

# **The reflective practice of the social work students in an interdisciplinary project using m-learning for children with disabilities**

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## **Abstract**

Twelve social work students were involved in an interdisciplinary project aimed at working with children with communication disabilities using a mobile app, named TESI. The goal of involving university students in this project was to pilot the mobile app TESI and to increase their openness to the use of m-learning tools and computer based assistive technology for children and adults with disabilities, but also to be an educational opportunity to develop new knowledge, skills and attitudes for the future social workers. The research was both an evaluative research and an action research, the results were analysed, on one hand by referring to the project objectives, respectively to the initial needs analysis of the target group of students, and on the other hand through the lens of education based on competence and the reflective practice in the social work profession, aiming both to reflect the formative value of this experience for the future social workers, and to challenge them to self-reflection for developing a conscious, reflective professional practice. The experience itself was perceived as very positive by the students, it helped them become more aware of their personal and professional knowledge, skills and values, as well as the aspects they need for their further personal development. The training of the future professionals can benefit by their involvement in interdisciplinary projects, keeping the focus on skills to be developed, without any fear of using creative teaching strategies or applying the older ones in new learning contexts.

**Keywords:** *social work higher education; reflective practice; mobile learning; competence-based education; interdisciplinary projects; children with disabilities.*

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## **1. Background and literature review**

In the spirit of promoting the children's rights to „a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community” (Article 23 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989), and ensuring access to assistive technology to enable independent living of persons with disabilities (The 2030 Agenda of UN), as well as following the UNESCO recommendations to „promote the creation of mobile content that is relevant to local groups and accessible in local languages” and to „advocate for standards that make mobile hardware, software and content accessible to diverse student populations,

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including students with disabilities” (UNESCO 2013), a number of eight organizations (3 universities, 3 special schools and a NGO from five European countries) developed and implemented the TESI project: Adaptive Personalized System for Creating Expression Tools in Social Inclusion of Learners and Verbal Communication Disabilities. This is an ERASMUS + project, Key Action 3: Support for Policy Reform - Education, Training and Youth, set up by the European Commission, which focused on four target groups: children with disabilities, their parents, teachers working with these children and future social workers and teachers (Iacobescu 2018).

The main goal of the project is to create a new mobile application to facilitate the communication and the learning of the children with verbal impairments and to pilot it in order to find the most suitable design.

The verbal disability is an impediment to the social integration of children and adults, raises barriers before their participation in community life and access to quality education (Sorescu and Iacobescu 2019). Mobile learning is one of the contemporary opportunities to facilitate communication, learning and social integration of children with verbal impairments. According to the World Health Organization's recommendations (2011: pp. 225-227), this project supports teachers and schools to have flexible approaches that can cope with the diverse needs of learners, such as individualized education plans, involves parents and family members as partners in deciding on the educational needs of the children, develops the digital competence of the children and provides children with access to quality education using appropriate mobile devices and applications to increase their chances of social integration and a better quality of life.

Information Technology is a part of our lives, being used in multiple ways, including mobile learning and assistive technologies for people with disabilities. The need and efficiency of m-learning was the subject of many researches. One research focused on the use of m-learning in autism disorder (Allen, Hartley & Cain 2016, De Leo, Gonzales, Battagiri et al. 2011), in learning disabilities (Draper Rodríguez and Cumming 2017; Ismaili and Ibrahim, 2017).

One of the partners on this project, The University of Craiova (Romania), involved social work students in the stage of piloting a mobile application – the TESI tool.

Each of these students held five work sessions using mobile devices that had the TESI app installed, with a child with disabilities, who was registered as a pupil at the Special School „Saint Mina” from Craiova, another partner in this project.

The same type of activity was developed in parallel by the other two partner universities from Plovdiv (Bulgaria) and Kielce (Poland), which involved Pedagogy university students. The decision to involve students set to become future teachers and social workers was not incidental; the need of training for development of computer skills has been underlined in researches from 1980's until now and has evolved into concerns for m-learning and extensive use of software, for attitudes who influence the computer use and factors that affect them (e.g. for teachers: Bruder 1989; Bryant, Erin and Lock 1998; Fisher 2000; for social workers: Miller 1986; Perron, Taylor, Glas, Margerum-Leys 2010 etc). Corman (2015), in a study conducted at national level in Romania concludes: „teachers in Romania do not have sufficient competences to allow them to learn and use appropriate theoretical concepts related to ICT, to use information search programs in the virtual environment, knowledge of ICT tools and teaching

materials accessible and for people with special needs.” Our initial need analysis reflected the same situation for future social workers and teachers in our target groups.

