

Social work education: The Relational way

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Abstract

The article presents the Relational paradigm to social work education. Through the presentation of the main principles and key concepts offered by this paradigm, in the paper are discussed the experiences developed at the Catholic University of Milan and Brescia to educate the future social workers. Empowerment, reciprocity, critical thinking, peer facilitation and valorization and involvement of service users encouraged educators to support teaching and learning processes focused on the development of reflexive social workers. The discussed experiences inspired by both human and methodological issues opened social work education to innovative and relational ways sustaining in the practice both educators and students' roles.

Keywords

Social work education – Relational Social Work – Teaching and learning – Reciprocity – Social workers.

Introduction

In social work there is no universally accepted idea of valid knowledge, skills or expertise for social workers (Asquith, Clark & Waterhouse, 2005; Winterton, Delamare Le Deiste & Stringfellow, 2005). Social work education is generally understood as an all-encompassing enterprise that includes multiple and interrelated professional functions aiming to develop competent social work practitioners (Bogo, 2010, p. 55).

There are only the most general ideas of what we are trying to produce, what constitutes the essential skill for a social worker, and consequently still more varied ideas as to how to set about it (Younghusband, 1959, p. 28). Nevertheless, using the words of Trevithick (2005), social work is a demanding and highly skilled activity. This means that to become a social worker are required a full set of knowledge, competences and abilities both human and technical. Despite the absence of a thorough and unequivocal classification of social workers' abilities and competences, it is widely recognized that some abilities are

essential in order to become effective and morally upright social workers (Banks, 2008; Barnes, 2005; Braye & Preston-Shoot, 1995; Schön, 1983; Thompson, 2002; Wilkes, 1985). Social work educators have an obligation to ensure that students are adequately prepared to take on the challenges of practice and are equipped with the ability to think critically (Samson, 2016). Professional practice requires workers to be able to analyze, interpret, assess, communicate, evaluate, and intervene among multiple sources of knowledge and information in a manner that respects the dignity and diversity of the people served (Deal & Pittman, 2009). However, as is known, there are different ways in which students can be engaged in learning. The relational way offered by Relational Social Work (RSW) to social work education and practice (Folgheraiter, 2004; 2007; Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2012) helps to think in an innovative and encouraging way. The relational perspective is showing promising results in facing the always more complicated social work challenges, not only in relation to the growing complexity of social problems but also because of the ongoing evolution of social policies and welfare systems.

The social work principles that inform RSW as empowerment, peer facilitation, reflexivity and auto-evaluation, valorization and involvement of service users will be discussed below with refer to the educational experiences already developed in the Italian framework at the Catholic University. Without denying the necessity of guaranteeing students a complete education, including a range of different disciplines, paradigms and techniques, the relational paradigm has, in the last years, opened education to a new perspective.

An inevitable and fascinating step for social work students: To first know themselves

It's widely recognized that to become help professionals is required to work about themselves, in continuing education too. For social workers (as for counselors, psychologists and health professionals) the fundamental work tool is represented by themselves. For this reason it's important to promote the idea that each social worker or future social worker is engaged in a continuous process of personal development. By the way, Relational Social Work adds a keen but important shade. Starting from the idea that each human being can only change its existence, to the social workers is requested to promote positive changes in their person. Each change in the life problems of a service user or a family requires to social worker to change: for example to change his/her glance about that persons, or the way by which acts in the decision making process. To change themselves is not only a psychological issue but also includes ethical dimensions. RSW shares these ideas with some authors experts in care ethics.

Joan Tronto (1993) built her theory of care on the statement that to be a morally good person requires, amongst others, to meet the demands of caring that arise in our lives.

From other authors emerged that moral and ethical aspects pervade social work world (Jordan, 1990) and human and relational skills are the main required ones (Egan, 2002).

