to the students in the PP3 course. The data received allowed us to draw their life trajectory and to know if the real-life experiences that students go through during the development of their professional placements help them to acquire a sense of belonging to a professional group, as well as the vision of their own practical experience.

Based on the data obtained from the survey and with the purpose of collecting information on the professional identity of PP3 students at the start of the placements, we designed a specific questionnaire made up of different dimensions, categories and variables (Table 2).

With the objective of checking its validity, the questionnaire was subjected to various validation processes:

- Expert judgement: The questionnaire was subjected to the consideration of five field-expert professors from the UNED Faculty of Education (Table 2).
- Pilot sample: Taking into account the opinions received from the experts, the questionnaire was modified and given to an initial sample of 47 students, who gave their opinion. It is important to note that this initial sample is sufficient given that, for this type of process, between 30 and 50 subjects are generally used (López Pérez, 1996).

With all the information collected, the final tool is developed. Likewise, using the Crombach Alpha Coefficient to calculate its reliability, a coefficient of 0.856 was obtained. Bearing in mind that and according to Thorndike (2003), a coefficient greater than 0.60 is acceptable, we can state that the questionnaire developed and applied to PPIII students during the academic year 2014-15 has sufficient validity and reliability to collect the necessary data for the research in question.

Continuing on with the research process and the identification of needs, during the 2014-15 year the 'Professional Identity Research Forum' (Table 3) was created with two lines of *debate* on the communication area of the PPIII virtual course (Plataforma aLF, UNED).

Professional Identity Research Forum	No. of messages
Why did you choose to be a Social Educator?	19
What do you expect to learn during the placement period?	12

The information provided by the students in the debates has allowed us, through the life-history technique, to collect information relative to their previous experiences, self-image, initial expectations and personal values which they bring to their first real practical training. This allowed us to know their relation to the professional identity development of the students during this phase: 'Life histories allow us to take, as a point of departure, the knowledge and experiences that have configured the student's professional identity as the basis for biographically inserting the training and for integrating professional identity into personal identity.' (Goodson, 2004, cited in Bolívar, 2007, p. 15).

2. Development Phase

The researcher must make decisions regarding the weight of the data collected in the context of the inquiry and estimate its relevance during the different phases of the research process, as well as combine them or triangulate them within the framework of the study (Ivankova, 2015). During the initial research phase, it was considered necessary to carry out a significant reconstruction to evaluate the intended objective. This was done using new tools that allowed us to know how the training practice has influenced the development and initial professional development of the student once the placement was completed.

Taking as a reference the collected data from the previous phase and taking into account the diverse bibliography consulted on the subject, we used the *interview* technique and we developed a tool with semi-structured questions. We considered that this was an optimum and adequate method for completing collected information through other tools, given also that 'the design of good research must stem from what is actually known' (Richards, 2015, p. 29).

Three phone interviews were conducted with the students who had just finished the 2014-15 academic year placements. We selected students from different geographical locations (Madrid, Toledo and Valencia) who had obtained high marks in this course and who had a positive attitude towards our project.

Finally, consideration was given to the possibility of a *discussion group*, to collect precise information about the perceptions, knowledge and analysis of the reality of the subject matter (Gento, 2004).

The discussion group was conducted with students from the Associated Centre in Madrid who had completed PPIII during the 2013-14 academic year. They were chosen based on their positive attitude to participate and their availability to attend the meetings.

Information was collected taking, as a point of departure, a self-reflective analysis on the development of their placement training, where we identified two dimensions: the dimension of self, which includes their perceptions and beliefs, and the identity for others (Day, 2006; Domínguez, 2006; Vilár, 2006). The balance between their initial ideas, motivations, expectations and experiences and their final results, was the basis of our comparison analysis in order to better achieve objectives and to improve new teaching programmes.

The dimensions, categories and variables considered in the interview and the discussion group are set out in Table 4.