The enthusiasm and interest shown by students from pedagogy and social work from the three partner universities (Craiova, Plovdiv and Kielce) to work with children with disabilities and the use of mobile applications in their future professions is an indicator of the community's openness to use information technology. Developing the digital skills of the younger generations will influence their responsiveness to the use of IT means in their professions, as evidenced by our research.

At the start of the project, a need analysis was made. Achieved through the application of a rigorous research methodology, this analysis identified the needs of the four target groups covered by this project, namely children with verbal disabilities, their parents, teachers and other specialists working with these children and students in pedagogy and social work. We are focused here only on the university students from Craiova: all of them have mobile devices, use them on a daily basis, show a favourable attitude towards their use in communicating with and between people with disabilities, have the willingness to work with children with language disabilities, and to use applications mobile in working with these children. They had insufficient knowledge about people with disabilities, but they both want to be better prepared for this, and learn to use specific mobile applications.

According with its international definition, „the social work is a practice-based profession” (International Federation of Social Workers 2014), so the practical activities are essential in the training of future social workers. At the same time, the trend in the social work education of the last decade is to promote a competence-based education, as „an outcomes-oriented approach to curriculum design. The goal of the outcomes approach is to ensure that students are able to demonstrate the integration and application of the competencies in practice.” (Council on Social Work Education 2015: p. 6)

The European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning uses 8 reference levels based on learning outcomes, defined in terms of knowledge (theoretical or factual), skills (cognitive and practical) and competences (described in terms of responsibility and autonomy). The EQF shifts the focus from input (lengths of a learning experience, type of institution) to what a person holding a particular qualification actually knows and is able to do (European Commission 2008).

Epstein and Hundert (2002) offered a comprehensive definition of the competence as "the habitual and judicious use of communication, knowledge, technical skills, clinical reasoning, emotions, values, and reflection in daily practice for the benefit of the individual and community being served." They describe dimensions of competence in cognitive, technical, integrative, context, relationship, affective/moral, and habits of mind categories. We agree with this point of view and consider that the training for being a professional should involve all these dimensions, which are taking into account the definition of the social work competencies.

According with the Council on Social Work Education, „social work competence is the ability to integrate and apply social work knowledge, values, and skills to practice situations in a purposeful, intentional, and professional manner to promote human and community well-being. The demonstration of competence is informed by knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive and affective processes that include the social worker’s critical thinking, affective reactions, and exercise of judgment in regard to unique practice situations.” (Council on Social Work Education 2015: p. 6) This approach

underlines the „purposeful, intentional manner to promote human and community well-being”, as well as „critical thinking”, abilities that can be developed through a reflective practice.

Starting from these definitions, we assessed the perception of the students about the experience, about the developed knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes and values, as well as their emotions during this experience considering with Boud that „the most important ways to enhance learning is to strengthen the link between the learning experience and the reflective activity that follows it” (1985: p. 26).

As part of their professional training process as future social workers, students must acquire the ability to reflect on their own practice, as defined by Yip (2006): „Rigorous reflection is a process of self-involvement and self-reflection in which the social worker undergoes self-analysis, self-evaluation, self-dialogue and self-observation.”

We started from Yip's premise (2006) that in order to develop this ability to reflect, the students need to have an intellectual space to think and reflect on what they have achieved and learned, as well as the teacher's focus on how much can the student learn, think and reflect, rather than how much the teacher has taught. So, we took advantage of the opportunity offered by the involvement of the students in a practical activity slightly different from the activities that they usually carry out in the places of placement and we challenged them to an experiment of self-reflection and reflection on the own practice, performing an action research, in the meaning defined by Kurt Lewin (1944).