Empathy, sensitivity, warmth, and an unconditional positive vision (Rogers & Kinget, 1965) are identified as the relational characteristics that social workers need to have (Ferguson, 2005). Thompson (2002) affirmed that although social workers strive to be objective and dispassionate, it is inevitable that emotional components influence their interactions and their work.

The social work profession embeds a set of values and ideologies that imply that practitioners who are authentically «professional» must be not only competent but also self-aware, sensitive, and equipped by a strong sense of ethical and moral correctness (Buckley, 2000). Students need the ability to question, reason, and consider alternative perspectives but also to evaluate their own biases, values, claims, and belief systems (Huff, 2000). Using the words of Dominelli (1998) and Lishman (1998) «we have to know ourselves».

Sevenhuijsen (1998) explained that care is not something given to the user by the practitioner: successful caring first of all relates to one's inclination to reflect on personal actions and reactions.

For the future practitioners engaged in a human relationship, it will be essential to suspend their own conjectures and worries, and their own feelings and free association, in order to recognize the «otherness»(Sevenhuijsen, 1998).

According to Thompson (1991) and Alexander and Charles (2009), social work is personally engaging and intimate work and to give adequate answer to others' emotions is for practitioners a delicate and complex task, but many times it is complicated to give an answer and a name to one's own. Thompson (2006) affirmed that in the professional practice the emotional dimension is often neglected or reduced to only one aspect: the others' emotions. It is very problematic to think of social workers as people who are able to keep themselves above their own emotional experience or as persons «morally correct» who have nothing to better. For the young students, recognizing the emotions and speaking about them is not a simple process, but at the same time it is a fundamental part of the education process, necessary to prevent them from suffering from moral blindness as future social workers. Rather than trying to be there primarily for others, students can learn to recognize that they must be there for themselves first. Sevenhuijsen (1998) suggested that «by knowing ourselves, we create space for «knowing the other», for meeting the other-as-(s)he is, freed from projections, illusions and false expectations».

As human beings, we are always communicating something, although this may not be in words (Watzlawick et al., 1967; Trevithick, 2005), and the path of self-exploration can contribute immensely to improve our attentiveness towards others (Sevenhuijsen, 1998).

To know themselves in social work education: some examples

In the relational paradigm, the action of care is not reduced to care for so-called «weak groups». The young students, social workers to be, need to care of themselves through continuous processes of reflection and positive change. The idea is that, first than to support the others change, it's necessary to focus on their personal opinions and characteristics. This is done not to eliminate prejudice and worries, but to know and manage them. Not to «objectify» the students, but to stimulate their human growth and personal maturation.

Emphasizing the expression of positive energies and resources, the Relational Social Work education model is guided by the purpose of promoting personal growth in the students, a maturation of interpersonal skills and human qualities.

In Relational Social Work education experiences several workshops have been created with this intent. «Social work orientation workshop», «Personal development workshop», and «Emotional elaboration group» are educational experiences ideated to offer the students a dedicated space in which they can work about themselves.

These activities consist of group encounters led by practitioners (social workers or psychologists) in which they facilitate the discussion stimulating student expression and encouraging them to explore their feelings in depth. In these workshops useful group dynamics can take place, in particular of mutuality, empowerment and emotional mirroring. The aim is to encourage the students to learn about themselves in a participate and active way. The students experience themselves through the group, exploring in depth their personal internal world and improving their emotional control.

These experiences proposed during the bachelor's degree aim to facilitate students' coming into contact with their own personal life experiences and gaining self-awareness of their resources and limits. If the students do not have such awareness, their own personal experiences, needs, and unconscious behaviors could influence their understanding of the other person's needs (Cabiati, 2016).

Thanks to these experiences, students described the process of their own change and the change within each relationship.