Table 4. Variables Used in the Design of the Interview and Discussion Group

Tool	Dimension	Categories	Variable	Working definition of the variables
Inter-viewand Discussion Group	Pre-place-ment data	Life History	Life experiences	Previous life experience that identifies unique features, characteristic of the student's behaviour in relation to the profession.
		Self-image	Personal view	Personal professional identification
			Initial expectations	What is hoped to be achieved when starting the placement
			Initial attitude	It identifies the attitude with which they approach the placement
		Social Mis-sion of the Profession	What they offer to the placement centre	What they contribute professionally to the institution
			Professional com-petences	It determines the acquired attitudes throughout the degree
			Experience	Practical knowledge acquired prior to the placement in other organisations
			Availability	Having a positive disposition to cooperate with the centre
			Motivation	Being eager to learn
		Values	Personal values	The values that the student starts with before the placement, based on the Deontological Principles.
	Post-place-ment Data	Self-image	Acquired compe-tences	The student's thoughts about the knowledge acquired from the placement
			Personal view	Thoughts about the professional identity acquired
			Acquired experi-ence	Practical knowledge acquired

3. Evaluation Phase

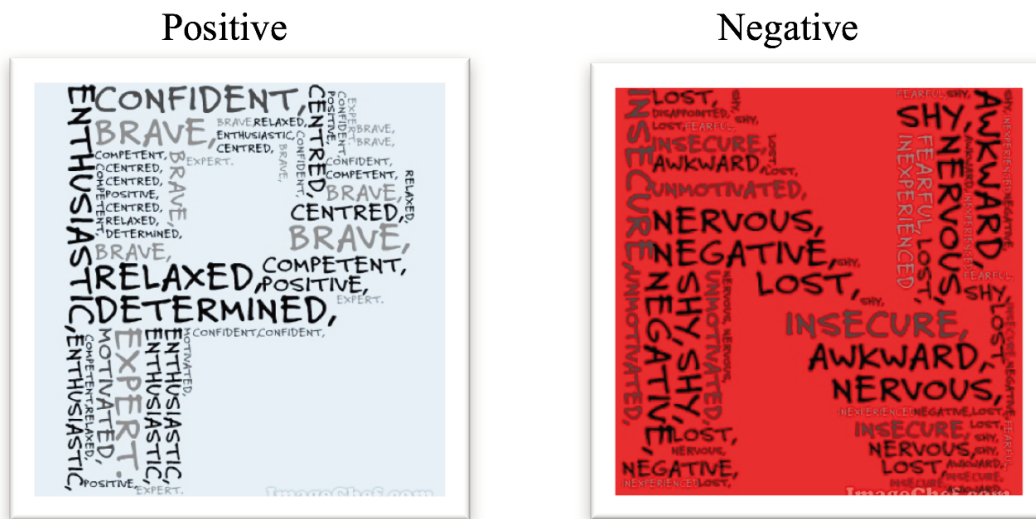
The data obtained through the various tools used throughout the research phases have been treated and analysed by computer programs, on the basis of their characteristics (especially the SPSS 22.0 quantitative data analysis program and the AQUAD 6 program, that makes qualitative text analysis possible). In this way, a data traceability and contrasting process is developed, with the aim of adding to the knowledge of the initial professional identity development of the social educator in training, and in order to determine if the PPIII course is an important variable that influences the professional identity development of Social Education students. At the same time, it has allowed us to determine the causes that influence interest in the social educator profession, offering metaevaluation keys for improving initial training programs in the discipline and, in the future, in the continuing training programs for social education experts.

3.4. Sample

The research conducted began with the 2011-12 academic year and finished in 2014-15. Throughout these years, a total of 1,575 students registered for the PPIII course.

During the research in question, 770 surveys were collected, 93 questionnaires administered, 16 students took part in the debate forum, three in-depth interviews were conducted and a discussion group with 5 students took place. Therefore, and taking as a point of reference the contributions of Fisher, Arkin and Colton (1995), it can be stated that the sample used is sufficiently representative to determine the influence of the PPIII course on the professional identity of the (UNED) Social Education Undergraduate student.

Image 1. Self-image of the Students



4. Research Results

The results obtained after the survey analysis indicate that the self-image that the student creates during the development of the PPIII course (Image 1) evolves, in the case of a positive self-image, around factors such as peace of mind, determination and a positive attitude during its completion. In the same way, regarding negative self-image, the most noticeable labels also point towards negative aspects: feeling loss, fear, anxiety, negative self-image, etc.

course, in general terms, the students considered that they had a positive self-image (Figure 1). They placed special emphasis on the enthusiasm that this new challenge awoke with them (with a measure of 5.91 out of 7), whilst, at the same time, being aware of their lack of experience (\bar{X} =3.45).

