Group and Community Work in Practice: Students Learning from Experts-by- Experience

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Abstract: Group work and community work are traditional levels of social work interventions. However, to define precisely and understand in depth the role of a social worker doing group work and community work is not so easy. Considering these features, students of the bachelor in Social work at the Catholic University have opportunities to listen from members of communities experiences of collaboration with social workers in planning group and community work. 14 experiences of group or community work have been presented to students. At the end of each meeting students were asked to answer two questions by filling a form online. 218 forms were filled out with answers to the two questions for a total of 436 answers. A qualitative analysis was conducted. Results show that students appreciated the opportunity to hear concrete experiences of group work and community work from EBE. Moreover, listening to their voices allowed students to better understand some methodological concepts explained during theoretical lessons; understand how the role of social worker can be declined inside the communities; get examples of how participation in collective projects could provide benefits to community members; verify that aid is also a natural dimension of the relationship between people and, consequently, to have example of the function that relational social workers play in facilitating human relations at work towards a common good; receive practical indications or strategies that social workers could put in place to cope with problems in promoting and implementing group and community work.

Keywords: Community work, Group work, Social work education, Expert-by-experience, Relational social work

Introduction

Group work and community work are traditional areas of social work interventions (Folgheraiter, 2007; Mayo, 2009; Payne, 1995; Popple, 2002). Community work can be found at the origins of social work. In a broad sense, community work focuses on helping "*people with shared interests to come together, work out what their needs are among themselves and then jointly take action together to meet those needs, by developing projects enabling the people concerned to get the necessary support to meet them or by campaigning to ensure that they are met by those responsible*" (Payne, 1995, p. 165).

Similarly, social work has a long and varied tradition of research and practice regarding group work (AASWG, 2010; Gutman & Shennar-Golan, 2012; Kurland & Salmon, 2006; Raineri, 2017; Steinberg, 2013).

Working in these two professional areas require participatory planning processes. The Relational Social Work method (Folgheraiter, 2007), based on the theoretical framework of Relational Sociology (Donati, 2010; 2013), provides operational indications to social workers to facilitate processes even in these social work practices. However, defining precisely and understanding in-depth the role of social workers in group and community work is not an easy task. There are no formal procedures to follow. Social workers are asked to collaborate with community members, guiding group of people to reflect, helping communities develop reflexivity, improving their ability to enhance their welfare and defining their strategies to reach the goals identified and set. Therefore, training based only on the acquisition of theoretical principles and concepts is often not enough.

The EbE involvement in the University-Community partnership

In view of integrating theoretical knowledge with deeper understandings and awareness acquired from practice, Universities often decide to establish partnerships with communities (Rogge & Rocha, 2004; Soska & Johnson Butterfield, 2005; Yamamura & Koth, 2018). In this way, mutual improvement is created: on the one hand, the social workers in training can learn directly on the field; on the other, communities can benefit from meeting students who can provide skills, knowledge, time and energy.

The exchange is encouraged through internships and practice placements organised in social work courses (Allegri, 2021; Raineri, 2003) so that students can also build their knowledge by learning from practice. The relevant literature presents many examples of students who are offered *Unconventional practice placements* (Raineri & Sala, 2019; Schelbe et al., 2014; Tapia, 2009; 2016; Williams et al., 2002). These experiences allow social workers in training to experiment independently in the facilitation of projects with a

collective impact. At the same time, their presence in the field provides valuable help to the communities in dealing with their needs. University-community partnerships are also realised through research-action processes.

However, the learning through experience method is not implemented only through practice placements in which the student is assigned to services or specific areas. Sometimes, the Experts-by-Experience (EbE) collaborate with Universities to share their knowledge with students. The international literature describes several experiences in which EbE collaborate in social work courses, presenting the benefits of their involvement in the education of social work students (Allegri, 2015; Branfield, 2009; Cabiati, 2016; Cabiati & Raineri 2016; Cooper & Spencer-Dawe 2006; Irvine et al., 2015; Morin & Lambert 2017). Universities organise these meetings-exchanges in different ways and with different methodologies (Driessens et al., 2016). These experiences sometimes are conducted through the organisation of short or day long meetings (Cabiati & Levi, 2021). The students have the opportunity to dialogue with people who personally experienced pain, need or suffering and who acquired, thanks to personal or group re-elaboration paths, awareness, and knowledge that they can now share with "Others" (cf. Service users Involvement SUI, McLaughlin, 2009; Shulamit et al., 2019). These "Others" could be people going through similar life problems, but also practitioners or students who can learn from them what they otherwise can not find in manuals (Hughes, 2017). At other times, more or less structured University-Community partnerships are established, and entire projects are shared in the University classrooms directly by the people involved: practitioners, volunteers, caregivers, service users who share group and community social work processes and outcomes with students.