We also benefited from what Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon (2014) named *action science*, which identifies „two aspects to professional knowledge: the formal knowledge which all competent members of the profession are thought to share and which professionals are inducted into during their initial training, and the professional knowledge of interpretation and enactment” (2014: p. 10). Schön (1983) talk about an action research as being „reflection-in-action”, a very essential process for some professions, as social work itself, in which „awareness of uncertainty, complexity, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict has led to the emergence of professional pluralism”. In this context it is necessary to develop „reflective practitioners”, and these results and from the standpoint of the crisis in confidence in professional knowledge. The reflective practice cannot be ignored, because only working and interacting with others conducts to a real professional development: „We can become more alert and attuned to the world, and stronger and wiser, through reflection on action, and through the kind of meditation that opens us up to experience the world around us more sensitively. These reflective practices have an important place in our development. To have something to reflect on, however, we must first act—that is, we must first interact with others and the world, through our own action-in-history. Thus, I conclude that most of our becoming is done in our own interactions with others and the world; that is, most of our developing is done in practices.” (Kemmis 2019: p. 37). As Kemmis (2019:180) states, the critical, reflective research of the practice is not only a form of practice development, but also a form of education development. However, teaching a reflective practice involves certain resources, of which the time is essential. (Davis 2003).

This article presents some aspects from the evaluation of a significant part of the project implementation, respectively the activities realized with the target group of students during April-August 2019.

The research approached the evaluation from a dual perspective: that of the impact of the project on the target groups, and another one of the formative value for the students, but in a way to transform the evaluation process itself in an educational step causing the students self-reflection.

From the perspective of the impact of the project on the target group of students, it was thought to evaluate the extent to which their needs identified in the initial analysis were met through participation in the project. In the same time, we wanted that the involvement of the social work students to have a formative effect on them as professionals, to increase their confidence in the use of IT in multiple ways in their future profession and to exploit this experience as an opportunity for reflective practice.

The second perspective, of the formative self-reflective evaluation included references from the field of competency-based education, of the experiential education (Kolb 2015; Race 2015), Bigg's constructive alignment (2003) and of the social work reflective practice.

The data collected during this research was also used in a group coaching session with these students, with the aim to deepen the process of reflection to affective, discriminant and judgemental reflectivity, in the meaning offered by Mezirow (1981).

The learning process was an experiential one, following Phill Race's model (2015): *needing / wanting* – an initial need analysis, *doing* – the involvement of the students in the project, their participation at five work sessions with TESI tool with children with disabilities, *digesting* – reflection and self-reflection and *feedback*. We was taking in the account and the ten principles of reflective practice built by Ghaye and Ghaye (1998:pp. 15–19 apud Bold and Hutton 2007: p. 21) on the work of Schön (1991): „reflective conversations that have the potential to disturb their professional identity; interrogation of experiences; returning to look at taken-for-granted values, professional values and understandings –‘a reflective turn’; describing, explaining and justifying practices; viewing professional situations ‘problematically’; creating knowledge of interest to self and others; asking probing and challenging questions; decoding a symbolic landscape, e.g. the ‘school culture’; linking theory and practice as a creative process; socially constructing ‘ways of knowing’”.

## **2.Method**

Our approach had both characteristics of evaluative research and action research. As an evaluative research, it aimed to highlight the impact of the participation in the TESI Project of the students, as well as obtaining feedback from the students involved in working with children with disabilities using the TESI application. The activity was evaluated in relation to the objectives of student participation in this activity, having the role of estimating to what extent the participation in the project was beneficial to the students, which were the benefits from participating in the project (positive aspects, knowledge, abilities, acquired values and/or what difficulties they encountered, if they recommend such activities for the training of other future social workers.

We wanted to find out to what extent the needs of the target group of students identified in the initial research were met through their participation in this project. These needs were: acquiring knowledge about children with disabilities, acquiring knowledge and interaction skills with children with disabilities, acquiring knowledge about using a mobile application in interacting with children with disabilities.

At the same time, we have also set to ourselves a secondary purpose, to entice students to reflect on their own practice and to consciously assume their own

professional training, which is a feature of action research. The students' answers were analysed from the perspective of the involved and developed competences, the awareness of certain professional skills, personal qualities, values, attitudes and limitations they have.