Another important aim of these experiential workshops is to orient and support students in discovering their personal motivations for becoming social workers and engaging with them. Becoming a social worker, or an expert in human relationships, requires investing in oneself and opening up access to one's own personal resources. Working on personal motivations for becoming a social worker may help students to avoid the most common traps for a helping professional (as paternalistic or stigmatizing attitudes). Students have to engage in self-reflection to determine whether their personal motivation may be deeply rooted in salvific motives, paternalistic attitudes, self-care, or professional omniscience (Cabiati, 2016). Social workers have to face the real risks of becoming «disabling professions» (Illich, 1977) or reinforcing false conceptions of empathy.

It is a sheer impossibility to stand in the «shoes of another» and this is certainly so when we acknowledge the principle of plurality (Sevenhuijsen, 1988).

It is not our journey: the experiential knowledge and expertise

Beyond the personal growth and development, another powerful way to better ourselves is the contact with the experiential knowledge and the experiential expertise of service users and caregivers (Borkman, 1976). A core idea of RSW is that the true help could be developed drawing on these particular resources.

In social work helping processes, the practitioner metaphorically embarks on a journey, but it is not his or her own journey (Folgheraiter, 2004). It is a matter of fact that many social workers tend to think and to act in the service users' lives as they would be the travelers in first person, as if it was their journey.

In critical, often painful life circumstances are not so simple for a practitioner respect the principle of service users' self-determination, above all in situations where direction is legitimate or desirable to contrast sufferings and negative attitudes.

Although this, the subjective and inter-subjective meaning reigns in social work and cannot ignore by professionals. Faced with this, the professionals have limited by definition. Each part is able to modify only itself but in so doing could modifies the other parties (Folgheraiter, 2004).

A relational social worker knows that the nature of social problems requires a mixture of technical knowledge (which rests predominantly on practitioners' shoulders) and life knowledge (predominantly the service users' experiences) combined in an equal and mutual relationship, able to empower both parties (Cabiati, 2016). Taking up the words of Parton (2008), social workers should construct a process whereby the theory of how to help is generated mutually.

For a social worker, the way of knowing how to best help people in difficulties begins in the instant in which recognizes that, as it is also true for himself, all human beings live giving unique meaning to their world themselves. It's important for social workers to keep in mind that service users are the first experts of the life problems they are dealing with.

If, as practitioners, we can involve ourselves in the experience of relating to another human being, what we ourselves gain from this involvement is that we also can develop and learn from the encounter, about ourselves and about other people (Trevithick, 2005).

The relational paradigm recognizes the people who need help as equipped of «experiential competences» about their lives and for this it's more appropriate talking about collaborators or co-workers rather than clients or services users

Service users and careers are experts in their lives, in coping one or more life problems, in taking care of a relative or a friend, in managing the relationship with services and practitioners. Taking up the words of Folgheraiter (2004, p. 120), clients possess the

meaning of what happened, of what is happening and of what may happen. In social work education, clients must be considered the best communicators of their own life experiences (Valutis, 2015).

To value the experiential knowledge in social work education: some examples

In educating students to become social workers, it is necessary to seek help from service users, as happens in social work practice. Considering service users as «experts by experience» in their life problems (Croft & Beresford, 1994), their involvement is seen as providing a balanced education to potential practitioners and modelling good practice for the future (Tyler, 2006; Waterson & Morris, 2005).

Clients have been involved in social work education for over 30 years in the USA (Wikler, 1979); in the UK service users' and carers' involvement has become more widely accepted (Taylor, Braye & Cheng, 2009; Robinson, 2010) but in Italy it is nowadays rare. For ten years, in our experience of social work education developed at the Catholic University of Milan and Brescia, users and carers as «experts by experience» has been actively involving in the bachelors and master degree' programs. In these experiences Experts by experience have shown generosity in supporting not only the students' learning but also the educators' teaching. They have been participating in workshop, academic lessons and full day meetings showing in the practice the idea that social workers must regard service users and carers as partners in dealing with their life difficulties. The concept of «experiential competence» and the distinction between «technical problems» and «life problems» (Folgheraiter, 2004) offered by the relational paradigm support the social work educators in correctly channeling and enhancing the contributors of experts by experience.