The workshops

In the bachelor's courses in "Social Work" at the Catholic University of Milan and Brescia, the workshop "Analysis of good Relational practices" is conducted. The workshop is part of the social work method theoretical course in the third year of the bachelor's course. Students acquire in-depth knowledge on social workers' functions in group and community work based on the Relational approach (Folgheraiter, 2004; 2007). The workshop "Analysis of good Relational practices" consists of 7 meetings of 3 hours each. In each meeting, the workshop tutor presents to the students a group or community work project considered relevant from the point of view of the Relational social work approach and invites some people who have participated in the projects to share their experiences. These presentations are made by service-users, caregivers, and Experts-by-Experience community members, who sometimes intervene together with social workers from public services

or non-profit organisations, local administrators, and experts from other professions. They share their experience, answer the students' questions, and listen to their reflections. Projects or initiatives conducted in various areas of intervention, not always already known to students, are presented. Generally, the projects presented have in common participatory planning processes among different people, in various ways affected by a problem or a situation, who form a coping network to implement solutions to the life problems of their communities. In many cases, a social worker participates as a Relational guide, helping people work together towards a common goal, enhancing the differences and the dynamics of reciprocity. This experience demonstrates the benefits of mutual help and how this network can generate empowerment and social capital, which are concepts studied by students at a theoretical level in courses on Social Work Methodology.

The findings presented by the international literature and the principles of the RSW method, such as reciprocity, exchange between expert and experiential knowledge, co-construction of help and knowledge paths (Folgheraiter, 2004), highlight the importance of EbEs' involvement in Social Work Education, in both theoretical and practical training. For this reason, the workshop presented in this article is part of the bachelor's courses in "Social Work" at the Catholic University, together with other experiences offering students the opportunity to meet, discuss and work together with EbEs (Cabiati, 2016; Cabiati & Levy, 2021).

The workshop purpose is to offer future social workers the opportunity to learn about experiences born from the initiative of local communities, "outside" the formal contexts of welfare organisations and reflect on them trying to identify elements related to the Relational social work approach. Students should make a reflective effort to turn theory into practice and vice versa, applying complex conceptual categories expected in their profession. Given the importance for Relational Social Workers of promoting and encouraging mutual support relationships and community activation, during the bachelor's course, young social workers in training are offered the opportunity to practice such function, also presented in the experiences shared during the workshops. In the last year of the course, students participate in Unconventional Practice Placements: such experiences allow them to operate in the field, starting and facilitating projects benefitting the community in total autonomy and with the direct involvement of community members (Corradini et al., 2020). These fundamental experiences allow students to contextualize and practice the theoretical knowledge acquired and what was shared by the EbEs during the workshops.

This study hypothesises is that after listening to concrete examples presented by community members collaborating with each other and with prac-

titioners to define interventions aimed at improving the living conditions of their community, students can:

- achieve greater theoretical and practical awareness of this complex aspect of professional social work
- understand the social workers' role in group and community work through practical examples