Thus, the research had as objectives:

- O1. Assessing the degree of satisfaction of the needs of the target group of students identified in the analysis performed before their involvement in the project;
- O2. Highlighting the students' perception on their participation in the project;
- O3. Acquiring suggestions for optimizing the professional training of future social workers through specialized practice;
- O4. Challenging students to reflect on their own professional practice.

The research group consisted of twelve social work students who participated in the TESI project, five from the First year of bachelor study and seven from the Second year.

The research method was the sociological survey based on a self-assessing questionnaire, sent and returned by e-mail. If the students did not understand the question or gave general answers, additional explanations were offered and they were asked to provide details about their experience.

The questionnaire included five Likert scale questions, which were meant to challenge students to reflect on their experience in this project in terms of newly-acquired knowledge, skills and knowledge, as well as to assess to what extent the project has contributed to their professional development.

It was also desired to evaluate the extent to which the students learned to use the TESI application in working with children with disabilities.

The first five questions were followed by six open questions, the first four of them referring to their experience in this project, the fifth asking for suggestions for optimizing the professional training of future social workers, and the last one for optimizing the TESI application.

All the question aimed to provoke an act of *reflectivity*, as simple awareness of „a specific perception, meaning or behaviour of our own or of habits we have of seeing, thinking or acting.” (Mezirow 1981: p. 12).

The answers to these open questions were analysed and coded (Babbie 2010: pp. 521-522), the analysis being variable-oriented.

### **3.Results**

As mentioned, the needs analysis highlighted that students do not have sufficient knowledge about children with disabilities, nor knowledge and working skills with them, and would like to learn to use m-learning resources to interact with children with communication disabilities. The variables were constructed taking into account these needs, as well as the dimensions of professional competence in social assistance, as it results from the definitions analysed: knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions and self-reflection.

When rating the question "How satisfactory was the experience of my participation in the TESI project?", the average of the answers was very high, 4.92 out of 5, which was expected, due to the enthusiasm expressed by the students throughout the entire project's period and to the promptness they answered to all the tasks they received (including activity reports, ordering and labelling photos during the activity, responding to evaluation questionnaires).

The students appreciated that they acquired knowledge about children with disabilities, the mean of the answers being 4.75 out of 5, they learned how to interact with children with disabilities (4.92), and they learned how to use a mobile application in the interaction with children with disabilities (4.92). Also, the students strongly agreed with the statement "I discovered new things about myself" (4.58).

The answers to the open questions were analysed on two axes, one evaluative and one reflective. The first dimension, the evaluative one, concerned the activity itself in relation to the objectives of the students' participation in this activity, having the role of estimating to what extent the participation in the project was beneficial to the students, which were these benefits (positive aspects, acquired or developed knowledge, skills and values) and the difficulties they encountered, and if they recommend such activities for the preparation of other future social workers.

The reflective dimension involved the interpretation of the students' responses from the perspective of the developed competences, the awareness of certain professional skills they possess, values, attitudes, qualities, as well as limits.

Analysing the students' responses in relation to the evaluative purpose of this research, we found that in their assessment of the most important positive aspects of their participation in this project, a large number of affirmations characterize the experience as giving them opportunities (n = 18). The experience itself was a positive, useful, beautiful (n = 2), and for some of them, it was also a challenge, leaving the comfort zone, a new environment for practicing professional skills (n = 4)

Among the opportunities offered by this experience were mentioned:

- The opportunity to acquire skills, especially interpersonal and communication skills (n = 6):

*"I consider this to be an experience that taught me how to collaborate with a child with disabilities, but also some ways in which he can evolve."*

*"As part of this project, we had the opportunity to learn how to use the TESI application, an application that helps us understand more easily the needs and wishes of children with disabilities. We interacted with them, and this context gave us the chance to learn how to behave, how to communicate and how to understand them."*

- The opportunity to use a mobile application in interaction with children with disabilities (n = 5):

*"Thanks to this project I went through a new experience, I was glad when I saw that there is such an application and that those children can learn and communicate using the application."*