The methodological choice in our service users and carers involvement experiences don't misrepresent the value of educators and practitioners as expert by professional knowledge. On the contrary, it's a joint learning in which there is a development space for «experts by life experience» and «experts by scientific paths», where they empower each other. This reciprocal improvement allowed the maximum expression of a helper.

In the international arena, the rationale for such involvement is that an understanding of the everyday experiences of service users is fundamental to equipping emergent social workers with key aspects of knowledge and expertise needed to improve services (Beresford, 2000; Anghel & Ramon, 2009). The possibility of learning from the people most involved in social services enables the development of self-awareness and communication skills in young students (Skilton, 2011). The personal interaction between «experts by experience» and social work students seems to have a greater effect than a conventional teaching (Corrigan et al., 2001).

Among the various benefits of service users' engagement in the education system, there is a particularly interesting effect on changes in attitudes towards clients (Corrigan

& Penn, 2015; Cabiati & Raineri, 2015). Based on the idea that social workers often share the negative view of social problems commonly held by much of the population (Beresford & Croft, 2008; Penn et al. 1994; Trevithick, 2005; James et al. 2012), studies have focused on the positive outcomes of service users' engagement, and a decrease in individual students' negative perceptions of social problems, such as mental illness, drug addiction, and disability was shown. Other studies enlightened that the involvement of service users in social work education activities promoted the connection between theory and practice (Cooper & Spencer-Dawe, 2006; Irvine, Molyneux & Gillman, 2015).

Away from determinism: uncertainties, reflexivity and critical thinking

Social workers can be challenged to achieve particular outcomes and to maintain roles that are not practically, ethically or professionally feasible or possible (Graham & Shier, 2014). The core of a complex and contradictory profession (Banks, 2001) requires a special path of education that can not be reduced to the acquisition of technical evidence-based skills. Banks (2001) suggest that, for social workers, uncertainty may arise when «technical rational» and «moral realms» become confused-essentially technical-rational decisions gain moral overtones, and morality itself may become defined solely in terms of outcomes. According to Beck (1992, p. 156), the scientific knowledge becomes more and more necessary but less sufficient. Leicht and Fennel (2002) make a distinction between «old professionalism» and «new professionalism» to indicate the idea to reconceptualize professional incorporating the need to be openness rather than to master knowledge to reduce uncertainty. RSW explains the deep reason of the complexity of social work. It's a complex and contradictory profession because in coping life problems must involve the experiential knowledge of service users and carers.

If a practitioner considers the people' life problems only according to technical codes, that means that the problems exist just it is perceived by s/he by virtue of his/her expert competences. This logic distances from the real possibility of help and weighs on the practitioners' shoulders the resolution of life problems. Using the words of Folgheraiter (2004), social problems emerge from social relations that are not there.

Instead, in any helping relationship, help is only effective when the worker accepts help from the interested parties as if they themselves were workers (Folgheraiter, 2011).

Professionals have a role, and they perform it, but it is supervisory and facilitatory in nature rather than being manipulative and technical (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2012).

Along the same line, Barnes (2005) proposed the image of social workers as expert in the problem solving process rather than expert in problem solving as such.

Uncertainties exist due to each human being's subjectivity (White & Stancombe, 2003, p. 16) and practitioners need to be able to incorporate doubts constructively (Lorenz, 2016). This is the core of critical thinking.

In literature there are different definition of «critical thinking». Critical thinking has been described as a cornerstone of higher education across the spectrum of academic disciplines (Kuhn & Dean, 2004), but in the practice is difficult to define and even more difficult to measure (Abrami et al., 2008). Celuch, Black, and Warthan (2009, p. 31) summarized a definition that viewed critical thinking as a higher order process of reasoning that allows to move beyond an individual viewpoint and deeply analyze a range of complex information, issues and problems. According to this, critical thinking includes the ability to analyze and evaluate one's own thinking processes. The ability to make judgements about our knowledge and skills and whether they are at a level which equates to competence in professional practice is an important part of reflection and the learning process (Baldwin, 2000). Schön (1987) argues for the importance of reflection in the development of effective practice because of his fears that the more dominant approach to problem solving-technical rationality- is ill-equipped to deal with uncertainty, uniqueness and value conflict.