During the academic year 2020-21, the two workshops, "Analysis of good relational practices", held in Milan and Brescia, were attended by 65 students who had the opportunity to participate in dual-mode meetings (part of the students in presence and part remotely). The people presenting the experiences, due to the health emergency, intervened only remotely. Out of 14 experiences presented, 9 were on community work, 3 on group work, and 2 on both topics. The community projects presented had different purposes: active citizenship, social cohesion and participatory redevelopment of facilities (such as the redesigning and renovation of a railway station together with young people to create a place for youth policy interventions); community development projects aimed at families in specific localities or in vulnerable neighborhoods (such as the collaboration agreements made in some municipalities between citizens and local administrations aimed at taking care of common areas through street cleaning, the management of facilities and small services, which also resulted in new connections and relationships); projects aimed at social inclusion or awareness-raising and humanitarian aid interventions (such as associative activities born from the activation of asylum seekers). The experiences on group work dealt with self-reciprocal help on specific personal problems (such as eating disorders and addictions) and the well-being of social workers from various parts of Italy, connected through an online supervision group during the health emergency. There were also presentations dealing with both group and community work: an experience on severe marginalization and youth activation, involving informal groups of self-organized young people engaged in visiting homeless people; support and awareness activities regarding specific pathologies, such as the presentation of a movement coping with senile dementia offering help to families affected by the problem and working with communities to make them fully understand and accept these challenging situations.

Research method

Students attending the third year of the bachelor course in Social Work were invited to participate at the research. At the end of each meeting of the workshop, the students were asked to answer two questions by filling an online form: 218 forms were filled out with answers to two questions for a total of 436 answers.

The research aimed to get students' feedback about the effectiveness of their participation in the workshop in view of a better understanding of social work practice and its connection to the profession theoretical aspects. The first question of the survey asked whether and in which way listening to the testimonies had helped the students to understand better the theoretical/methodological concepts related to group and community work. The second question was about what they had learnt on social workers' practice in group and community work.

A qualitative analysis was conducted. The answers to the two questions were analysed together. The texts were subdivided into themes and subtypes identified by semantic analogy (Ritchie et al., 2003). Three researchers read the answers independently to provide greater objectivity in the development of themes. At the end of the analysis, the three researchers discussed the results together.

The study was conducted following the ethical research standards established by the Ethical Code of the Catholic University (Chancellor Decree n. 9350/2011).

Results

Theoretical principles applied to practice

From the analysis of the students' answers, a first possible consideration concerns the fact that listening to the testimonies on group or community work allowed the students to observe the principles that guide social workers' professional activity applied to practice.

The students state that they were able to understand what it means in practice complying with some principles and value orientations indicated both in the Italian ethical statement for social workers (CNOAS, 2020) and in the Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles (IFSW, 2018).

Various responses recall the importance of respecting people's right to self-determination even when the group or community members experience difficult situations that could question their ability to make good choices for themselves.

> An Expert-by-experience reported a fundamental concept: believing in the abilities of people who are going through challenging times or difficult life circumstances. He recalls the importance of recognising the centrality of people and non-judgment. (Answer 51)

Some testimonies allowed the students to observe the principle of reciprocity applied to practice when defining aid interventions. The recognition of this principle has a fundamental strategic value for the success of partic-

ipatory planning processes and the implementation of interventions with a collective impact.

> I learned that it is essential to maintain equality, reciprocity, and respect for one another when working online. Furthermore, I learned that every day, every experience, every person are useful and indispensable resources. (Answer 385)

Alternatively, when practitioners collaborate with community members only in the initial planning phase, they then carry out the project.

> I was struck by the ability of the volunteers to conduct a project without the support of social services. So, I understand how important a social worker's sharing, availability and transparency is in promoting and starting projects with a collective impact. (Answer 150)

Listening to a group work experience in support of social workers during the Covid19 pandemic clearly and concretely demonstrated to the students the responsibility of practitioners to take care of themselves to take care of others.

> I learned that if social workers do not take care of themselves first as persons and as professionals, they will hardly be able to help others. (Answer 252)

In addition, the responsibility stated in the ethical statement is to take action as professionals to help communities in emergencies.

> I was able to connect this testimony to Article 42 of the [Italian] Ethical Statement, which provides for SWs' availability, who have to make themselves available in case of emergencies. (Answer 16)

Finally, there were several examples about respecting the principle of non-judgment, the importance of adopting an empathic attitude towards the people with whom one is collaborating, respecting human rights and the centrality of every person, and the need for continuing training for performing qualified interventions.

> Listening to the testimony, I realised the importance of concepts that I could not have understood otherwise. The importance of non-judgment towards those who have a need and are facing life difficulties, the empathy essential in approaching those who turn to professionals, the need to be informed and always up to date on how to plan interventions collaborating with other professionals and members of the public. (Answer 159)

It seems that the opportunity to hear the importance of respecting these principles from the direct voice of service users allowed students to observe the effects of social workers' work in the life of specific groups and communities, understanding the ethical challenges faced by the practitioners.

