Psicología y Educación: Presente y Futuro

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Programas de desarrollo de las habilidades sociales para los estudiantes:

cuestionar su contenido, su eficacia, y pertinencia

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Resumen

En un contexto socio-económico inestable y todavía más evolutivo y competitivo, la cuestión de la inserción profesional de los jóvenes es central y se convierte en un continuo desafío para muchos países. Entonces se da una prioridad a las políticas y prácticas encaminadas a mejorar la calidad de las transiciones entre el sistema educativo y el mundo profesional. Recientemente, dispositivos dirigidos a nuevas habilidades, incluyendo las habilidades sociales, aparecieron para tratar de enfrentar este desafío. De hecho, los únicos conocimientos técnicos ya no son suficientes. En el mismo nivel de calificación, las habilidades sociales dan a los jóvenes “oportunidades adicionales” para encajar profesionalmente y “sostenible”.

El objetivo de este trabajo es reflexionar e interrogarse sobre el concepto de habilidades sociales y cuestionar la pertinencia y la efectividad de los programas para la integración profesional de los jóvenes mediante el desarrollo de estas habilidades. A nivel práctico, el objetivo es proponer posibles líneas de reflexión y mejora para establecer y construir futuros programas como perfeccionar los ya creados.

Para identificar los programas con un enfoque científico riguroso, confiamos en los pasos de una revisión sistemática (Lavis et al., 2005). Posteriormente decidimos comparar los programas identificados a partir de un análisis transversal.

Se identificaron 8 programas desarrollados en la educación superior, con alumnos y estudiantes de sectores variados y de diferentes países. Estos son comparados y analizados según sus objetivos, su aprendizaje, sus métodos de evaluación, la población definida y los resultados obtenidos. Este análisis hace resaltar criterios de eficiencia esenciales para el funcionamiento de un tal programa pero también se identifican varias limitaciones. Estudiaremos estos criterios según diferentes niveles: prácticos, teóricos y metódicos.

Concluimos este artículo presentando un programa francés, TalentCampus, en el que este análisis ha sido realizado para desarrollar su método y su dispositivo.

Palabras clave: inserción profesional ; programas ; estudiantes ; habilidades sociales
Social skills training programs for students: 
Questioning their content, their effectiveness and their relevance 
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Abstract 
In an unstable, dynamic and increasingly competitive socioeconomic context, the integration of young adults into the labour market is a central issue and a challenge for many countries. Priority has therefore been given to practices and policies aimed at improving the quality of the transition from education to employment. Recently, programs focused on new competencies, such as social skills, seem to address these challenges. Indeed, having only technical skills and know-how is no longer sufficient. At equal levels of qualification or experience, young people with better social skills will have more opportunities for obtaining employment. 
The purpose of this work is to question the relevance and effectiveness of the social skills training programs aimed at the professional integration of young people. On a practical level, the objective is to propose points for discussion and some recommendations to improve these programs and their effectiveness. 
In order to identify programs according to a rigorous scientific approach, we relied on the method of systematic review (Lavis, et al., 2005). Therefore, we chose to compare inventoried programs through cross-sectional analysis. We identified eight programs, developed in different countries, for higher education students from various fields. These programs were compared and analysed according to objectives, learning methods, evaluation mode, target population, and results. The analysis served to highlight the criteria of effectiveness essential for a program to function, but also several limitations. We consider these criteria at different levels: practical, theoretical and methodological. 
We conclude this paper by presenting a French program, TalentCampus, within which this study was conducted. 