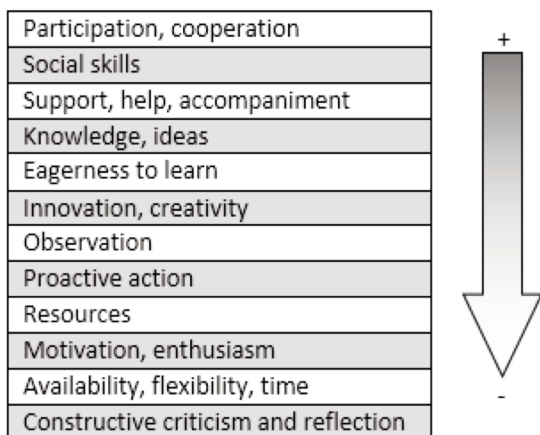
Precisely, 96% of those surveyed had a positive self-image, highlighting their enthusiasm (19%), their motivation (18%) and their ability to complete it (15%). Compared to only 4% that noted a negative self-image. The students that expressed a negative self-image when starting the placement admitted that it was due to it being their first experience (11%), to the fact that the chosen environment was unknown (7%) and to the tasks they had to perform (4%).

Delving deeper into the field of the self-image of the students at the start of the placement, it can be noted (Figure 2) that the students view the PPIII course as an opportunity for their learning process (\bar{X} =4.85 out of 5), are motivated by it (\bar{X} =4.81) and consider the placement as an opportunity to evolve both personally and professionally (\bar{X} =4.64).

As far as the social mission is concerned, at the start of the PPIII course the students consider that their contributions to the placement company or institution are defined by their enthusiasm to learn (\bar{X} =4.85), their motivation (\bar{X} =4.81), their desire to work (\bar{X} =4.81) and their participation (\bar{X} =4.66) and, to a lesser degree, the contribution of knowledge (\bar{X} =3.66).

The last dimension evaluated in the questionnaire refers to their ethical commitment, which allows us to know their initial values at the start of the course (Figure 3). They highlighted the principles of respect for Human Rights and for the social-education action subjects (91.5% respectively) and,

Image 1. Self-image of the Students



Regarding the social mission of the profession and the values acquired during the placement (Table 5), the surveys participants place great relevance on participation and cooperation, the development of social abilities, cooperation, etc.

Analysing the data obtained in the questionnaire, it can be established that at the start of the PPIII