The methodology for group and community work projects

A significant result of listening to the experiences presented in the workshop is the students' understanding of some theoretical concepts presented in their classes related to the working methodology that a social worker should follow to conduct group and community work projects.

Some students report a generic understanding of group or community work in their answers without specifying specific methodological steps or social workers' operational responsibilities.

> I better understood the theory of group work and community work
> by listening to the testimony of those directly involved. (Answer 60)

On the other hand, many others specify which aspects of the theoretical/methodological concepts they were able to understand better by participating in the workshop.

A substantial opportunity for clarification relates to the functioning of groups in social work and their creation, the rules of member engagement, time management, mutuality dynamics among group members, social workers' role in facilitating dialogic exchange in a self-help group, and the dynamic of the helper therapy.

> It helped me understand what a self-help group really is, not only
> from a theoretical point of view but also from a practical one, thanks
> to the experiences reported. A thing on which I reflected, and which
> was one of the themes in the theoretical lessons, is that in self-help
> groups, the only activity is actually mutual support. (Answer 55)

> I was able to understand the concept of helper therapy better when
> one of the group members explained that for him, self-help is helping
> others by helping themselves and that helping is a process of empowerment. (Answer 69)

The workshop allowed students to learn concrete examples of the different "types" of groups that can be activated in social work, particularly on self-help groups, and the difference between supervision groups and peer supervision groups.

> I better understood the theoretical distinction between peer supervision groups (groups where professionals meet to discuss how they are
> performing their work, sharing their experience as equals, and trying
> to improve themselves) and supervision groups (groups in which an
> experienced outsider joins the group and helps professionals). (Answer 32)

Regarding the process of planning interventions with a collective impact, most of the students report a greater understanding of what it entails

supporting an participatory planning process that requires practitioners to create:

> a connection with people ready to act in an area, thus creating a space where individuals are at the centre of the intervention. (Answer 79)

> collaborations and a network made up of expert practitioners, but above all Experts-by-Experience. (Answer 106)

The participatory planning process is based on the Relational social work approach. According to this approach, practitioners' function is primarily to support and facilitate coping networks in achieving shared goals through the free initiative of members of the concerned community (Folgheraiter, 2004). In the workshop, the students were able to concretely learn about the outcome of these support processes, which can lead to an increase in social capital and community care...

> I had the chance to hear how the concept of care by the community can be implemented. [The practitioner] reported, step by step, the actions they performed to make the community aware of the difficulties faced by people with Alzheimer's and how everyone could help. (Answer 108)

> Young people contributed to the project, starting from the need to satisfy their own needs (self-realisation); they could take care of other community members (hetero realisation). (Answer 89)

... on the other hand, it is advantageous for the social workers themselves who, with the collaboration of the community, can better and more easily carry out their work.

> I realised that social workers, by helping others and allowing them to participate, can also help themselves. (Answer 302)

This reflection is linked to the concept of Relational guide, a methodological function typical of social workers, which often recurs in the students' answers.

> [I understood that] social workers are professionals who play a fundamental role within the network: they should be able to facilitate the connection between members of the same network, knowing, in some cases, how to guide them in the direction that the participants are trying to reach together. (Answer 382)

Some practitioners and EbE offered the opportunity to observe this function embodied in the action of a person, thus expressing with methodological awareness what a practitioner should do to guide communities in achieving the common aim of improving their conditions.

A parallel could be drawn between the role of a local manager, whose responsibility is to carry out activities in support of the shared goal of becoming a "friendly community towards people with dementia", and the role of a relational guide, whose task is to facilitate the process progress. (Answer 107)

Finally, the students were able to reflect on the concept of purpose, which allows catalysing a coping network, and how the accurate initial *Community profiling* allows its identification. Furthermore, it was possible to concretely exemplify the purposes that such joint processes as *community development*, *community problem solving*, and *social service planning* could have "theoretically" (Twelvetrees, 2002).