- The opportunity to interact directly with beneficiaries and to interact with children with disabilities (n = 6)

- The opportunity to apply knowledge in practice and test their own skills (n = 3):

*"The experience itself prepares you to be a future social worker, puts you in touch with people, in situations in which, until then, you knew what to do only at the theoretical level"*

- The opportunity to learn new things, to acquire knowledge (n = 3),

- The opportunity to meet new people, children and teachers (n = 3):

*"I have met both children and teachers, these are wonderful people with a special warmth to their soul"*

*"Among the most positive aspects of participating in this project is the children's happiness when I visited them, the fact that I was able to work in a new environment and that I met some wonderful people."*

- The opportunity to develop some personal qualities such as patience, respect for others (n = 2), as well as professional competences (n = 3):

*"It was an opportunity for my development as a future social worker"*

*"The most positive aspect was my development on two main plans: the personal one, but also the professional one. This project represented my introduction to my future career."*

- The opportunity to collaborate with experts (n = 1),

The quality of collaboration with children and staff was mentioned by three students. One of the students appreciated the "feeling of fulfilment" he experienced during this activity, and another student considered that the most important positive aspect was his success in obtaining the child's trust and cooperation. This reflects both his anxiety related to the performance in a unique situation, as well as the value that the practical activity has in increasing the confidence in his professional skills and experimenting professional satisfaction.

Hierarchizing the positive aspects considered by the students to be the most important, in first place are those regarding interpersonal relationships (n = 13), whether it is the opportunity to interact with children with disabilities, or the good relationship that they managed to establish with them and the teachers or meet new people, either through the skills they had developed. The emotional aspects were the most positive aspects for 5 students. A number of 6 of them appreciated the acquired skills, 5 students considered the use of the mobile app in work as the most positive aspect of their activity. Less of them mentioned knowledge (n=3), the challenge, or exiting their comfort zone (n=3), and aspects of personal development (n=2). (See Table 1)

Five of the students mentioned the emotions they experienced during the activity, being impressed by the children rejoicing when reunited with the students, when they were able to make themselves understood, through the means of the application:

*"The most positive moments of my participation in this project were those when the children were able to say what they wanted with the application and they were happy when I understood them."*

Table no. 1. The most positive aspects of the students' activity in TESI Project, according their view

<b>The most positive aspects of the activity</b>	<b>Number of answers</b>
Interpersonal aspects	13
Emotional aspects	5
Using mobile app in work	5
Skills	6
Knowledge	3
Challenge	3
Personal development	2

The analysis of the students' answers to the question "What was most difficult for you in this project?", revealed particularly the students' personal difficulties, certain insufficiently developed professional skills: acting practically, despite having the theoretical knowledge, capturing the child's attention, explaining according to the child's comprehension ability, understanding the child's perspective, adapting their own behaviour and attitude to the child's needs (n = 9), as well as confronting various feelings such as the anxiety before their first exposure to such a situation, the fear of not being rejected, and to be accepted by the child, fear of not coping with the challenge, powerlessness (n = 4). These difficulties did not surprise us, half of them being present only in the students in their first year of study, but those in the second year also having a reduced practical experience. There were no difficulties related to the organization of the activity or the attitude of the school staff or the project team, and two students stated that they did not encounter any difficulties and appreciated the support received from the teachers:

*"I did not encounter difficulties in this project. The use of the application was explained to us very well, and the staff from the centre for people with disabilities was very patient and guided us step by step."*

The support received was appreciated also by the students who had anxiety in relation to the unique situation to which they were exposed:

*"The most difficult thing I can say was the beginning because I did not know how the children would react but, with the help of the educating lady, I understood their needs quite easily and I adapted very quickly."*

Here's how they describe their fears:

*"The most difficult thing for me was the initial meeting because of my emotions, not knowing how the children will react when we will meet."*

*"I was afraid I would be rejected by the child."*

The students strived to exceed their limits; they understood the importance of empathy in working with the child with disabilities, but also the difficulty of being empathetic:

*"In the first phase, it was difficult for me to find an attitude that suited the needs of the child I worked with, to adapt, to look at things through his eyes so that we could achieve results together. Understanding his needs was the most difficult, understanding that we have different perspectives and cannot be brought in the same point without empathy. I started with holding the pencil in his hand, to understand his difficulty, to enjoying endless ball games ... which for me may not matter, but for the child I worked with they were the most beautiful moments of the day."*

The student mentions the difficulty he encountered in applying the theoretical knowledge, in being empathetic, as well as the limits of his own perception, paying tribute to the experience in an environment in which he did not interact with people with disabilities, proving awareness of the stigmatization theory about which he has taught at the course (Goffman, 1963, Ilie Goga & Niță, 2018: 50):

*"Thus, if at the mental level I was convinced that it is not difficult, and I knew exactly what to do, in practice it was a bit difficult to manage. It is difficult to realize that the imprint of the "normal" in society is also placed on you, after you have long believed that you can easily empathize with any person ... and this I think made it difficult for me to interact with the child in the first meetings, until I understand it."*

The sense of powerlessness mentioned by a student was related with the incapacity to help more children. This was an important subject for the coaching session with the students after the project, as well as the anxiety subject. These emotional difficulties show the importance of developing empathy as a fundamental skill for the social workers.

Table no. 2. Perceived difficulties of the students in TESI Project

<b>Difficulties</b>	<b>Number of answers</b>
Related to insufficiently developed skills: Difficulty acting practically, despite theoretical knowledge Capturing the child's attention Explain according to the child's comprehension ability Understanding the child's perspective Adapting the own behaviour and attitude at the child's needs	9
Emotional: Anxiety about the first meeting or to be rejected by the child Sense of powerlessness	4

For all participants, this activity was the first interaction with children with attention deficit, with learning and communication difficulties, so four of them considered that the most difficult was to capture the child's attention (one of them failed to communicate with all the children he worked with), and to understand them when they are sending messages. For two students it was difficult to explain clearly enough so that the child understands what she is saying. The difficulty in capturing and maintaining the attention of a child with attention deficit is a given. Not knowing the specifics of each disability created unrealistic expectations, and one of the conclusions is that the students needed more in depth training for this activity, so that they can possess the necessary knowledge on the disability.

Another question was „What are the most important things you learned from this experience?”.

The answers underlined skills, values, and emotions, corrections of their own perceptions and awareness.

The students learned how to catch and maintain the focus of the child's attention, how to interact and communicate with children with disabilities, and how to be more empathic. They wrote about the changes in their values and their attitude about life and

towards the children with disabilities / people with disabilities in general, and even grow their motivation to work with this kind of clients:

*„I learned to appreciate the small things of the life, to look more realistically at the problems in life, to not give importance to minor discomforts”.*

*„I learned to value the people with disabilities more, to normalize their situation: they are just like any child, they only have certain special needs.*

*„I learned to enjoy the small things that the life gives me”*

One of the students considers that this change in her values scale is a sign of growing up for her:

*“Participating in this project has brought more maturity to my life, because it made me realize the real problems a child can face in his life and made me not give so much importance to small things.”*

The students changed their perception about children with disabilities, and this helped them develop skills like empathy, non-judgmental attitude, and patience:

*“The most important things gained during this experience are empathy towards the beneficiaries and the desire to do as much as possible for them.”*

*“I learned to appreciate these people more when working with them.”*

*“I learned to accept a person as he/she is.”*

*“I learned that the children with disabilities are just like any child, the only difference being that they need more patience from those who work with them to be able to concentrate their attention.”*

We emphasized the development of some personal qualities as: patience, perseverance, attention, ability to adapt, communicative, self-confidence, spirit of observation, respect for other people's limits.

*“This experience has helped me be more patient and more ambitious.”*

*“I learned to communicate with the children with disabilities.”*

*“I developed my ability to be empathetic.”*

*“I learned how to work / to interact with a child with disabilities.”*

*“The most important things I learned from this experience were having more patience, adapting according to the needs of each person, being more attentive to certain gestures and more communicative.”*

An important benefit of this experience was the correction of the students' own mental representation about effectively working with the clients, as well as the awareness of their personal limitations, and of the skills that they need to practice.