Key words: programs; social skills; employability; students

1. Introduction 
In an unstable socio-economic context, the professional integration of young people has become a major concern for France and for many countries. Those at the greatest disadvantage are those who are least qualified (Giret, 2009; Trottier, 2000), though an increase in the level of training does not exclude a rise in unemployment (Menard, 2014). To address this issue, priority is given to policies aimed at improving the quality of the transition between education and the workplace. A prime example of these policies is the introduction of programs aimed at fostering professional integration, such as subsidized contracts, mentoring systems, training, or recruitment subsidies. The purpose of these programs is the acquisition of essential professional experience and of the “practical” skills needed to enter the labour market. 
More recently, as the economic situation continues to worsen and in an ever-changing and more competitive environment, programs aimed at developing new skills have emerged. Indeed, merely technical skills do not seem to suffice any more. With equal levels of qualification and training, other skills, including social skills, provide young people with further opportunities.
for sustainable professional integration (Duchene, 2010). The issue of the definition of social skills is generally the subject of much debate in the literature. Based on a survey of several writings and reflections on the definition of this notion (Abbet & Moreau, 2013; Coulet, 2011; Drozda-Senkowska, Gasparini, Huguet, Rayou and Filisetti 2002; Nangle, Hansen, Erdley and Norton, 2010), we have identified some key elements: social skills are a complex process resulting from individual and social trajectories. They are dynamic, which means that they are constructed and change over time, in a more or less regular manner, under the influence of developmental processes, and of many other internal and external factors. They allow individuals to be socially “effective”, in order to create and maintain social relations consistent with context, situations and/or people. Social skills overlap in two complementary and interdependent dimensions: an intrapersonal dimension (self-management) and an interpersonal dimension (managing interactions with the social environment). They mobilize, often jointly, a series of resources, which are behavioral, emotional, social and cognitive.

In recent years, because of its manifold nature, the notion of social skills has actually become more central at various levels of debate; educational, political, economic, social, etc. Considered by some employers as “more important than technical skills “(Archer & Davison, 2008), they are also important factors in academic success, performance (Witt & Ferris, 2003), professional achievement, and even in salary (Albandea & Giret, 2016; Heckman & Kautz, 2013). In this context, it appears that social skills are a prerequisite for the good professional and social integration of individuals. Therefore, whether in higher education or in business, there is a significant desire to develop these skills. Many programs and schemes aimed at meeting these needs and expectations have thus emerged. Given the importance of the situation, it seemed appropriate to analyze programs aiming for the professional integration of young graduates through the development of social skills. After a brief description of the programs, we will analyze their contributions and limitations, to propose ways of thinking and acting towards the development of future programs.

2. Method

To identify programs in a scientific manner, we proceeded to conduct a systematic review (Lavis et al., 2005). One of the most important steps was to establish specific and targeted criteria for inclusion and exclusion, so as to select studies and compare programs that were similar in their objectives and target population.

We are specifically interested in higher education, with students as our primary target: there is no selection whatsoever in terms of discipline or level of education. We also focus on curricula offered to “any and all” students, who have not been pre-selected on any predefined criteria, such as psychological or social areas of interest. We specifically exclude all “clinical” programs, that is to say programs for the prevention or treatment of various disorders such as alcohol or drug abuse, social exclusion, anxiety, etc. For the reviewed programs to be comparable, from the point of view of their intentions and target population, we focus only on those which are designed to help students in their future careers. More specifically, those where the aim is to promote professional integration (as an ultimate goal) through the development of social skills (an intermediate objective). Furthermore, we present only those programs that have been the object of at least one study published in a refereed journal and which reflect a scientific methodology. Thus, several elements should be studied in depth, including the modalities of intervention, the evaluation and results, which emphasize the relevance, validity and effectiveness of a program. Finally, the studies included in this work were written in English or French and were published after 2000.

3. Results

We identified eight programs developed in different countries. These programs are based on various approaches and methodologies aimed at developing the social skills of the students. We performed an analysis of the programs so as to obtain, for each of them, a short description of the type of scheme and target population, the objectives, the modalities of intervention, the method of evaluation, and the impact of these programs on the targeted individuals (see Table 1). Here is a summary of the main points for later discussion of the contributions and limitations of these programs.
· Goals

The ultimate goal of all these programs is the same: the professional integration of the students. However, each program selects specific intermediate objectives: 1) confronting the ultimate realities, 2) being more “attractive” for employers during interviews, 3) being more “effective and efficient” at work.