The first phase of identifying needs can be equated to the phase studied in Community profiling theory. Furthermore, the proposed initiative refers to two different project goals. The first is community development, for which we try to create bonds within the community so that the greater the social bonds, the less the stigma. The second one corresponds to social service planning, for which we try to carry out projects to develop participatory actions and plan services or initiatives in the local community. (Answer 114)

Social workers' functions in practice

The students' answers highlighted how listening to the community members allowed them to observe some of the indications of the Relational social work methodology, fundamental in conducting group and community social work projects, applied to practice.

First, listening to community work experiences allowed students to understand the meaning and appropriacy in social work of facilitating the process of coping with collective concerns through participatory projects:

[I understood] that in addition to casework, social workers can also be involved in planning and coordinating interventions that directly involve entire communities, using their professional skills to initiate participatory planning together with the intervention recipients. (Answer 348)

Furthermore, the answers show an understanding of the need for professionals to assume a self-critical attitude and to accept to change themselves during the process of facilitating community work projects:

[I realised] the importance of being open to changing ourselves when building relationships and not trying to change others. Understanding and active listening are essential. (Answer 265)

The students understood better some of the Relational guide's functions in the assessment process during the Community profiling phase:

> The social worker, as a professional, has the task of facilitating these planning processes, finding active people in the area through community profiling, understanding people' needs, concerns, and desires, trying to find and bring to light their hidden skills and resources. (Answer 359)

In particular, they highlighted that one of the assessment objectives is to identify people motivated to collaborate with practitioners throughout the community work project. The students learned a fundamental principle of their future profession: the importance of recognising significant and decisive partners in the community during the conception and implementation of projects.

> I understood the importance of collaboration and search for people motivated to carry out a project based on shared ideals. (Answer 149)

The students were able to learn from the experiences they listened to a valuable methodological tool for conducting their assessment: the importance of considering the community needs and the skills and resources of its members. Thanks to these experiences, the students realised how these community "resources" sometimes result from having lived or going through moments of difficulties and suffering. A student highlighted this concept as follows:

> You can discover the potential of a person starting from his or her frailties. (Answer 201)

Indeed, sometimes community work projects are an opportunity for people to rediscover their skills and knowledge and, supported by practitioners who creates connections and networks, share them for the common good:

> This experience has allowed me to understand that the collaboration agreement can be a tool to give voice to the hidden skills of people, managing to promote social cohesion and consolidate relationships. (Answer 138)

Thanks to the experiences told by those directly involved, the students were able to understand how useful it is for social workers to connect and ask for help not only from community gatekeepers but also and above all from those who directly experience the problem they intend to help to solve. This learning opportunity also includes experiences of self-help groups. Some testimonies accounts allowed the students to verify how Experts-by-Experience possess unique knowledge, deriving from what they lived and its elaboration. The task of the Relational guide is to facilitate the encounter of these different kinds of knowledge and make it available to help others:

> The so-called "Experts-by-Experience" acquired their skills from having gone through circumstances similar to those experienced by other

group members and, therefore, can make valuable and unique contributions, different from those offered by a professional/facilitator. Indeed, the latter has the task of guiding and supporting the development of aid processes rather than offering solutions. (Answer 278)

Another function of social workers, which the students understood thanks to the participation in the workshop, is facilitating participation in self-help groups. Some in the answers reported that they have better understood the skills that a practitioner needs to have to facilitate the group exchange so that mutual aid dynamics can properly function (Shulman, 1992).

> The role of the facilitator is not to advise or say, "you did well, or you were wrong", but to know how to help the group in their dialogue and sharing, help people to open up, and if not followed, remind all members about the rules that the group has decided to observe during its meetings. (Answer 274)

Other practical functions of social workers highlighted by the students in the answers are advocacy and awareness-raising. The experiences brought to the classroom made it possible to know actions in which practitioners gave a voice to those marginalised or whose rights are not yet recognised, informing, and sensitising the community on the needs, sometimes little known, of specific categories of people.

