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The need for a comprehensive reform of academic training programs for social educators
La necessità di una riforma completa dei programmi accademici per gli educatori sociali

Fuori Call

New challenges in the social, educational and care sectors raise questions about the adequacy of university education. This mixed-methods study explored the new skills and training needs of educators.
The results highlighted a strong preference for practical and interpersonal skills over traditional theoretical knowledge, emphasizing the importance of promoting these skills in academic programs.

Keywords: academic programs, educator, competencies, needs, soft skills

Le nuove sfide nei settori sociale, educativo e assistenziale sollevano interrogativi sull'adeguatezza dell'offerta formativa universitaria. Questo studio basato su metodi misti ha esplorato le nuove competenze e le esigenze formative degli educatori.
I risultati hanno evidenziato una forte preferenza per le competenze pratiche e interpersonali, rispetto alle conoscenze teoriche, sottolineando l'importanza di promuovere tali competenze nei programmi accademici.

Parole chiave: formazione accademica, educatore, competenze, bisogni, soft skills

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Introduction

In recent years, the role of the social educator has undergone a significant evolution, requiring the acquisition of new skills to meet the challenges emerging in contemporary society. These competencies are no longer limited to the pure transmission of knowledge but include a wide range of interpersonal, cultural and technical skills (Cadei, Simeone, & Sità, 2022). In today's digital and multicultural age, social educators must be able to understand and work with different cultural, social and economic contexts, as well as effectively integrate new technologies in their teaching and interaction with students. Their training therefore, includes the ability to promote social inclusion, manage conflicts and crises, and support the personal and professional development of the individuals they assist (Mortari, 2003).

At the international level Konal Memiş and Tabancalı, (2024), emphasize the centrality of digital competences for contemporary teachers, showing that technological skills have become indispensable for fostering meaningful and equitable learning processes. Meanwhile, Ježková Petrů (2023) point out that the professional competencies required of managers in social services significantly influence both service quality and organizational adaptability, suggesting a broader shift toward flexible and innovation-oriented professional profiles. Similarly, Sanatbay et allii (2025), focusing on students of social pedagogy, demonstrate how problem-based learning supports the development of teamwork, communication skills, critical thinking, complex problem solving, and other soft skills that are essential for future social educators.

The analysis of complexity in which the educator operates leads to some important considerations: complexity is becoming an everyday occurrence; therefore, the competences needed to carry out the profession become increasingly preponderant and differentiated (Schön, 2001).

> "The educator's profession continues to be characterised by a weak professional profile, especially in terms of professional identity and public recognition, and this lack of recognition has undeniable consequences on the experience of educators in their being protagonists of stratified and complex professionalism." (Cadei, Simeone, & Sità, 2022, p. 23)

Given the evolving professional challenges, we believe a critical examination of the university's educational offerings is essential. As an academic community, our Higher Institute of Education and Training Sciences 'Giuseppe Toniolo' (IGT) actively contributes to research development and the training of educators, especially working students, engaged across various educational sectors. Its focus encompasses both preventive measures and therapeutic approaches aimed at human assistance. The educational provision includes a three-year Bachelor's degree program in Education and Training Sciences, featuring two distinct specialisations: "educator in socio-educational services" and "educator in early childhood education services" (Istituto Superiore di Scienze dell'Educazione e della Formazione "Giuseppe Toniolo", 2024).

The promotion of competencies by academic organizations requires constant critical reflection, possibly based on research. Only in this way will it be possible to construct a training proposal capable of responding adequately to the needs of the territory. The study we present had the objective of exploring the training needs of educators concerning future developments of the training plan of the Institute, where an attempt will be made to align the programmes of training activities with the socio-cultural and work context.

The survey also allowed us to examine the phenomenon of 'quiet quitting' among educators, a new trend observed in the world of work, where employees decide not to actively engage beyond their minimum work obligations. Quiet quitting does not necessarily imply a decrease in the quality of work, but rather an emotional disengagement and a lack of proactivity in the workplace. In other words, rather than quitting their jobs or resigning, 'quiet quitting' workers adopt a passive approach, limiting themselves to performing only those activities strictly necessary to keep their jobs. This behaviour may be motivated by various factors. International empirical studies on workers (Ochis, 2024) or teachers (Alanoğlu, Karabatak, Uslukaya, & Kuloğlu, 2024) (Konal Memiş & Tabancalı, 2024) (Ergen, Giliç, Yücedağlar, & İnandi, 2025), for example, highlight burnout, lack of recognition, poor communication with management, per-

ceptions of a toxic work environment, leadership issues, workplace bullying, and the increasing precariousness of educational work as key contributors (Nimmi, Syed, Manjaly, & Harsha, 2024)

1. Literature Review

The contemporary period is commonly characterized by some writers as the "crisis of modernity," when the human figure is depicted as impotent, unable to withstand the progression of time and the everyday obstacles (Benasayag, 2020).

Andrea Volterrani argues that education must address human vulnerability throughout a person's life cycle. As a result, it is unclear what abilities a “modern” educator must acquire to address individual vulnerability in an increasingly complicated societal setting (Volterrani, 2024). It is equally important, however, to recognize that educational vulnerability is not limited to the individual level. It is also systemic, shaped by the structural conditions of social policies and by the broader welfare model in which educators carry out their work.

The challenges faced by educators frequently originate from organizational shortcomings, contractual insecurity, high staff turnover, and the fragmentation of services. These factors contribute to a fragile operational environment that not only hampers effective practice but also generates significant professional distress. As Carnes (2023) highlights in her examination of school social work, burnout often emerges not simply from personal strain but because of systemic failures that leave practitioners “overworked and stretched thin.”

Therefore, there is a question about what skills the “modern” educator must possess to address individual vulnerability in an increasingly complex social context. As a result, it is unclear what abilities a “modern” educator must acquire to address individual vulnerability in an increasingly complicated societal setting. Michele Pellerey's skills (2021) for today’s professions might be reconsidered. He examines the concept of professional identity in the current setting, focusing on the problems and transitions that influence the building of professional identity in today's workplace. Humans are enmeshed in globalization, technology, and socioeconomic developments, which affect both social workers and those who practice them. In this framework, educational practice cannot be separated from the public policies that regulate it: educational operability and social policies are deeply interconnected, and the quality of intervention depends on the strength of the available welfare services.

According to Pellerey (2021), the educator's fundamental competencies are divided into five essential categories, each of which contributes to the effectiveness and adaptability required in today's educational situations.