For the social work profession, which is dedicated to the betterment of humanity, the ability to ensure that graduates have the skills to think critically and engage in critically reflective practice is of paramount importance (Samson, 2016).

Gambrill (2013, p. 95) adds that critical thinking in social work is purposeful; responsive; supports humility, integrity, perseverance, empathy and self-discipline; self-assessing (both critical and corrective); results in a well-reasoned answer; and recognizes opposing views.

The social work education aims: becoming a solutor or a reflexive social worker?

A certain grade of indeterminacy is requested to cope with several human questions and social problems, so the social workers' learning style could be considered as a critical learning and a reflexive thinking.

Considering the unpredictable of social work stage practices, if educators channel the educational energies into a positivist model of education through technical rigidities, these efforts will produce unprepared social workers in facing and tolerating uncertainties. How do practitioners make act with relative confidence in situations where knowledge, outcomes and conditions are indeterminate? (Limbery & Postle, 2007).

There has been an ongoing debate on whether the role of the university is to merely impart knowledge or to produce individuals who have the capacity to understand, analyze, and resolve issues and problems in society through the process of democratic

deliberation (Lim, 2011). Furthermore, the curriculum in social work education can serve as a foundation for people to deliberate over issues of social justice, inequality, and oppression and advocate for effective social change that can lead to transformation (Samson, 2016). Without denying the necessity of guaranteeing to the students a complete education (including theory and practice), the relational paradigm has, in the last years, opened education to a new perspective beyond education models exclusively centered on the professional expertise.

Taylor's (1997) preference for the use of the term «orientation» over that of «induction» is also helpful in signifying the nature of what is required within professional programs of learning and suggests that we should see orientation to professional learning as something rather more ongoing than is usually the case. The educators must never confuse learning with training and the students should always be engaged in a constructive learning process and always open to real encounter with the life situations.

It's commonly known that professional knowledge is associated with powers and privileges (Healy, 2000). Sometimes does it mean undermine the students' wish to attend classes in order to receive soon practice handbooks to be applied on the field. Animated by salvific or omnipotent reasons (although developed by good intentions), the students strive for enter in the professionals' Olympus as soon as possible. In the relational paradigm to social work education is better to educate the future social workers trying to turn off the natural tendency to feel powerful, better and detached from service users by virtue of professional competences acquired.

According to the relational framework, the concept of «coping» help us in understanding that the life problems could encounter solutions or betterment, but could never solved or manipulable by professionals. The term «coping» denotes a reciprocal observed challenge between task and person through the set of motivated person held together seeking for betterment of individual or family life situation (Folgheraiter, 2004). This idea is counterpoised to the image of social worker as solutor or magical repairer of dysfunctions. Leading by this concept and returning to the essence of education, the aim is to transmit to social workers to be an authentic care for the other, not to merely teach how to assess or judge him/her but to realize that, first of all, this encounter may be an occasion of reciprocal learning.

In the delicate mission to educate reflexive social workers, the methodological reason for choosing the relational work approach is to leave students free to act on their personal experiences, educating them not to solve people's life problems but to take care of other people's agency. It is important for social work educators to incorporate the components necessary to teach students to think critically and reflectively, and that students recognize that learning is a lifelong process (Samson, 2016).

Who teaches and who learns? The principle of reciprocity in teaching and learning

Relational Social Work proposes some suggestions for educators to better use their role. The first one regards the teaching style and the adoption of a reciprocity-based approach.