· The means of intervention

We have listed, depending on the program, different types of learning situations set up to develop social skills: 1) project-based learning relying on experiential, active and cooperative pedagogy, 2) theoretical learning with a focus on research, information and advocacy, 3) learning through mentoring, which consists in personal tutoring by a more experienced person and 4) "multi-mode” learning, which combines theoretical input, metacognition, group activities, role playing and mentoring.

Depending on the particular objectives and on the selected theoretical positioning, the programs target different social skills. Those most often targeted are creativity and innovation, cooperation or the ability to work in teams, and the ability to handle various situations. These three dimensions are also part of the social skills that evolve most after the programs.

· Evaluating the program’s effectiveness

To measure the effectiveness of their program, researchers focus on different levels of measurement. After analyzing all the techniques used, we identified four distinct levels.

1) Some researchers measure the effectiveness of the implemented program in terms of learning or changes. The focus, in that case, is on the impact of the program on the development of social skills. 2) Other authors will verify how the skills learned are implemented in the workplace. 3) It is also possible to assess the effect of a program in the longer term by checking whether the student has managed to find gainful employment or by assessing their “performance” on the job (in terms of yield). 4) Finally, the program’s effectiveness may be inferred from the learners’ satisfaction about it.

· Results

The majority of the studies show positive results in the development of social skills. Specifically, cooperation, creativity, ability to handle situations, self-confidence and commitment are the skills that evolve most after the interventions. These results are interesting and promising, as these skills are considered by many researchers as being the most important and the most valued by employers. In contrast, two studies show more mixed results and another highlights significant negative results in the social skills and in the entrepreneurial drive of the learners (program 2). The authors explain the negative impact of that program by the fact that the students, when they were confronted with the reality of starting their own business, lost their optimism and thus their interest in entrepreneurship. Another interpretation of the authors is that the students may simply not have liked the program for several reasons: the fact that it was compulsory, the fact that the considerable dedication required was not rewarded with grades and the fact that the groups were too large (N = 10).

4. Discussion

The various studies reviewed allow us to emphasize the importance of using and developing the social skills of individuals in a labour market that is ever more complex, evolving, competitive and uncertain. It is with this outlook that we have sought to identify and analyze programs developed in higher education promoting the development of students’ social skills. Based on this work, we can now identify some key discussion points, which can serve to nourish reflection in the creation of similar programs or to guide the practices of those involved in such programs.

Social skills: theoretical foundations and definitions

This work initially allowed us to reflect on the notion of social skills. It confirms that it is difficult to circumscribe the concept with a standard definition and to precisely list what it covers. Indeed, this “list” of skills varies according to different elements:
1) the researcher's own characteristics: views, approaches, discipline, and goals; 2) the specific characteristics of social skills: they are dynamic and vary according to the context or to the developmental processes of each individual. This last point is both the weakness when operationalizing the process, but also the strength in that it does not limit the process to a one-dimensional notion, stable and frozen in space and time.

In terms of theoretical foundations, it should be noted that, to develop social skills, many of the programs rely on the behaviourist movement as it is practiced mostly in North America. This approach, based on reinforcement and modelling, obscures both the causes and the origins of the problem, as well as the social and contextual aspects of the person. The multimodal programs seem most comprehensive, in that they address cognitive, social and behavioural aspects. It seems essential that the schemes should act simultaneously and in mutual interrelation, both on personal and on environmental factors, through varied and complementary interventions.

The target population

The present work has shown that these programs are aimed at a student population exhibiting little heterogeneity. The participants are mostly involved in rather long curricula, mainly in economics and management. And yet the curriculum and level of qualification were not part of our selection criteria. It thus seems that the notion of social skills is primarily associated with specific professional sectors and thereby entails performance as a target. One may therefore wonder whether, in collective representations and practices, the notion of social skills is not merely reduced to this single objective, but also confused with what is commonly named “the calling”, which people doing “social work” would “naturally be endowed” with. This would refer to a naturalization of qualities and skills, which is in direct contradiction with the very definition of this process. Given these limitations, it seems important to commit to a greater diversity by opening these programs to students from various disciplines, but also to those with less training, who, as mentioned in the introduction, are the most concerned in issues related to professional integration. These schemes would actually help offset or mitigate some inequalities in access to employment.