First, relational competencies are paramount; the educator must demonstrate effective communication skills, empathy, active listening, and the capacity to foster positive relationships with others. These relational skills are crucial for building an environment of trust and collaboration, which forms the foundation of any successful educational experience. These competencies are also linked to the dimension of educational care: “care” and “caring” are not spontaneous attitudes but professional competencies, as highlighted by Mortari (2016) and Noddings (2012). Care entails responsibility, presence, the ability to read needs, and to support growth processes. Those elements are central in every educational relationship.

In addition to relational abilities, pedagogical competencies are equally critical. Educators must be proficient in designing and implementing educational activities that align with the needs and interests of their students.

To avoid a rigid separation between theory and practice, these forms of knowledge must be continuously reinterpreted through experience. Following Schön (1983) (Tan, Kocsis, & Burry, 2023), the reflective practitioner transforms practice into professional knowledge, turning theory into a support rather than an obstacle.

This includes employing innovative teaching methodologies, assessing student progress, and adjusting

instructional strategies to accommodate individual learning styles and needs, ensuring a more personalized and effective educational experience.

Furthermore, management competencies are indispensable for educators working in complex educational environments. These involve not only the efficient handling of time and resources but also the ability to manage group dynamics, address behavioural issues, resolve conflicts, and maintain a respectful and constructive atmosphere conducive to learning.

Finally, reflective competencies hold a crucial place in the professional development of educators.

The ability to critically reflect on one's own practices, challenge existing methods and continuously seek improvement is essential for adapting to the evolving demands of the educational landscape. This ongoing self-assessment ensures that educators remain responsive to changes and committed to their professional growth, ultimately enhancing the learning experiences they provide. Together, these interrelated competencies form the backbone of an effective, adaptive, and reflective educational practice. These fundamental competencies are interconnected and complementary, supporting the educator in their role as a facilitator of learning and individual development (Pellerey, 2021).

However, it is believed that these are no longer sufficient, and it is necessary to analyze, interpret, and promote other competencies as well.

Educators are now operating in an era marked by rapid social, economic, and cultural transformations, which present new challenges and opportunities for those working in social education (Bertolini & Caronia, 2005).

In recent years, the role of the social educator has undergone significant evolution, requiring the acquisition of new competencies to address the emerging challenges in contemporary society (Milani, 2019). These competencies are no longer limited to the mere transmission of knowledge but include a wide range of interpersonal, cultural, and technical skills. Recent literature confirms (Mortari & Valbusa, 2020) (Lemon, O'Brien, Later, & et alii, 2025) that educators must integrate intercultural, digital, project-design, and political competencies, as well as an ethics of care centered on the dignity of the person.

In today's digital and multicultural era, social educators must be able to understand and work with various cultural, social, and economic contexts, as well as effectively integrate new technologies into teaching and interacting with students. Their training, therefore, includes the ability to promote social inclusion, manage conflicts and crises, and support the personal and professional development of the individuals they assist.

Technical competencies, such as knowledge of social and psychological theories, are necessary. A social educator must have a solid theoretical foundation. Understanding group dynamics, learning theories, and conflict mediation techniques is essential for effective intervention. Digital competencies are also necessary (Nigris & Catarsi, 2016). Digitalisation has transformed the way we interact and work. Social educators must be proficient in using digital technologies to manage communications, documentation, and reach beneficiaries through online platforms. Relational skills such as empathy and active listening cannot be excluded (Rossi, 2017). Empathy is at the heart of any effective social intervention. Actively listening and understanding individuals' needs and emotions helps build trust and create a safe environment for change.

Being part of a multicultural society, intercultural communication skills are essential (Colombo & Landri, 2018). In an increasingly globalised world, social educators must communicate effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds. This requires an understanding of cultural differences and the ability to adapt one's communication approach.

The complexity of educational structures and administrative organisations also demands management skills to communicate effectively with institutions. Project management skills, including the ability to plan, implement, and evaluate projects, are crucial. Social educators must manage resources, time, and objectives to ensure the effectiveness of interventions.

These characteristics naturally lead to the importance of resilience and stress management skills. Working in complex social contexts can be highly stressful. Social educators must develop resilience to face daily challenges without compromising their well-being (Tosone & Donati, 2013). In addition to stress

management, educators must possess ethical and reflective competencies. Critical reflection is important for educators to evaluate their practices and biases constantly. This helps continuously improve the educational approach and ensures that interventions are always aimed at the well-being of the individuals they assist. Professional ethics ensure educators work with integrity, respecting the dignity and rights of all individuals. This also implies a constant commitment to inclusion and social justice.

Finally, the continuous turnover of personnel within educational communities calls for the competency to support and train new colleagues (Bonometti & Cadei, 2022). The professional identity of the educator is very fragile and not widely recognized at a social level, making the formative aspect, particularly field training alongside more experienced personnel, fundamental.

To conclude, the competencies required for a social educator today are numerous and demand an integrated approach that combines theoretical knowledge, practical skills, and personal qualities. Only through continuous professional development and critical reflection can one hope to effectively address the complex social issues of the "*contemporary educator*". Therefore, to avoid a continuous drain among educators, it is essential to deepen, analyse, and update the skills needed to cope with the constant upheavals that today's society brings to the most fragile people, according to an integrated approach that combines theoretical and practical knowledge while taking into account the professional qualities of each operator (Fazzi, 2024).

2. Method

Study design and data collection

This study uses a mixed quantitative and qualitative method (QN + QL) to assess the quality of the training program for the future development of the training plan. The aims of the survey are: to strengthen the strategic development plan of a post-diploma training institute that prepares educators for social (or early childhood) educational services; to align the programs of training activities to make them more consistent with the Institute's mission in the socio-cultural, scientific, and labour context; and to examine the phenomenon of "quiet quitting" among educators. The specific objective of the research was to explore training needs (QL). The research was conducted to revise the Institute's training plan.

The data were collected during the first semester of the academic year 2023-2024. The researchers sent the online questionnaire[1] to all students via the mailing list. In the introduction of the questionnaire, the purpose of the study was explained. Before answering the questionnaire, everyone was informed about the purpose and privacy obligations arising from the General Data Protection Regulation for EU Member States (GDPR Regulation (EU) 2016/679). All participants declared informed consent. The entire survey process was conducted anonymously, and all sensitive data information was kept confidential.