> Social workers [...] can exercise an informative function, help raise awareness, and reduce stigma by giving people the opportunity to get information about a topic. They can take on a pivotal role by acting as facilitators within the community, trying to give a voice to people with dementia, facilitating communication and the achievement of set goals. (Answer 326)

The analysis of the responses highlighted how listening to the testimonies allowed the students to understand how the function of building local networks can be put into practice. The students realised the importance of knowing and establishing contacts, in particular, with no-profit organization and groups that promote self-help. Such connections are valuable not only to support the activities of local groups and invite to participate those who can benefit from them but also because their members can become a precious resource to support service users' paths of aid. Sharing similar life experiences can provide a form of help that a professional can hardly offer.

> It was highlighted how a specific type of help could only come from interacting with people who had a similar experience and meeting among equals. Therefore, social workers should be aware of it and contact the local entities that organise and support mutual aid groups or similar experiences [...]. It is essential to collaborate as profession-

als with local entities. We could be amazed by the power of this help network. (Answer 291)

The benefits of participation

Thanks to the experiences they listened to, students acquired a better understanding of the benefits of participation for community members. Their answers show how valuable it was for them to hear what was shared by the experts by experience.

> Certainly, an experience shared by someone who personally made it gives a new meaning to a theory learned in class. Seeing the emotion and gratitude in the eyes of the EbEs allowed me to delve into an aspect that would not have been possible to investigate otherwise. (Answer 47)

Regarding the effects of community members' participation in the projects presented, the students note the following:
- the participants felt less alone and "different."

> Much has been said about the importance of mutual help groups, how fundamental they are not to feel alone and be able to find comfort thanks to the possibility of comparing personal situations with similar ones, finding the strength to face what one is experiencing. (Answer 50)

- the individual well-being generated in experiencing *care*, the bidirectionality of helper therapy, and in feeling valued, appreciated, useful, and active players:

> I understood how important it is for those in difficulties to be considered in their entirety, putting aside their issue. Furthermore, I was able to find confirmation of the fact that there is nothing better than offering a person some space to ensure that their skills can develop, and we can create a path with and not for that person, starting from all the positive we may find in them. (Answer 87)

- the empowerment, the acquisition of skills, being open to change and the creation of meaningful relationships:

> It was interesting to see how, starting from the experience of mutual aid groups, friendly and supportive relationships were created that continue outside the group meetings. Finally, it also emerged that by participating in this process, you learn to accept the problem and take charge of it and take responsibility for it. You have to start changing and questioning yourself before the others. (Answer 71)

Many students also reported how, from listening to Experts-by-Experience, they perceived the suffering experienced by many of them and their needs, which often are not satisfied by traditional services. However, some

could also perceive the effects on professionals as members of the group or project. Participation in groups can make social workers work better because they experience the strength of reciprocity in coping with an issue. The students were able to verify how, in participatory planning paths, professionals learn through others how to perform their job best, thus improving the service they provide.

> [I understood] the strong collaboration that can be created between a practitioner (such as a social worker) and an expert-by-experience and how they can enrich each other. (Answer 415)

> Furthermore, I have noticed that through the participatory approach, it is possible to obtain results and facilitate the work of social workers. (Answer 219)

Concrete opportunities and new knowledge

In the survey, some students report how listening to the testimonies offered them concrete opportunities to better continue their personal and professional training and identify the steps to be taken for their Unconventional practice placement to be developed following the Relational methodology.

> This experience made me think a lot about the importance of creating a local network, not only among professionals but also among members of the public. This topic was discussed extensively during the theoretical lessons and could be relevant and used as an example also for our Unconventional practice placement. (Answer 163)

Furthermore, the students report how they acquired new knowledge regarding issues that they had not had the opportunity to deal with previously in the classroom or through personal experiences, such as diseases like dementia, or social issues and current issues like life in refugee camps.

> I have learned more about the difficulties that people belonging to an ethnic minority may face. I was able to learn about life in refugee camps and see the different management of this issue from one country to another. I also understood the importance of training to avoid making mistakes. (Answer 224)

It is also noteworthy an effect that we could call "disenchantment" reported by some students concerning some frustrating dynamics, limits, and interference, which as professionals they might experience and which they perceived in the stories of witnesses, professionals, and non-professionals.