The reciprocity of learning is similar to the concept of reciprocity of helping in the social work practice. The reciprocity of helping — allowing the helpee to be an equal and to help social workers in return — is not an empty slogan (Ferguson & Lavallette, 2004) or something that «is better if it exists». It is a radical turning point (Folgheraiter, 2012, p. 83) because if it is absent, that help withers and dies (Beresford & Croft, 2008).

Believing in the principle of reciprocity, the relational approach to social work education reminds that the expertise to become a social worker is not in the educators' hands only. Granting a space of reciprocal influence for the learning process may be uniquely effective. Given that all relationships are in some manner two-way, it must therefore be presumed that students and educators, like all people, experience reciprocity in relationships (Alexander & Charles, 2009). Reciprocity means that not only do teachers influence students but also that students influence teachers (Aultman, Williams-Johnson & Schutz, 2009).

In Relational Social Work education, students need to learn from educators in the same way that educators need to learn from students. Affirming this, it is possible to surmise that educators learn from students how best to teach them. In the same time, students learn from educators but in doing this they teach to the same educators what is the best way to accomplish the mission. In this sense it's a shared mission in which different goals (become a social worker and educate a social worker to be) culminate in a whole purpose. This is not conventional and often educators are concentrated on the teaching process, disregarding the importance to learn themselves while teaching.

To educate following a «relational teaching and learning approach» means to facilitate a dialogical process involving different actors, crossing traditional boundaries and sharing the purpose of this delicate mission. The aim of social work education guides all of the actors involved in co-constructing spaces of knowledge, listening to every voice involved and considering «teaching and learning» as an ongoing process that is never complete. Integration of the concept of bidirectionality in human development and the potential for mutually caring, intimate and meaningful relationships into social work practice would enhance the educator's capacity to contribute to change (Alexander & Charles, 2009). Stimulated in a non-traditional way, students change of their own and change within the relationship with educators.

It's important to clarify that in the social work educational path all is not reciprocal because there are contents that require a traditional teaching and learning approach;

however, for an aim of students' personal development or growth, it's necessary to put into practice the principle of reciprocity, teaching (and learning) in a peer-to-peer logic.

In the Italian experience promoted by the Catholic University of Milan and Brescia, several workshops inspired by the reciprocity principle have been introduced. In these experiences the border between teaching and learning vanishes thanks to a participatory role of the students and the ability of the educators to use their power in a relational and reciprocal way. If in the learning relationship the creativity and the initiatives of the students are not impeded, they could express not only their personal capacities, but also the capacity to show to the educator how best to teach them. Through a trusted uncertainty students free to find their own routes of learning inspiring educators in renovating their routes of teaching.

Ongoing humility (as the idea of being able to learn from each other) supports collaboration and can level an unequal distribution of power (Lewis et al., 2016) both in education and practice.

When there is a reciprocal basis of discover and encounter that contributes to spread the fields of knowledge, caring and educating initiatives become truly «social» based and their efficacy increases. In this framework teaching and learning follows a developmental approach that requires indeterminacy, confidence, humility, openness and human energy, as suggested by RSW.

Relational guidance: A way toward students' empowerment

A second suggestion offered by the relational paradigm to social work education concerns the way by which the principle of reciprocity can be used in the practice through the Relational guidance.

In RSW, the relational guidance is the reciprocal influence between a network-in-motion and an expert who seeks to intercept and deflect that motion (Folgheraiter, 2004, p. 175). Given that this concept is valid both for social work practice and for education, the educators as relational guides act not only to transfer knowledge or procedures but also to encourage and support students' agencies.

Considering education not only in a traditional way, the educators act as relational guide giving up to a directive style of teaching to assume a function of facilitation. As a relational guide, the educator facilitates discussion, stimulating student expression and encouraging them to explore their feelings in depth, when necessary starting with talking about their life experiences. Educating students as «facilitators of human relationships» means acting from a desire to contribute to human flourishing. Educators as Relational guides should encourage students to be collaborators in the project of helping themselves to become social workers.