Figure 1. Self-image Results from the Questionnaire

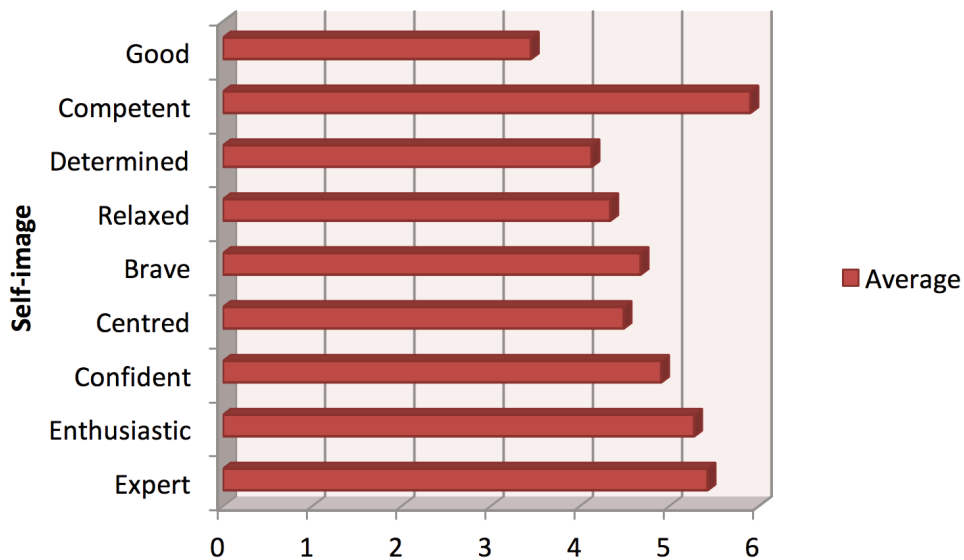
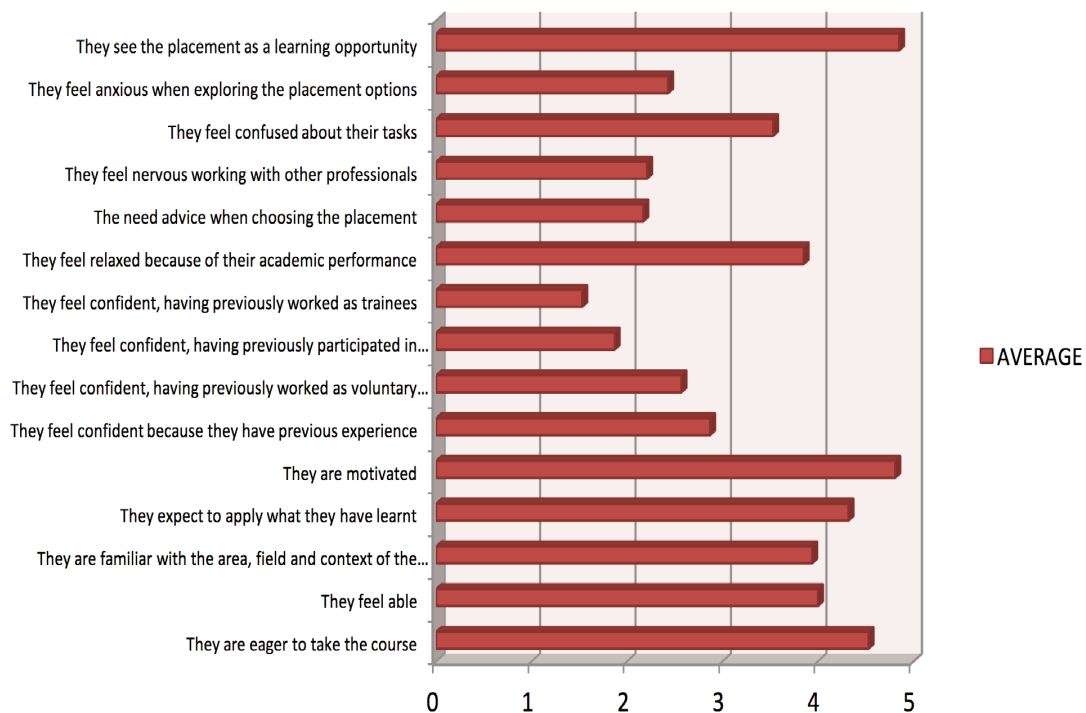


Figure 2. Self-image of the Students at the Start of the PPIII Course, as Evaluated in the Questionnaire



with a lower response percentage, the principle of professional independence (70.2%).

With respect to the data collected in the *debate forum* the self-image of the students at the start of the course can be summarised as insecure, motivated and lost. However, once the placement was over, the students indicated that they felt more confident and in control of their limitations (Image 2).

In the same way, when starting the placement, the students expressed their expectations: to ac-

quire experience in the social education sector, to know their capacity for action, to gather knowledge, resources and strategies and, to a lesser degree, to work in a team and to know the profession better.

Within the personal values dimension, it should be noted that the students placed a great importance on the realisation and development of the principles of professional solidarity, professionalism and social-education action.

Figure 3. Ethical Commitment at the Start of the PPIII Course, Evaluated in the Questionnaire