Quantitative Measures

Quiet quitting was assessed to evaluate educators' behavioral and psychological inclination to disengage from work. This construct comprised 12 items, demonstrating good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0,91). A 4-point Likert scale was applied, where 1 indicated the lowest risk of quiet quitting, and 4 the highest risk.

Other composite variables, designed to measure four specific soft skills, ranged from 1 to 4. These included *Teamwork, Learning from mistakes, Empathy,* and *Problem-solving*. A 4-point Likert scale was applied across all these scales, where a score of 1 indicated a lack of competence or a very low level in the specific soft skill, and 4 represented maximum ability. Specifically, *Teamwork,* consisting of four items, measured the ability to collaborate with others (Cronbach's alpha = 0,49); *Learning from mistakes (L-mistakes),* with three items, assessed an individual's capacity to recognize errors and their willingness to

1 The questionnaire template is available upon request.

learn from them (Cronbach's alpha = 0,52); *Empathy*, comprising seven items, evaluated the ability to perceive and comprehend the feelings and thoughts of others (Cronbach's alpha = 0,62); *Problem-solving*, composed of four items, assessed the ability to identify solutions to problems (Cronbach's alpha = 0,75).

Additionally, individuals' perception of *Competence at work* was measured using four items. A score of 1 on this scale indicated a low perception of competence, while a score of 4 denoted a high sense of competence (Cronbach's alpha = 0,71).

The covariates of interest include the demographic, occupational and educational information of individuals. The demographic variables consist of dummy variables representing gender (female), age and residence. Vocational and educational information includes current employment status (job), possession of a university degree, date of enrolment (enrolment) and study status (completed). It also includes the period between graduation and university enrolment.

Qualitative Data Collection

The qualitative analysis was based on the answers to the open-ended question: *What skills and competences does the social/childcare educator currently need to be able to perform his/her role to the best of his/her ability?*

Data analysis

Stata 17 was used to assess coverage rate and the representativeness of responses, as well as to analyse self-reported levels of soft skills, workplace competence, and quiet quitting. These variables were constructed by aggregating the simple mean of several items, which were developed based on relevant literature and pre-testing in other contexts. Before aggregation, the reliability of each dimension's subindex was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha to ensure internal consistency.

Initially, the sample composition was investigated by examining individuals' general characteristics using percentages, averages, and standard deviations. Correlations between soft skills, perceived workplace competence, and quiet quitting were computed using Pearson's correlation test to investigate their correlations. Finally, differences in these dimensions based on socioeconomic variables were investigated using one-way ANOVA. This initial quantitative analysis, in addition to validating the representativeness of the sample, aims to assess and comment on respondents' self-perception of their soft skills and workplace competence, as well as their risk of quiet quitting. It will also evaluate whether these factors vary according to personal characteristics such as gender, educational background, age, and other demographic variables. Additionally, the analysis seeks to categorise respondent profiles, which will be utilised to inform the qualitative analysis.

In the second part of the study, a qualitative approach was adopted, inspired by Grounded Theory (GT) (Strauss & Corbin, 1994), (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) or, more correctly, Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) (Charmaz, 2006)]. GTM is an interpretive approach to qualitative research, which has recently seen renewed interest (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019). The decision to adopt this methodology stemmed from the necessity to employ a qualitative approach for analyzing responses to the open-ended questions. Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) enhances the analytical process by deriving theories directly from qualitative data, rather than relying on predefined constructs. This approach enables the organization of extensive information, facilitating the categorization of recurring themes and the identification of relationships among them. To conduct the analysis of these open-ended responses, following CAQDA approach (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis) (Lee & Fielding, 2004) the MAXQDA software was utilized, specifically designed for qualitative data analysis (VERBI GmbH, 2024). The decision to use MAXQDA software in qualitative data processing was made to make the researchers' work more objective, as this software allows systematic and rigorous data management. Three types of coding were performed during the analysis: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. The text was coded by two coders. To determine the agreement between the coders, Cohen's coefficient K was calculated, which represents the degree of agreement and reliability of the analysis. The K coefficient reported a value of K = 0,82, indicating a high level of agreement between the two coders (Landis & Koch, 1977), (Gwet, 2012).

Finally, a lexical analysis was performed. The entire text containing responses to the open-ended question was examined for keywords (the main terms of reasoning). After removing stop-words from the text, i.e., words that did not provide useful or specific information, the entire text was subjected to occurrence analysis (i.e., the number of times a word appeared in the text). This step improves the accuracy of keyword extraction and frequency analysis by focusing on terms that contribute to the semantic content of the text (Aggarwal, 2015). The result was a "word cloud," a visual representation of keywords. The purpose of this type of analysis was to examine the language used by students about the topic requested in the open-ended question.

Sample

As a selection criterion, we only included responses from current or recent year attendees, excluding those who attended too many years ago, especially before 2015. This decision was driven by concerns about potential biases from including older respondents. Older students might struggle with accurate recall, leading to inaccuracies. Furthermore, their perspectives could have been shaped by cumulative experiences, differing from more recent students. Additionally, older respondents might have encountered different educational methodologies and course structures, complicating the interpretation of their answers within the current study's context.

	Population	Sample	Coverage rate
2015-2016[1]	NA	11	NA
2017- 2019	65	41[2]	63%
2020-2021	55	48	87%
2022-2024	76	21	28%
Total 2017-2024	196	121	51%

[1] *For this year we have no administrative data for comparison.*

[2] This cell also includes 3 students enrolled in 2015 and 2016 who declared themselves off-course in the questionnaires; as they were certainly included in the off-course administrative data of 2017- 2019.

Tab. 1: Questionnaire response –Coverage Rate

To assess the representativeness of our sample, we compared its characteristics with those of the entire population, as reflected in administrative data. Table 2 below demonstrates that the sample [Column (2)] is highly representative of the population [Column (1)] as the distributions in personal characteristics are quite similar. Furthermore, the t-test results presented in Column 3 reveal that the differences in the average demographic characteristics are minimal and not statistically significant.