From the recent Italian experience promoted by the Catholic University (Raineri, 2015; Cabiati, 2016; Cabiati & Raineri, 2015), it's apparent that the characteristics of this facilitator-professor should be that is skilled in relational abilities, is not directive, and knows and applies the principles of the relational paradigm learnt during his/her own experience as a student or later through dedicated learning. Based on a peer-to-peer logic, this figure aims to facilitate active participation and openness in students.

As part of the education process, the teacher/relational guide changes the classroom environment from one in which students are passive recipients of the instructor's knowledge to one in which they are active participants in their own education (Steiner et al., 1999). In this delicate task, the educator remains aware of the purpose of the educational process but accepts a certain degree of indeterminacy.

As Prosser and Trigwell (1999) clearly indicate, the nature of what a student learns is not dictated solely by what is taught or by how it is taught. A democratic environment creates the context for a variety of emotional experiences that have the potential to influence not only learning but also teaching and motivational processes.

Another intent of the education process is concretely show to the students the methodological concept of Relational guide in order that they could experiment it during the practice learning and consequently in the professional practice. The function of relational guide with own distinctive traits is assumed by the educators and transmit to the students in order that they could experiment it from the beginning of their educational path.

The relational guide aims to help the students in constructing a personal balance between technical skills and human agency/liberty. If young students experience his/her educator as a relational guide, therefore will be likely that they could express this function in their future social work practice. For these reasons, the benefits of stimulate facilitation processes regard both the education process and the professional activities of the future social workers. Several authors (Hensley, 2002; Bennett, 2008) affirmed that in the relationship with service users the practitioners express what they experimented during the practice learning.

An example of relational guidance into practice: Off-the-beaten-track placements

As is known, field education is an integral component of social work education and as Hepworth and Rooney and Larsen (2002) highlighted activities in the field provides opportunities to marry theory and practice. In the Relational Social Work education experience, at the third year of bachelor's degree, after a completed experience of traditional practice learning during the year before, the students are requested to experience the function of relational guide in an «Off-the-beaten-track placement» (Doel, 2010). In this placement, expectations and goals are different from those of a conventional placement.

The students have the task to create an innovative and participated project, shared by professional and non-professional stakeholders. The project must be original for the specific context where it is developed; and meet the needs identified «by» the person, the family, the group or the community (Calcaterra & Raineri, 2015). The global definition of social work (IFSW and IASSW, 2014) suggested that in facing the life challenges in the society social work is invited to engage people and organizations. Assuming this, the «off the beaten track placement» is promoted by the Catholic University believing in the idea that the activities of the student in placement depend from the cooperation with other actors involved in the project: service users, professionals, volunteers; at the same time these persons have to gain something useful for themselves (Raineri, 2015). Following a participatory approach (Croft & Beresford 1994; Dominelli, 1998;) the student interacts where the problems arise in the local communities.

Non-traditional placements increased opportunities for students to explore different and creative ways of meeting service user requirements, and to challenge their own value base (Billingham & Roberts, 2002); to provide students with a more holistic view of service users' lives and needs (Gregson & Fielding, 2008,); and to support the development of key skills, especially communication skills (Parker, Hillison & Wilson, 2003).

By taking a nonhierarchical, egalitarian approach, with the academicians assuming a not-knowing stance, all participants contributed as equals in defining the exact nature of social life problems and in developing effective solutions (Strier, 2011). These successful partnerships reflect relationships of mutuality, reciprocity, and valorization of practitioners, service users, caregivers, citizens. Furthermore, social work intervention helps people connect with needed resources and to negotiate problematic situations which might also involve changes to existing structures where these present blocks to human growth and development. Non-traditional placements express concretely all the strength of working together according to a relational logic to enable citizens, groups of families, to mobilize organizations and entire neighborhoods, and often awaken institutions a bit lazy.