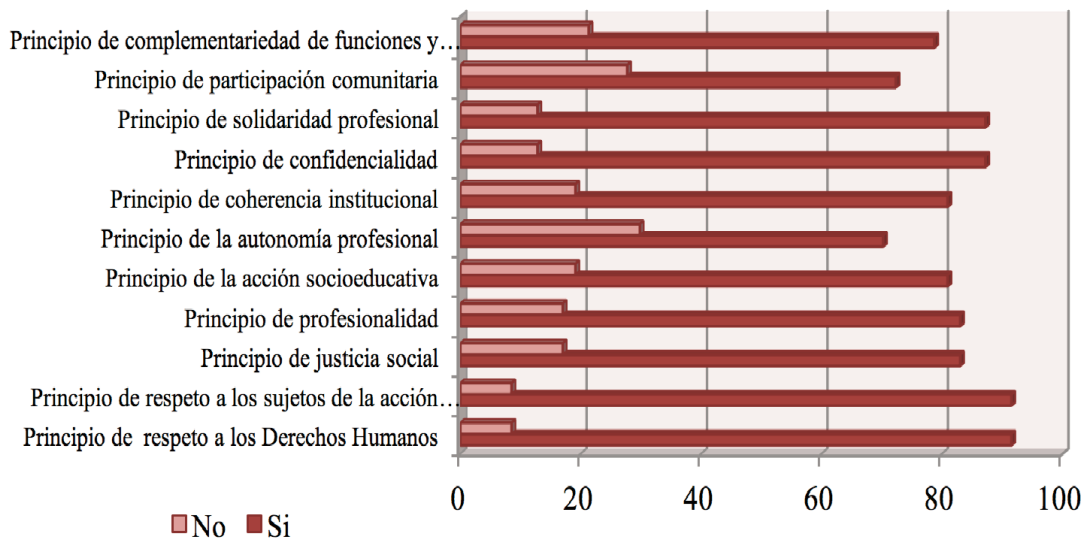


Image 2. Self-image of the Students at the End of the PPIII Course in the Forum



The data provided by the *interviews* indicates that, at the start of the placement, a large proportion of students had a positive self-image (67% of those interviewed), referring to their enthusiasm, eagerness to learn, existing skills, interest in cooperating with the institution, determination and adaptability to the medium in question. However, once the placement is finished, the data obtained reveals a significant increase of students with a positive self-image (80% of those interviewed).

Consequently, and as far as social mission is concerned, at the beginning of the placement those interviewed considered they were capable of making multiple contributions to the placement centre (Image 3). Nonetheless, once completed, the perceptions of those interviewed equally shared

a shortage of contribution due to a lack of integration with the professionals, a lack of self-reflection of the institution in question and the usefulness for the development of its day-to-day work.

Regarding the development of their own ethical commitment values, those interviewed agreed that they had the possibility to acquire them all, except the principle of community participation, given that they could not always apply it within the context of the placement and, to a lesser degree, that they had not made it easy for them to participate in the different social education teams.

Analysing the information provided by the *group discussion*, we can state that, at the start of the PPIII course, the students that had a positive self-image were less than those that perceived it in a nega-

Image 3. Results of the Social Mission at the Start of PPIII according to the Interview



Image 4. Self-image at the Start of PPIII according to the Discussion Group

Positive



Negative

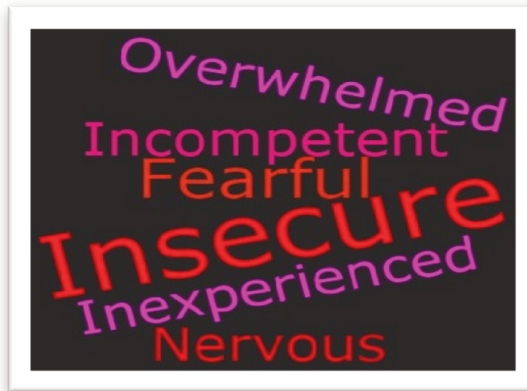


Image 5. Self-image at the end of PPIII according to the discussion group

Positive



Negative



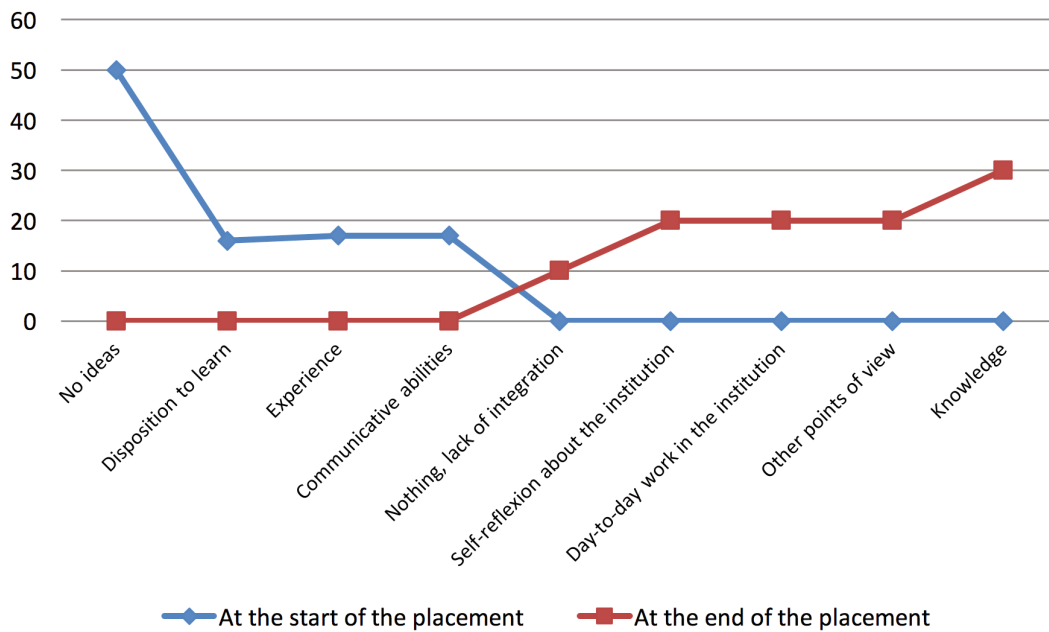
tive way, as can also be concluded from the considerations given about the course (Image 4).