	(1) Population		(2) Sample		(3) T-test	
	mean	**sd**	**mean**	**sd**	**b**	**t**
Female	0,75	0,43	0,78	0,42	-0,03	(-0,55)
Age	32,81	10,14	34,88	11,21	-2,07	(-1,66)
Surrounding of Modena	0,44	0,50	0,38	0,49	0,06	(0,98)
Modena	0,41	0,49	0,45	0,50	-0,04	(-0,78)
Reggio and surroundings	0,04	0,20	0,04	0,20	0,00	(0,05)
Other in Emilia Romagna	0,08	0,27	0,09	0,29	-0,01	(-0,34)
Outside Emilia Romagna	0,03	0,18	0,03	0,18	-0,00	(-0,06)
N	196		121		317	

*Notes: * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001*

Tab. 2: Questionnaire response – representativeness of the sample

3. Results

Quantitative study

Descriptive statistics are displayed in Table 3. The average age of the sample is approximately 35 years old, and students range from 20 to 60 years old, with female participants comprising 78% of the sample. All respondents are currently employed. Approximately 34% of participants have completed their studies at the institute, and 14% hold another university degree (i.e., have attained tertiary education outside the IGT). In terms of domicile, participants are predominantly located in the province of Modena or its municipalities. Specifically, 45% reside in the city of Modena, while 38% live in other municipalities within the province.

Regarding soft skills, the sample performed exceptionally well; scores for all examined variables leaned significantly towards the high end of the scale. Furthermore, the average for "quiet quitting" was a promisingly low 19.1. This is particularly positive given that 25 is the theoretical benchmark for moving from a low to a moderate risk of quiet quitting. More specifically, the frequencies for this variable indicate that 81% of the sample (n = 98) is at low risk of quiet quitting, 18% is at moderate risk, and less than 1% is at high risk of quiet quitting. Additional descriptive statistics about the subsample of respondents who have already completed their studies are available in Appendix A1. The appendix shows that the subsample found the program at the IGT Institute useful for developing key educational competencies, including knowledge, autonomy, communication, and ongoing professional development. In fact, nearly all items (except two) received a usefulness score higher than 3, with 4 being the maximum possible. The table also presents the respondents' academic paths: 39% attended the program for Educators in Social-Educational Services, 28% for Early Childhood Education, and 33% for Social Educators (old system).

Variable	Frequency	Percent	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Female	121	78%	-	0,42	0	1
Age	121	-	34,9	11,21	20	60
Concluded	121	34%	-	0,48	0	1
Other master's degree	121	14%	-	0,35	0	1
Work	121	100%	-	0	1	1
Domicile:						
Provincia di Modena	121	38%	-	0,49	0	1
Modena	121	45%	-	0,50	0	1
Reggio e Provincia	121	05%	-	0,20	0	1
Other in Emilia Romagna	121	09%	-	0,29	0	1
Outside Emilia Romagna	121	03%	-	0,18	0	1
University Enrolment:						
2015-2016	121	11%	-	0,31	0	1
2017-2019	121	32%	-	0,47	0	1
2020-2021	121	40%	-	0,49	0	1
2022-2023	121	17%	-	0,38	0	1
Empathy (*Range*: 1-4)	121	-	3,2	0,35	2,29	4
Teamwork (*Range*: 1-4)	121	-	3,3	0,42	2	4
Learn mistakes (*Range*: 1-4)	121	-	3,4	0,44	2,33	4
Problem-solving (*Range*: 1-4)	121	-	3,5	0,41	2,5	4
Competence (*Range*: 4-16)	121	-	12,5	1,79	6	16
Quiet quitting (*Range*: 12-48)	121	-	19,1	6,3	12	48

Tab. 3: Descriptive Statistics

Table 4 highlights positive relationships between all the soft skills examined, with particularly strong correlations between “Learn from Mistakes” and “Problem Solving”, as well as between “Learn from Mistakes” and “Teamwork.” Additionally, individuals who demonstrate higher proficiency in learning from mistakes and problem-solving tend to perceive themselves as more competent in their roles.

When it comes to the risk of Quiet Quitting, the data shows a negative correlation with all soft skills and self-assessed competence. This indicates that individuals with stronger soft skills, and those who feel more capable in their jobs, are less likely to engage in quiet quitting behaviours. These findings suggest that mitigating quiet quitting requires investing in both soft skills and professional competencies, moving beyond purely theoretical knowledge.

Of note are the statistically significant negative relationships between Quiet Quitting and Professional Competence perception ($p < 0,05$), and between Quiet Quitting and Teamwork ($p < 0,1$). The results imply that individuals who feel more competent in their jobs are less likely to disengage, and those with better teamwork skills are similarly less prone to quiet quitting. This underscores the importance of fostering both teamwork and a sense of professional competence to reduce the risk of disengagement.

	Empathy	**Teamwork**	**Learn from Mistakes**	**Problem Solving**	**Competence**
Empathy	1				
Teamwork	0,28**	1			
Learn from Mistakes	0,30***	0,43***	1		
Problem-Solving	0,38***	0,37***	0,47***	1	
Competence	0,15	0,22*	0,30***	0,46***	1
Quiet Quitting	-0,14	-0,20*	-0,06	-0,12	-0,29**

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Tab. 4: Correlations between soft-skills, perceived workplace competence and quiet quitting

A total of 42 one-way ANOVA tests were run to determine the influence of respondent characteristics on six different dependent variables (those listed in Table 4). The analysis reveals that residing near the institute, specifically in Modena, is related to statistically significant differences in certain soft skills. Modena residents exhibit higher levels of empathy [$F(1, 119) = 3,08$, $p = 0,082$], teamwork [$F(1, 119) = 3,83$, $p = 0,053$], and learning from mistakes [$F(1, 119) = 5,32$, $p = 0,023$]. No other respondent characteristics have significant relationships with soft skills. One possible explanation for these findings is that residing closer may facilitate more frequent interactions with peers and instructors, enhancing teamwork and empathy.

Regarding the respondents' assessments of their competence at work, none of the personal criteria that were observed at sex, age, domicile, having completed their studies in the institute, or having a degree, showed a statistically significant effect. This result underscores the importance of their learning pathways and external influences over exogenous[2] factors such as demographic traits. This suggests that competence is shaped more by learning pathways, experiences, and external stimuli than by demographic traits or inherent characteristics. This emphasises the importance of the institute in fostering an environment that supports skill development and personal growth, which are key to nurturing a sense of competence. The qualitative analysis later in the paper explores the specific needs and factors contributing to this sense of competence in greater detail.

A statistically significant difference in quiet quitting was found based on whether individuals hold a

2 In the sense of immutable, unchangeable.

degree [F(1, 119) = 8,44, p = 0,004]. Those with degrees are closer to the moderate risk threshold (23,05, with a threshold of 25) for quiet quitting, while those without a degree are at 18,43. This may suggest that degree holders, potentially believe they deserve better opportunities or recognition for their efforts and investment in work, which could explain their higher risk of disengagement. No significant differences were observed related to sex, age, having a degree, whether they completed their studies at the institute, or their proximity to the institute.