Sometimes these initiatives, by virtue of the benefits generated in the local communities, not only can present itself as innovations within the local services, but also have legs to walk even after the formal conclusion of the project.

In our experience, sometimes, are the same lazy organizations to understand the power and the originality of these initiatives (whose benefits are often positively contagious) proposing collaborations to the students to go on with the project. Through these unconventional placements, the young students shown in practice an improvement of their technical and human competences, mixing methodology with personal abilities and creativity.

In doing this they are guided by the principle of «indeterminism»: every specific (non-generalizable) social problem admits to a plurality of solutions, all of which are equally possible at the moment when the intervention gets under way (Folgheraiter, 2004, p. 132). Aware that in the world of social work life problems there are solutions available

but not predetermined or «at all», the students, to help themselves, seeking collaborators and helpers in the local communities. There is a change of perspective from a traditional placement: the students don't leave the university to implement a project relative to a need individuated in the community. Instead, through the methodological supervision of a university educator with experience as social worker, the students set out for a fluid and uncertain path seeking for teachers, helpers and supporters to cope worries about a specific problematic.

Combining strengths and resources dialogically, the student, as a relational guide in the practice, learns from the people met in the field how to best help them.

According to the studies carried out by Scholar et al. (2012), from our ten-year experience, students that had initially wanted a placement within the statutory sector to work alongside qualified and experienced practitioners, through an «out of the beaten track placement» experienced «real social work» empowering their identity as social worker.

Conclusion: notes of prudence

In this final part, some of the concepts proposed are revisited with notes of prudence.

If future social workers will be demand to become experts of human relationships (Folgheraiter, 2007), the educators' responsibility is not for something but towards someone. It's a kaleidoscopic responsibility that involves human, ethical, societal, scientific and social justice issues (Cabiati, 2016). In the relational paradigm, responsibility is not thought in a formal sense, but rather as an apprehension of and a care for the other's vulnerability (Jonas, 1979).

As regards the issue of experiential competences in social work practice and education, the amount of experience is not a reliable indicator of learning (Thompson & Thompson, 2008). This is valid for practitioners in relation to the uniqueness of each life situations, but it's true also for service users and careers experiences. Recognizing the experiential competences value, these need to be elaborated to be used conscientiously and successfully. The mere fact that they were service users is not sufficient to consider them as «Experts by experience» from whom to learn. To be regarded as partners in the education programs, not only as testimonies, it's necessary that their life experience through elaboration become experiential knowledge and expertise. In the relational paradigm, mutual-aid groups represent a meaningful elaboration spaces enhanced by the perspectives of the same members. Through the power of mutual-aid dynamics, the knowledge of individual members upgrade because become shared knowledge (Raineri, 2011). In social work education programs, the experts by experience' recruitment through mutual aid groups could avoid the risk to present anecdotal, unrepresentative or too personal stories (Baldwin & Sadd, 2006).

Experiential knowledge concerns practitioners too. As for all human beings, students and social workers have experiential competences borrowed from their personal life too. It would be dangerous to think of them only as «experts by scientific ways». Can happen that a practitioner is «expert by experience» of living and coping a life problem similar to that of the service user of which is dealing. In the practice these experiences can function positively or negatively, using the words of Thompson (2006) as «accelerator or brake». Referring one more time to the idea that the first travelers of the journey are the people directly involved, social workers and students need to become aware of the fact that, even with similarities, they only remain protagonist of their own personal experiences. If they do not have such awareness, their own personal wishes, needs, and unconscious behaviors could negatively influence their understanding of the other person's needs. Remembering the importance of knowing first themselves through the learning process, future social workers could greatly benefit from the knowledge rooted in their own life and from the knowledge learnt from service users' and career' experience too.

In these delicate missions, the Relational Social Work education paradigm seems to represent an effective way to positively sustain both educators and students' roles.

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