Furthermore, it is also necessary to establish beforehand the needs of the people targeted, based on the social, developmental, cultural or contextual elements that define them. This “diagnosis” is essential for the subsequent targeting of skills to be developed, best practices, and goals to be met.

Evaluation

Generally speaking, the results show that the interventions have proved “effective” in fostering the development of the students’ social skills. Using different methodologies, the programs identified have indeed had rather positive results for this particular goal. It is however possible to point out several limitations or to question these results. It is first important to note that the most mixed results are revealed by the programs with the most rigorous evaluation method: use of validated questionnaires, pre/post-test evaluation and control group. Those two approaches (pre/post-test and comparative evaluation) are complementary and indispensable in order to obtain a reliable and valid measure of the development of the social skills. We also note that each study offers either a quantitative or a qualitative method of assessment. However, many programs advocate a “mixed methods” approach, combining these two strategies with the aim of making the analytical process more complex, thereby reinforcing the validity of the conclusions (Blouin, 2013). This methodology would indeed afford a better grasp of the complexity of the notion of social skills.

Another important limitation in the evaluation should be considered. None of these programs measured the effect of participating in them on the effective professional integration of those young people. However, integration is presented in each case as the ultimate goal of the programs. It is therefore impossible to establish a causal link between participation in these programs and the professional integration of young people. To confirm that this ultimate goal has been reached, it is necessary, in the evaluation, to introduce longer term monitoring of the participants, to assess their professional integration in addition to any changes
in social skills. As an extension of this idea, we can actually wonder about the sustainability of these schemes. Indeed, no assessment (as it is not based on a longitudinal approach) can verify any long-term effects. The issue here is not only a question of time but of a relationship to the world, to others, to oneself, and to learning, which is not necessarily “deeply” and permanently internalized when a program is applied. Incidentally, Martens et al. (2002) point out that, indeed, if the participants are asked to evaluate a program immediately after its completion, they are generally always satisfied.

We conclude this section with two points that need to be considered, in our opinion. Regarding the evaluation, so that it may be complete and comprehensive, it is necessary to combine the four levels of measurement presented in the results: the gains, the transfer of content, the long-term impact of the training, and satisfaction. The second point relates to the learning objectives in general. We believe it is important that the work on social skills that we have discussed throughout this article should not only be the object of actions limited in time to one-off programs. This vision should guide teaching at all levels, and do so throughout education, so that pupils and students may develop all of these skills in a continuous and sustainable fashion.

5. Conclusion

Current concerns about professional integration have led researchers and practitioners to question the value of developing or promoting among students those skills that should be complementary to practical and professional ones, that is to say social skills. Reliance upon these skills has indeed become increasingly relevant in an uncertain job market, since they give young people an edge towards integration. It is with this outlook that we have sought to analyze the programs developed in higher education promoting the development of students’ social skills.

This work has led us to identify various gaps in these programs, on both the theoretical and methodological levels. It is essential not to limit the interventions to one approach, by removing economic, cultural and social dimensions. We do believe that a socio-constructivist or eco-systemic approach can bridge these gaps. This is what TalentCampus, a new and innovative scheme developed in France, has been trying to promote (Chevalier, Arnold, Henry, Catinot, 2013). Aimed at a very heterogeneous audience (in terms of age, educational level, occupation, experience, etc.), this scheme seeks to foster the social skills of individuals, in relation to their needs, through active, cooperative and reflexive pedagogy. A longitudinal evaluation, taking into account learned content, transferred knowledge and participant satisfaction has also been set up.