Qualitative study

In today's educational and professional landscape, it is increasingly apparent that competency frameworks - whether at the academic or occupational level - extend beyond mere technical skills. These skills, which focus on theoretical understanding and mastering specific subjects, seem to be giving way to a new priority: transversal, or soft, skills. These are now crucial, emphasizing the personal characteristics and behaviors needed to navigate our complex society. It's no longer enough to simply grasp a subject; individuals must also be able to communicate effectively, collaborate in teams, solve problems, and adapt to diverse situations. This shift underscores the growing importance of developing interpersonal and behavioral skills, which are highly sought after, particularly in social work, placing soft skills at the core of preparing future professionals.

In this context, we explored the skills deemed vital by educators in order to align university curricula with current demands in social work. A qualitative approach was employed to investigate and identify the training needs of social educators and childcare educators. By utilizing this methodology, we conducted an in-depth content analysis of responses to open-ended questions, paying particular attention to recurring themes and the intrinsic meanings of the terms used. Given the complexity of the topic, this approach enabled us to enhance our understanding of the quantitative data, yielding valuable insights and capturing the diversity and depth of educators' needs and their current professional profiles. Below, Table 5 presents the qualitative survey database, outlining the key features of the survey conducted using MAXQDA.

Frequencies	Elements
121	Documents
2845	Number of analyzed words
73	Maxqda codes
1870	Coded segments
2	Coders (Cohen's coefficient between two coders Cohen's K =.82)
4	Maxmaps according to Hierarchical Code-Subcodes Model
1	Maxmap according to Code Co-occurrence Model (Code Occurrence)

Tab. 5: Qualitative features of the survey

In the last phase of the qualitative analysis, four concept maps were created (Figures 1-4) concerning: 1) Educators' needs, 2) Know-how (knowledge), 3) Skills and competences, and 4) Profile of the educator. Conceptual maps, created with the hierarchical code-subcodes model, made it possible to visualize and organize information in a structured way. This type of map (Maxmaps) shows the relationships between the main categories (codes) and sub-categories (sub-codes), highlighting how the various concepts relate to each other. The main features of such conceptual maps include:

– *Hierarchy*: The main codes are placed at the top, with the subcodes arranged under them, representing a thematic dependency or subdivision relationship.

– *Visualization of relationships*: Lines or links between codes and subcodes show how concepts are connected, facilitating understanding of the dynamics and interrelationships between different factors.
– *Data organization*: The conceptual map helps synthesize and organize data, making it easier to identify key thematic areas and their variations. Next to the code, in brackets, the frequency of the code attributed to the text segments is indicated. This visual representation allows researchers to explore and review thematic structures in an intuitive way.

In other words, conceptual maps in MAXQDA, using a Hierarchical Code-subcodes Model, provide a clear and organized representation of information, facilitating understanding and interpretation of the analyzed data. The individual conceptual maps are shown below.

Educators' needs

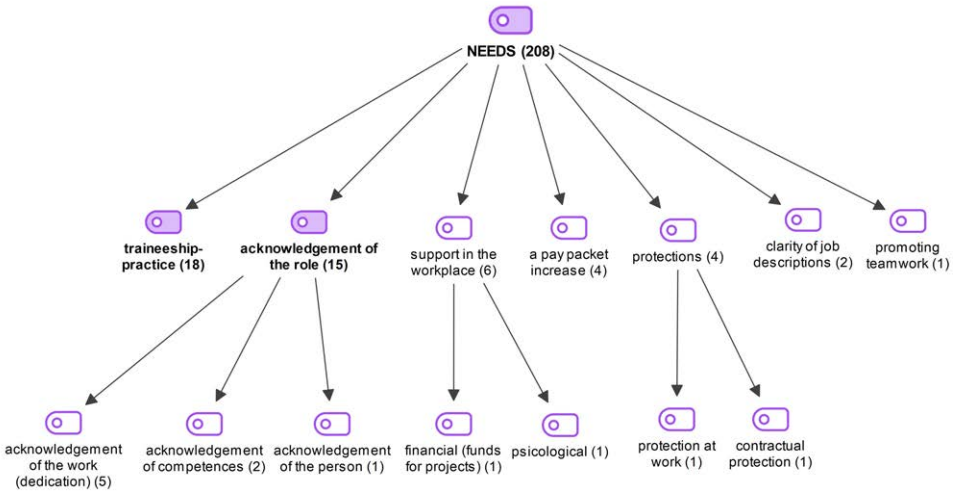

Fig. 1: Educators' needs. Maxmap according to the Hierarchical Code-Subcodes Model (n=121).
Source: Own elaboration based on qualitative data (open-ended responses)

This map illustrates the various factors associated with the needs of educators during the training phase. The most frequently cited factor is the need for apprenticeship training *(f_{18})*[3]. The analysis revealed that students expressed a desire to acquire new skills and competences through hands-on experiences, with the aim of translating their academic knowledge into real-life applications. Furthermore, the importance of role recognition *(f_{15})*, which includes appreciation of the educator's dedication, skills and personal attributes, was emphasised. Although it was mentioned less often, there was also a considerable need for protection and support in the workplace *(f_4)*, both in terms of psychological assistance and financial aid, and increased pay *(f_4)*. Below are some of the most significant quotes reflecting these insights.

Some quotes:

> *"I need theoretical knowledge, but above all I need a lot of practice and a lot of real experience to understand how to relate to colleagues, users and superiors."*
> *"Patience, passion in one's work, knowledge of pedagogical subjects and a minimum of experience in the field (internship)."*
> *"Educators need practice in their fields and more appreciation."*

Know-how (knowledge)