*„I learned from this experience that my image of how things will work with people and how they really are, does not coincide at all, until you see in practice what an activity entails, you cannot really talk about it.”*

The students realized the importance of professional skills and personal qualities necessary for the social worker profession, such as patience, calmness, maintaining the ability to think rationally in any situation, managing crisis situations, empathy, the need to encourage and trust the child:

*“We learned that, although these children with disabilities cannot express themselves verbally, what matters to them is showing them patience, understanding them as best as we can, and the TESI tool helped them express their wishes and us understand them.”*

*“I learned that attention is one of the most important qualities of a teacher, respectively a social worker, because each person is different and has their own specific needs, and to identify them you need attention.”*

*"I learned that it is important to keep your calm."*

*"I learned that you must be rational in any situation, and that you must not be left unaffected or unbalanced in crisis situations. I learned that you need to understand their problems as much as you can, to empathize with these people"*

The most reflective question was "What have you learned from this experience about yourself as a person and is it relevant to your future career as a social worker?". Despite the fact that a few students had difficulties in offering personal answers, the general impression was that this experience was a good opportunity for self-knowledge and self-assessment. At the same time, it was a challenge, a way to go out of their comfort zone and to face new situations:

*"I think this experience in itself put me in a position to get out of my comfort zone, to do things that I was just thinking about in what way they should be done, to discover that I feel fulfilled knowing that I have done something meaningful for a person".*

The students discovered that they already have some skills:

*„I discovered that I can be empathic and I can keep calm in any situation."*

*„I learned that I can manage the challenges and the emotions."*

*„I'm capable of working in this field of practice!"*

*„I can be kind, I can offer."*

*„An important thing for me as a future social worker is that I can handle new and stressful situations"*

*„I have also noticed that I can be patient so that a child with disabilities can concentrate and give correct answers to certain requirements."*

Some of them received confidence in their own professional abilities to work with people with disabilities and have overcome the anxiety of working with people with disabilities, together with developing personal and professional skills such as patience, respect for other people's limitations, the ability to manage new or stressful situations, self-confidence.

*"The fear of not being able to work with people with disabilities doesn't scare me anymore."*

*"The experience of the TESI Tool program made me have more confidence in myself."*

The activity with children with disabilities using TESI tool was revealing in confirming their professional vocation, giving them the satisfaction of helping:

*„I have a sense of fulfilment when I do something meaningful for a person".*

*„From my point of view, this experience made me have more confidence in myself, and I realized that after doing something important for a person and being able to offer help. I feel fulfilled. I found that I can make people happy by helping them and being close to them. I could see from this experience how important people are and how important patience is in working with people."*

Some of the students considered that for them the most important benefits of this project were the awareness of the need for skills and personal qualities that are required for this profession, as well as their personal limitations: patience, calmness, maintaining the ability to think rationally in any situation, managing crisis situations, having empathy, understanding the need to encourage and trust the child, having spirit of observation, self-confidence. Some of the students reflected on the importance of these things in the previous question and considered them to be among the most important things they learned during the pilot stage; others listed them in response to this question:

*„I learned that I have to be very patient, that I have to show the child confidence, to encourage him, show him that his opinion matters, and to be empathetic.*

*„I learned that one has to be very patient and very understanding with children with disabilities.”*

*„I realized that I needed to cultivate my calm and patience”*

It was mentioned as valuable acquisition the awareness at the axiological level:

*“Perhaps one of the most important things I learned from this experience is that we don't need too much to be very happy, and these kids made me to understand this!”*

The students mentioned that in this project they developed some important social worker's skills, such as empathy, spirit of observation or self-confidence:

*“The experience of the TESI Tool program made me have more self-confidence. Seeing that I can work with people who are in more difficult situations, I began to develop my empathy even more, which from a career point of view is necessary.”*

*“I learned to offer people more time, to have more patience, because progress comes in time.”*

*“I learned to be more communicative, more patient and more attentive to the needs of those around me. I think all of these things will help me in my future career and I can empathize with people a lot more to understand their needs.*

*“Everything I did at this stage of practice helped me improve my skills.”*

*“Another quality that stood out during the activity and began to take shape is the spirit of observation, without which, in the career of social worker, we could not orient ourselves.”*

*„I developed my ability to observe.”*

*„I learned to have a spirit of observation, realizing what the children wanted to convey or if they were tired, cheerful or enthusiastic.”*

The answers to this question are not enough to encourage the reflective practice, but are starting point for this kind of attitude. The students need opportunities to reflect on their own practice, to be conscious about their skills, feelings, emotions, values, attitudes and limits, and have someone to talk to about all of this, the coaching context being a good example.