This work has received funding from the National Agency of Research (Excellence Initiative in Innovative Training - ANR-11-IDEFI-0035)
References


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<th>Type of program</th>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Target Population</th>
<th>Modes of intervention</th>
<th>Targeted Social Skills</th>
<th>Evaluation &amp; Tools</th>
<th>Results</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Business Experience - Perruchoud (2011) Suisse</td>
<td>Developing the social and emotional skills needed to become an entrepreneur</td>
<td>Students (in economics, IT, engineering) (N = 20/200/year)</td>
<td>Active Pedagogy: experiential, cooperative, reflexive and empowering =&gt; 2 semesters: 1 day/week</td>
<td>Creativity, innovation, collaboration, accountability, self-management...</td>
<td>Questionnaires (not detailed)</td>
<td>Positive: professional integration</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Student Mini-Company (SMC) - Oosterbeek et al. (2010) Pays-Bas</td>
<td>Development of social skills to foster entrepreneurship</td>
<td>Administration economics, management and law students (N = 219)</td>
<td>Active pedagogy: student teams in charge of a company =&gt; 1 year, 5-10 hours/week</td>
<td>Self-confidence, creativity, flexibility, autonomy, power, achievement, efficiency, endurance, risk-taking, social orientation</td>
<td>Questionnaire: ESCAN (Driessen &amp; Zwart, 1999) + Control group + Pre/post-tests</td>
<td>Significantly negative: entrepreneurial skills have declined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Social Skills Training - Bartkus (2001) Etats-Unis</td>
<td>Development of social skills for better performance at work</td>
<td>Student interns (Cooperative Education &amp; Internship Students) (N = 200)</td>
<td>Lecture and awareness sessions on the importance of social skills =&gt; 1 semester, 1 hour * 4 sessions</td>
<td>Collaboration, managing relations and public relations, promptness, accountability, dedication, and initiative</td>
<td>“Written evaluations” by the internship supervisors + control group</td>
<td>Significant and positive for: personal efficiency, promptness and dedication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Social Skills courses - Martens et al. (2002) Belgique</td>
<td>Developing social skills to help students in their future professional lives</td>
<td>Management students (N = 175)</td>
<td>Bibliography + learning by analysis (metacognition), practice (role-playing and then real-life situations) and group discussion =&gt; 10 weeks, 30 hours</td>
<td>Learning skills, self-confidence, teamwork, creativity and empathy</td>
<td>Self-questionnaire + Pre/post tests + Control group</td>
<td>Significant and positive for: learning skills and creativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Personal Skills Development - Pang &amp; Hung (2012) Chine</td>
<td>Developing personal skills to prepare students for their professional lives</td>
<td>Business school students (N = 145)</td>
<td>Mini-lectures, discussion/reflection and practical group work =&gt; 1 semester (14 weeks, 42 hours)</td>
<td>Communication, oral presentation skills, teamwork, creativity and self-awareness</td>
<td>Questionnaires + Pre/post tests</td>
<td>Significant and positive for the 5 targeted skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Psychosocial Training Programme - Dumitriu &amp; Dumitriu (2011) Roumanie</td>
<td>Developing psycho-social skills for better social and professional integration</td>
<td>Students/junior faculty (N = 93)</td>
<td>Seminars, workshops, individual activities of self-training with internet monitoring =&gt; 13 weeks, 8 hours/week</td>
<td>Social integration, conflict management, interpersonal and emotional intelligence, connecting families and institutions</td>
<td>Questionnaire + Pre/post tests</td>
<td>Significant and positive for the 5 targeted psychosocial skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Project-based learning method - Senyuva et al. (2014) Turquie</td>
<td>Developing the social skills necessary for their future career</td>
<td>Nursing students (N = 70)</td>
<td>Group work on a project =&gt; not specified</td>
<td>Communication, initiative, self-evaluation, problem-solving, autonomy, creativity, self-management, etc.</td>
<td>Questionnaire (SSI, Riggio, 1986) + Pre/post tests</td>
<td>Non-significant</td>
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