3 The symbol *(f_{18})* indicates the frequency of one code.

Know-how and Knowledge

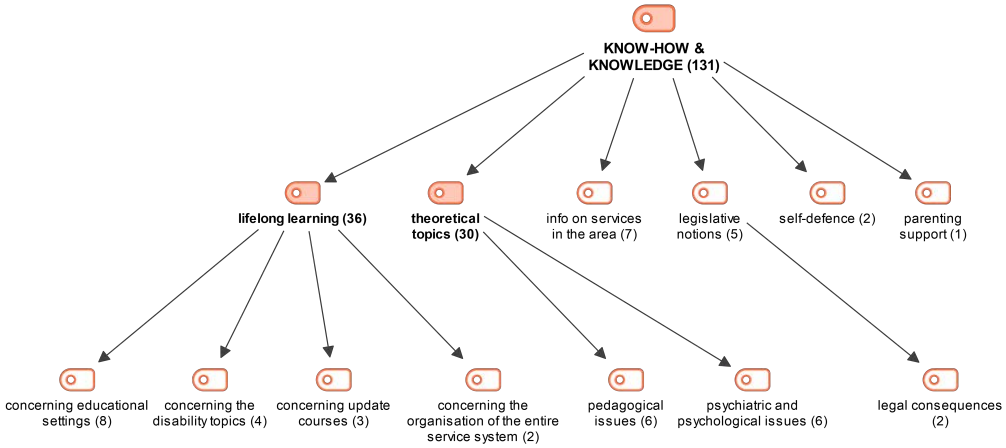

Fig. 2: Know-how (knowledge). Maxmap according to the Hierarchical Code-Subcodes Model (n=121).
Source: Own elaboration based on qualitative data (open-ended responses)

Two main factors emerged from the analyses relating to the subject of the educator's necessary know-how: Lifelong learning *(f_{36})* and Theoretical arguments *(f_{30})*. The first refers to knowledge of educational environments *(f_8)*, particularly those of disability treatment *(f_4)*. The educators expect up-to-date courses *(f_3)*, especially to know more about the whole system of services in the area *(f_2)*. Among the theoretical topics, they would greatly appreciate pedagogical issues as well as psychiatric *(f_6)* and psychological issues*(f_6)*, which by the way are already included in the university curriculum. They would also appreciate greater knowledge of legislative topics *(f_5)*, particularly those concerning the legal consequences of educational action*(f_2)*.

Some quotes:

> *"In my opinion, an educator should have solid skills in the subjects (such as pedagogy, psychology, sociology) that are useful in tackling the job."*
> *"In my opinion (...) he would need to know more about the functioning and competencies of the social services to collaborate more."*
> *"Always be informed and updated through training courses that help to improve skills and abilities such as: knowing how to manage and deal with relational dynamics with families, knowing how to deal with problematic children, knowing how to manage conflicts."*

Skills and competences

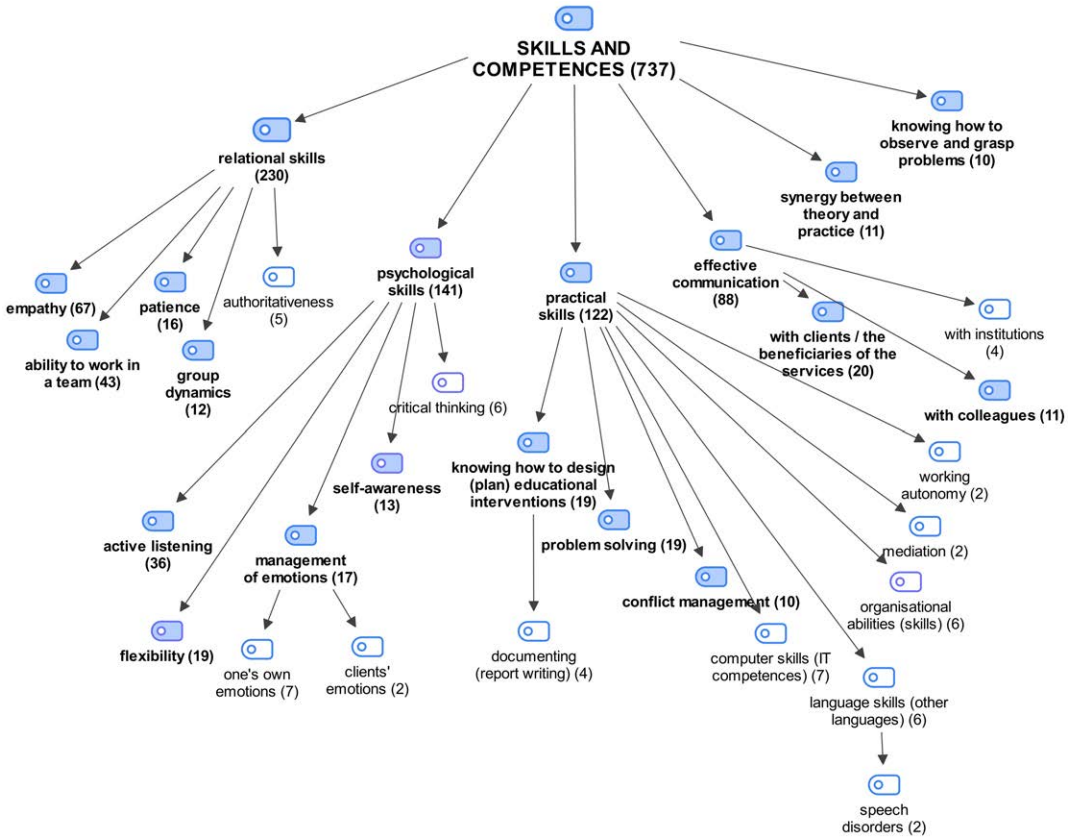

Fig. 3: Skills and competencies. Maxmap according to the Hierarchical Code-Subcodes Model (n=121).
Source: Own elaboration based on qualitative data (open-ended responses)

This map presents an extensive list of skills and competences related to training needs. The factors that reached the highest levels of saturation (frequency of codes) include: *Relational skills and competencies (f_{230})*, such as empathy, teamwork, patience and the ability to manage group dynamics; *Psychological* skills *(f_{141})*, including active listening, flexibility, emotional regulation (both of oneself and in relation to clients) and self-awareness, complemented by the ability to exotopia - the desire to understand a client's situation objectively and without emotional bias; *Practical skills (f_{121})*, including the ability to design and document educational interventions, to effectively solve educational problems, to manage interpersonal conflicts and to communicate effectively with users, colleagues and institutions. In addition, these competences involve the ability to find a synergy between theory and practice, as well as the ability to observe and accurately assess the nature of problems.