> I understood how the work done by social workers is also strongly influenced by the political affiliation of the various municipal administrations. (Answer 375)

Discussion and conclusion

The option to participate in the workshop during the bachelor's degree courses in Social work at Catholic University is based on the recognition of the importance of experiential knowledge, alongside the traditional scientific/theoretical teaching, in the training of future social workers (Beresford & Boxall, 2012; Beresford, 2013; Kolb, 1984).

The more social work training can also benefit from the experience of those actively involved in the planning and implementation of fieldwork projects, the more it is possible to bring practical and theoretical knowledge together, avoiding polarisations.

The reflective effort to which the students were invited in the workshop, and which they proved to know how to perform by collaborating in research, proves how important it is in social work training the ability to turn theoretical concepts into professional practice and grasp methodological indications from the analysis of concrete social work experiences.

Students are not only invited to reflect on social work practice but also to reflect during practice, thus training to develop and maintain reflective skills on the connections between theory and practice. Alongside practice placements, which typically focus on these training goals, workshops such as those studied in this research can be additional opportunities to develop these essential skills.

The research highlighted, first of all, the students' appreciation of the possibility of listening to the testimony of caregivers and EbE, recognising its educational value. Besides enjoying such a close experience with group and community work, offering the opportunity to visualise a cross-section of what their professional future could be in this professional area, the high participation rate in research shows students' interest in reflecting on their training.

The research results demonstrate an improved general understanding of the principles and theoretical/methodological concepts on which is based the work of social workers involved in guiding groups or community work projects (Folgheraiter, 2004; Mayo, 2009; Popple 2002; Twelvetrees, 2002;) and their related practical functions.

Listening to the testimonies gave a new value to the theoretical concepts presented in the classroom. The students could observe them put into practice through the experiences of the people involved. They could also verify the beneficial effects of social workers' conscious and intentional supporting work in initiatives with a collective impact. Be they aimed at small groups of people united by similar life stories or concerns, or at entire communities of people connected by geographical or cultural affiliations, or their going through specific stages of life.

Furthermore, it was an opportunity to understand how social workers can operate both in formal welfare services and in less structured contexts created by members of the public who are committed to taking care of their communities (such as informal networks of active citizens, groups of volunteers, and non-profit organisations).

What is described above is based on the concepts of community care (Bulmer, 2015; Payne, 1995), and the Relational Social Work approach (Folgheraiter, 2004; 2017), which define social work as the action of coping networks dealing with complex social problems in their communities. Although in many cases, these coping networks are catalysed by the action of social workers, they are often spontaneously created by members of a community willing to organise to cope with a specific concern.

The students listened to the presentation of some projects in which the collaboration with social workers was not active or was only an accessory to the organisation of some specific initiatives. Therefore, they were able to verify how help is a natural dimension of the relationship among people. Consequently, professionals' function is primarily to acknowledge the presence of these spontaneous/informal helping relationships in communities and enhance, support, and strengthen their work towards better conditions of well-being for the community.

The students did not mind the professionals' absence in some of these testimonies. They managed to imagine what new spaces for professional action could be created by starting collaborations in similar contexts when professionals recognise the legitimacy and positivity of people's spontaneous action in facing shared problems.

What is described above is an essential reflective work requiring a personal commitment from each student, which could be more effective if followed by a group reflection among the students with the guidance of a Tutor. This further reflection opportunity aims to train students to dialogue together on how the testimony of members of the public and Experts-by-Experience can be useful in their professional education and to conceptualise new possible developments for the profession.

Such a training experience is even more effective when based on an epistemological approach to social work education, inspired by the principles of social justice, recognition of people's value and reciprocity among practitioners and service users in defining paths of aid.

Regarding the research limits, it should be considered that the participating students were informed about the purpose of the research and how their answers would be used. The students were free to choose whether to join the collaboration proposal. Their reasons for participating in the research may have partly affected the quality of their answers, as some students may have considered participating in the research to improve the evaluation of their

workshop attendance. In such cases, their answers might have been rushed and not pondered enough. Further limitations lie in the selection process and limited number of experiences presented. The researchers could not identify any specific criteria for the selection which was based on the workshop tutor's knowledge and the documentation on the work procedures implemented by the organizations involved. The survey is expected to be continued in the next academic years to analyze the results of greater number of answers and presentations. Thus, achieving a possible data quantification and, consequently, greater representativeness.

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