Even though this situation changed drastically at the end of the placement period, where the number of the discussion group participants achieving a positive image is clearly higher (87.5%). This becomes evident when observing the personal perception of the students, shown in Image 5. In the social mission dimension there appears an important

difference amongst the initial and final contributions (Figure 4).

Regarding the development of their own ethical commitment values, the discussion group members considered that these values had previously been acquired as competences for the development of the placement in this profession, some having developed more than others depending on what challenges they faced.

Figure 4. Students Contribution to the Placement Centre at the Start and End of Placements



5. Conclusions and Proposals

Throughout this research it has come to light that there is a shortage of scientific and research literature on the development of the professional identity of social education students. However, after analysing the collected results, it can be stated that the training and identity development in the UNED Social Education undergraduate students in the PP3 course is conditioned, like in other professions related to social education, by the students' previous experiences (Pontes, Ariza & Del Rey, 2010), which become reasserted and consolidated with later professional activities (Bolívar, 2007).

The students' interest in the profession, both at the beginning and end of the course, is fundamentally determined by their vocational character, similarly to what occurs in similar professions like teaching (Pontes, Ariza & Del Rey, 2010). Some of them had previous experience in this field working as volunteers and, to a lesser extent, in their professional placement in Vocation Training courses. Previous motivations at the start of the placement arise from their interest in knowing their possibilities as social educators and having the chance to relate with the subjects of educational activities. They expressed satisfaction at its completion, given that they find themselves better prepared for working in their professional field.

The results confirm the existence of an emerging professional identity concept in the student before beginning their placement which, in the ma-

jority of cases, changes and/or improves depending on their real-life experiences throughout the placement:

- When establishing their first contact with the placement centre, students come out with a positive self-image; then, this self-image improves and consolidates positively throughout the placement period.
- Regarding the social mission of the profession, at the start of the placement period students highlighted their motivation and eagerness to learn and to offer help; these perceptions change throughout the placement period. Upon completion, they highlight some elements they consider key, such as the fact that following this course gave them the chance to participate and collaborate in the day-to-day work of the institution, allowing them to effectively develop their personal self-reflection and social skills. In any case, it seems necessary to analyse the participation of some students that consider that their contribution to the placement location was poor due to lack of integration at the centre.
- Regarding their own ethical commitment values within the profession, we should highlight the principle of respect for Human Rights and for the subjects of social education actions; also, to a lesser extent, the principle of professional autonomy and community participation, due to the supervision of their placement tutor and to the difficulties to take part in the different teams.

In view of this, it can be stated that the (UNED) Social Education Degree PPIII course is an important variable that influences the professional identity development of future social educators. Nevertheless, it is necessary to reflect and establish a clear action protocol for the placement centre tutor with the purpose of facilitating a greater participation and integration of the students in the life and daily interventions at the placement centre or institution. This nuance will be incorporated in the analysis for future research.

In the same way, it also seems important to review the virtual nature of Professional Place-

ment I, II and V and their relation with Professional Placement IV, given its experimental nature. In this way, a better distribution and structure of the activities and learning in real environments should be implemented, like in other placement programmes at other universities. The interrelation of subjects and the placement supervision from an interdisciplinary perspective improves the capacities and attitudes that the student should acquire, adapting them to practical contexts (Monreal, Cárdenas-Rodríguez & Terrón-Caro, 2013).

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