Some quotes:

> *"I would need to acquire good interpersonal skills, problem solving, empathy, the ability to work in a team and to communicate with both users and colleagues."*
> *"The educator should have skills such as flexibility and adaptability in order to be able to communicate in the best possible way with the working team and with the users in front of him/her."*
> *"To perform the role of educator the person should have good interpersonal and communication skills, human relations, empathy, problem solving and a predisposition to teamwork."*

Profile of an educator

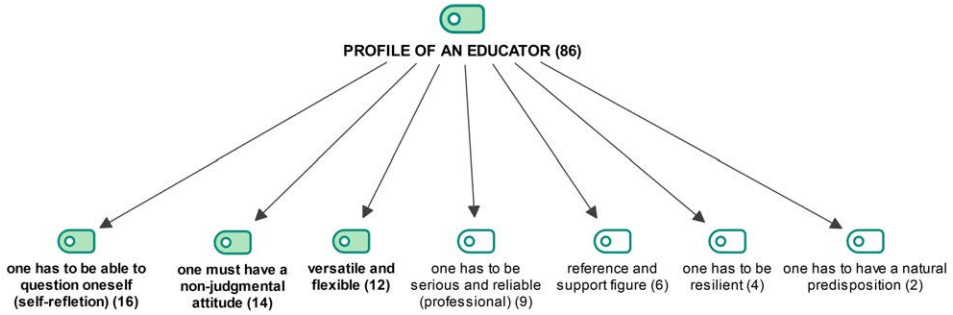

Fig. 4: Profile of an educator. Maxmap according to the Hierarchical Code-Subcodes Model (n=121).
Source: Own elaboration based on qualitative data (open-ended responses)

The conceptual map (Figure 4) illustrates that the profile of an educator, as revealed by the analyses, is mainly associated with two key qualities: the ability to engage in self-reflection *(f_{16})* and a non-judgmental attitude *(f_{14})* towards those they serve. Other characteristics that emerged frequently among respondents were versatility and flexibility *(f_{12})* and reliability *(f_9)*. Some students also emphasised that educators are a point of reference and support for users *(f_6)*, underlining the importance of resilience *(f_4)* in the face of challenges, as well as a natural affinity for this vocation *(f_2)*. Below, we present some of the most noteworthy quotes related to these qualities.

Some quotes:

> *"The educator should have the desire to keep up to date, to constantly challenge himself."*
> *"In the case of a lack of work experience, he should have the desire to learn and to put himself on the line."*
> *"To be an educator, in my opinion, good listening skills, empathy and the ability to question oneself (put one's face and heart into it) are fundamental."*

What are the skills and competencies that the social/childcare educator currently needs?

To definitively address this question, we created the final Maxmap based on the Co-occurrence Model of codes. This process allowed us to systematically integrate and organise the factors identified in the analyzed text. The conceptual map generated with the Code Co-occurrence Model provides a visual representation of the relationships among various codes within the dataset. It illustrates how different concepts encoded in the text intersect and correlate with one another.

Specifically, this type of conceptual map showcases:

- *Co-occurrence of Codes:* This feature indicates which codes frequently appear together with the other code, suggesting significant connections between themes. On the map, these connections are represented by tracked lines.
- *Networks of Relationships:* This aspect reveals how different codes are interconnected, forming a network of concepts that highlights potential links among various themes.
- *Frequency:* The map displays information above the connecting lines regarding the frequency of the codes' occurrences, emphasizing the dominant themes within the dataset.
- *Data Structure and Organization:* This element aids in visually organizing the data and understanding its structure, thus facilitating qualitative analysis. The red lines with the arrow indicate the presence of sub-codes.

Several criteria guided the creation of this Maxmap: three code levels, a minimum of 10 co-occurrences, and a frequency of codes greater than or equal to 10. The thickness of the lines corresponds to the frequency of co-occurrences—connections between highly related codes appear thicker, while those between less common codes are thinner. Above each connection, the frequency of co-occurrences is indicated, while the frequencies for each code are shown in brackets, consistent with the previously presented maps.

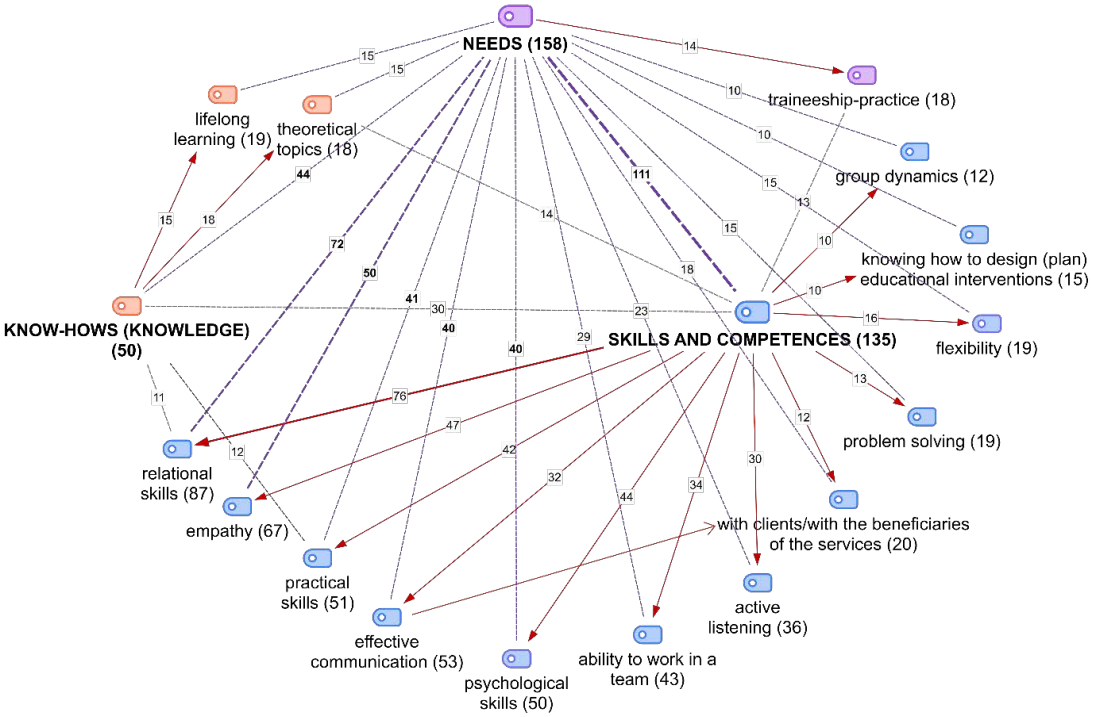

Fig. 5: Skills and competences that educators currently need. Maxmap according to the Code Co-occurrence Model (code occurrence) (n=121).
Source: Own elaboration based on qualitative data (open-ended responses)

Our analysis reveals a clear student preference for practical skills and competencies. This is evident from the 111 co-occurrences recorded for practical skills, starkly contrasting with only 15 for theoretical knowledge. The disparity is further highlighted by the coding frequencies: 135 for practical skills versus just 18 for theory. A total of 12 factors related to practical skills and competencies were identified, listed below in order of their co-occurrence frequency:

Relational skills *(f_{72})*,
Empathy *(f_{50})*,
Practical skills *(f_{41})*,
Effective communication *(f_{40})*,
Psychological skills *(f_{40})*,
Ability to work in a team *(f_{29})*,
Active listening *(f_{23})*,
Effective communication with clients/beneficiaries *(f_{18})*,
Problem-solving *(f_{15})*,
Flexibility *(f_{15})*,
Knowing how to design (plan) educational interventions *(f_{10})*,
Group dynamics *(f_{10})*.