The students' positive feelings regarding this practice experience made them want to recommend the implication in this kind of project for all social work students. At the question „What are your suggestions for improving the professional training of the future social workers, starting from this practical experience?”, ten students recommend this kind of involvement. They suggest involving future social workers in activities with different kinds of clients (n=8), offering more practice hours (n =5) and more opportunities to develop skills (n=7), and having properly trained, both theoretically and practically, coordinator staff (n=2)

In addition to these proposals the students argue that having more practice opportunities (including the students' participation in this kind of projects) is the way to discover more practice fields and know which one is adequate for themselves, in order to develop the necessary competences and qualities for this profession, to be more open for new experiences, and to apply the knowledge:

*„In order to improve training as a future social worker, I believe that there should be as many practical projects as needed to effectively discover what it means to work with people. I would like to have the opportunity to discover each area of social assistance in this way: from working with the elderly – to working with prisoners, discriminated persons and so on”*

*„I believe that, in order to improve professional training as a future social worker, we need many projects in which our skills are developed, in which we learn how to interact with all types of people.”*

*„These internships are important for students because they are an opportunity to come into direct contact with the work environment.”*

*„Through these practical experiences, students can enhance their qualities.”*

*„Each student should be involved in such experiences to find if he or she can work in such an environment.”*

*„Involving students in several projects of this kind gives them the opportunity to form as future social workers and thus they can create their own vision regarding the labour market.”*

According to David Kolb, experiential learning theory offers the foundation for the approach to education and learning as a lifelong process, a framework for examining and strengthening the critical connections among education, work, and personal development.(Kolb, 2015) These connections were underlined by the students' feedback, which applied their theoretical knowledge into work experience, and the effect was not only learning and developing their knowledge and skills, but also obtaining personal development.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The students' participation in the TESI project was satisfactory, and the needs of the target group identified in the preliminary analysis were met: the students acquired knowledge of children with disabilities, knowledge and skills of interaction with children with disabilities, as well as knowledge of using a mobile application in interacting with children with disabilities. In addition, the participation proved to be beneficial as an experience in itself and has been perceived as a pleasant experience, a challenge, but also as a source of opportunities for their personal and professional development, meeting new people, developing their skills and applying their theoretical knowledge in practice. The students gained knowledge, developed personal qualities and professional skills, but also reflected on their own values and attitudes, became aware of their professional qualities and limitations.

Some of the students found it difficult to answer the question about what they found about themselves in this experience. They did not understand the question from the beginning, which I interpreted as having difficulties in talking about themselves or as lack of self-reflection skills in the context of vocational training. Some responses reflected an inadequate mastery of the concept of empathy, as well as difficulty in managing emotions in the interaction with children with disabilities. For this reason, we consider the need for initial and continuing training programs to provide social workers with more contexts for exercising these skills.

The suggestions offered by students regarding optimizing their professional training were shared with the staff dealing with the specialized practice. They also provided relevant suggestions on optimizing the TESI tool.

The TESI project is an entirely new feature in the communities where it is deployed, being the only mobile app of its kind with which the communities have come into contact with so far, giving them the opportunity to experience its usefulness and personalize its content.

Involving the social work students in different practical activities which require the direct interaction with the beneficiaries offers multiple opportunities for developing

the students' knowledge, skills and values. The use of a reflective practice in the context of a competency-based education is absolutely necessary for the development of the self-reflection skills and for the awareness of the responsibility for their own professional evolution as future social workers. The reflective practice is both a form of practice development and of education development, and we think teachers can find a lot of opportunities to develop this kind of process. Despite the fact that teaching a reflective practice requires a lot of resources, the experience from the TESI project shows that the results on obtained by the students was worth the effort.

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