Among the 'know-how' knowledge that, in students' opinion, educators should acquire, two primary factors emerged: lifelong learning through update courses *(f_{15})* and theoretical knowledge *(f_{15})* related to pedagogical and psychological concepts, as well as an awareness of available services in their geographical area.

Some quotes:

> *"Knowing how to connect with families, especially in creating and strengthening the relationship between school and home, is fundamental for a child's journey!"*
> *"The theoretical knowledge I have gained thus far has boosted my self-confidence and allowed me to expand my horizons and skills."*
> *"Psychological skills and competencies are essential for understanding individuals across all age groups."*

Short lexical analysis

The Word Cloud below, with 10 most frequently used words, highlights the most prominent and meaningful terms in the dataset, allowing for a quick visual grasp of key themes (the size of the word indicates its frequency in the text).

Although the language is obviously influenced by the question, which in some way guides the answers, it is interesting to note that alongside the words: "educator", "skills" and "competences", the concept of "empathy" appears. It seems that Educators widely regard empathy as a crucial competence because it fundamentally creates a safe and supportive atmosphere and strengthens relationships. In our modest opinion, this could suggest that training programmes should place particular emphasis on promoting this soft skill.

Fig. 6: Word Cloud. 10 most frequent words.
Source: Own elaboration based on qualitative data (open-ended answers)

Conclusions

The increasing exodus of educators—driven by inadequate compensation, psychophysical fatigue, and a lack of recognition—highlights the necessity for comprehensive reform of academic training programs. Our research indicates that the skill sets offered by current degree courses must be revised to effectively address the complexities inherent in today's socio-assistance landscape. Notably, there is a shift towards placing greater emphasis on practical and soft skills, which reflects the evolving nature of social work and the necessity for educators to adeptly confront the new challenges facing society.

Employing a rigorous mixed-methods approach that included an analysis of a quantitative and qualitative dataset comprising 121 students, we have detected a distinct preference for practical applications and relational competencies over traditional theoretical knowledge.

The quantitative analysis offers insightful information on respondents' perceptions of their soft skills, workplace competency, and risk of quiet quitting. The data reveal a clear negative correlation between quiet quitting, soft skills, and self-assessed workplace competence. This suggests that individuals who demonstrate stronger soft skills and higher self-perceived competence are less likely to engage in quiet quitting behaviours. Specifically, the perception of workplace competence ($p < 0.05$) and teamwork ($p < 0.1$) have a significant impact on lowering the likelihood of disengagement.

Furthermore, the ANOVA test shows that, aside from having a degree, demographic variables, including sex, age, place of residence, and educational background, have no impact on the probability of quiet quitting. This finding underscores that variations in workplace competence and quiet quitting are more strongly influenced by factors like learning pathways, experiences, and external conditions rather than demographic characteristics.

These results highlight how important educational institutions are for skill development and workplace competence. Enhancing workplace competence, moreover, has the potential to prevent quiet quitting because employees who feel competent in their positions are more likely to stay in their jobs and not drift away.

It was essential to understand the specific skills and abilities required for educators to feel competent in their work. The question *'What skills and abilities do social educators and early childhood educators currently need to perform their role effectively?'*, asked as part of our qualitative analysis, addressed this issue precisely. The qualitative insights gathered affirm educators' desire for a balanced training approach that integrates both practice and theory, with a focus on lifelong learning and modern pedagogical methodologies.

Furthermore, the emergence of themes related to self-reflection on one's practice, resilience, and a non-judgmental attitude among educators highlights the need to integrate reflection and supervision of educators' work into academic programmes. This union between theory and practice is necessary to succeed in this challenging field. A further limitation of this study concerns the absence of data and analysis of educators' self-training practices, including reflective review of their work, educational coordination, and pedagogical supervision, since educators' development is shaped by continuing education, reflective review of practice, and educational-pedagogical supervision, which supports awareness and professional growth. An additional methodological extension concerns the possibility of involving educators in commenting on the results through participatory validation processes, as well as scheduling dedicated moments of engagement and discussion with participants.

Ultimately, this study not only deepens our understanding of the training needs of current and future educators but also calls for urgent action to reform the educational frameworks that shape academic training. Some concrete directions for reform include the structured introduction of soft-skills modules within the training curricula, the creation of practice-reflection laboratories. Moreover, the periodic monitoring of the professional competencies required by the labour market to ensure continuous adaptation and improvement of training pathways. These solutions help both to meet evolving sector demands and to reduce educators' sense of inadequacy.

Thereby, these lead a higher job satisfaction and promote a more sustainable future for socio-educational work.

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Appendix

Appendix A1- Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.
socio-educ	36	0,39	0,49
socio-educ-child	36	0,28	0,45
socio-old-syst	36	0,33	0,48
E 1	36	3,5	0,56
E 2	36	3,36	0,64
E 3	36	3,39	0,60
E 4	36	3,14	0,72
E 5	36	3,08	0,77
E 6	36	3,19	0,75
E 7	36	2,67	0,89
E 8	36	2,56	0,88
E 9	36	3,22	0,59
E 10	36	3,31	0,71

Notes:

E1: An adequate knowledge and understanding of the content, research methods, and training related to the educational sciences.

E2: An adequate knowledge and understanding of the educational issues emerging in the context of today's social reality.

E3: Autonomy in making judgments about the educational needs of individuals and groups.

E4: Autonomy in designing and implementing appropriate educational pathways.

E5: The use of communication skills useful for engaging with a user.

E6: The use of communication skills useful for engaging with a team of educators.

E7: The use of communication skills useful for engaging with institutions.

E8: The use of communication skills useful for engaging with IT and linguistic tools.

E9: Autonomy in staying up-to-date by synthesizing theory and practice.

E10: Autonomy in cultivating one's professionalism by opening up to multicultural perspectives.