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## Social Work Practice Placement During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Successful Experiences and Suggestions for the Future

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# Social Work Practice Placement During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Successful Experiences and Suggestions for the Future

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Abstract: The Covid-19 health emergency was a challenge for social work and field education of social work students, introducing the use of remote work. In the international context, field education underwent changes and adaptations, prompting the adoption of innovative and creative strategies. The Catholic University reviewed its methods of implementing practice placements, reorganising them from the beginning of the pandemic to the end of the course. This study presents some reflections based on the results of a qualitative research conducted by the *Relational Social Work* Research Center on the practice placements conducted during the academic year 2019 - 2020. The research focused on identifying the elements that made the practice placement experiences during the pandemic so positive that they were defined as “successful experiences”. The findings highlight the characteristics of these practice placements, particularly the specific knowledge and skills relevant to their success. Such as the ability to adapt, reflect critically, and seize the opportunities emerging from the health emergency. This article described and analysed the elements defining these practice experiences as successful, which could be adopted in future experiences, even in non-emergency conditions.

Keywords: social work education, practice placement, Covid-19 pandemic, successful field education, learning by doing.

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## Introduction

The professional training of social workers requires the constant integration between theoretical knowledge and operational skills. In addition to the theoretical preparation in the classroom, practical training in the field is fundamental in social work education (Raineri, 2015; Cleak & Wilson, 2019).

The bachelor's degree courses in Social Work at the Catholic University offers to second-year students a practical placement experience of 250 hours in social services and 40 hours of group support in the "*Practice Placement Guidance and Elaboration*" workshop, for a total of 12 *University Educational Credits* (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, 2019a, 2019b). The practice placement usually takes place between January and May for two days a week, with an intensive schedule after the end of classes. Students join a local social service institution and have the opportunity to observe and progressively experience the professional activity in the first person. The university selects the host institution and the supervisor/social worker who will support and guide them (Neve, 2013). The activities to be conducted are planned by the student and the supervisor and finalised in the *Practice Placement Plan*. This document sets out the practice placement purposes and the related activities and schedule, from the initial observation phase to the relative autonomous project implementation phase and its conclusion. In the "*Practice Placement Guidance and Elaboration*" workshop, students can freely discuss their experiences, supported by a University Tutor, a social worker with experience in the field, who facilitate their exchange. The University Tutor also supports the students individually during the internship and maintains constant monitoring relationships with the supervisor. A final joint interview is conducted in the presence of all the practice placement key players to evaluate the experience and the subsequent delivery of an *Evaluation Form* filled in by the supervisor. Furthermore, at the end of the experience, the students prepare a final summary report that includes a reflection on their personal and professional path (Raineri, 2015; Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, 2019a).

The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in challenges for social work students' theoretical and practical placement (Davis & Mirick, 2021; Zuchowski et al., 2021). Universities, both in Italy and internationally, had to redefine the organisation of social work experiences to achieve the expected internship objectives (Azman et al., 2020; Zuchowski et al., 2021). Internships during the pandemic, although challenging, represented an unprecedented learning opportunity (Davis & Mirick, 2021; Sarbu & Unwin, 2021). The study presents a qualitative research carried out by the *Relational Social Work Center*, which analysed eight practice placement experiences in the bachelor's degree course in social work of the Catholic University of Milan and Brescia,

conducted in 2019-2020. The research aims to investigate the elements that made some of the practice placements conducted during the pandemic significant and positive experiences to the point of being defined as “successful experiences of practice placement in social work during Covid-19”. Furthermore, the research aims to investigate how these elements could be applied to future practice placements.

### **Social Work practice placement and Covid-19 pandemic**

The Covid-19 health emergency challenged social work (Jonge et al., 2020), theoretical teaching and field practice placement of social work students, introducing the use of remote work (Smoyer, O’Brien & Rodriguez-Keyes, 2020; McCarthy, Glassburn & Dennis, 2021). It encouraged social workers in training to reflect on their personal and professional identity in a crisis (Cole et al., 2021). The pandemic was a reminder of the indeterministic nature of social work, which implies unpredictability and low ex-ante control over action (Cabiati & Gomez-Ciriano, 2021), stressing the ethical aspects of the profession (Banks et al., 2020a; 2020b). Social work is, in fact, a profession called to face crises and catastrophes (Davis & Mirick 2021) - such as earthquakes, tsunamis, and hurricanes. The Covid-19 pandemic represents an unprecedented crisis characterised by the pervasiveness of its diffusion and affecting all aspects of life (Azman et al., 2020; Davis & Mirick 2021). The health emergency triggered actions aimed at facing such an uncertain and unpredictable situation, which produced fear and discouragement and led to a new awareness of personal and other people’s vulnerability (Afrouz, 2021).

The recent literature in the field of *social work education* is investigating, in particular, the challenges related to the total or partial transformation of theoretical and practical internship in remote synchronous and asynchronous modalities (Papouli, Chatzifotiou & Tsairidis, 2020; Smoyer, O’Brien & Rodriguez-Keyes, 2020; Dinh & Nguyen, 2020; Banks et al., 2020a; 2020b; McCarthy, Glassburn & Dennis, 2021; Azman et al., 2020; Davis & Mirick, 2021; Singh, Doyle & Wobbe-Veit, 2021). The first results of these studies show that, although online internship leads to difficulties for students and teachers, it also provides opportunities to maintain a connection and stay in contact, thus counteracting stress.

The practice placement represents a fundamental experience for training in social work as it offers students the opportunity to operate at a social service institution alongside a professional (Cleak & Wilson, 2019; Raineri, 2015). Such an experience involves the head (theoretical knowledge), heart (emotionality), and hand understood as *learning by doing* (Shulman, 2005). Also, in Italy, field practice underwent adaptations in methods and schedules to allow the continuation of the training courses and adopting creative

and innovative strategies (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020; Dellavalle, 2020; Guidi et al., 2020; Licursi & Marcello, 2020; McLaughlin, Scholar, & Teater, 2020; Zuchowski et al., 2021).

The relevant research highlights the measures adopted in the early stages of the pandemic with consequences such as, for example, losing hours of practical work and the sudden interruption of field practice (Azman et al., 2020; Davis & Mirick, 2021; Zuchowski et al., 2021). There was no lack of hesitation, fears, and concerns on the part of the students regarding their practice placement and the strategies proposed by the universities to respond to the pandemic situation (Zuchowski et al., 2021). According to Zuchowski (et al., 2021), the sense of loss commonly felt by social work students at the end of their practice placements (Cleak & Wilson, 2019) in the pandemic was heightened by the sudden and unexpected interruption of such experiences. The supervisors, for their part, perceived the students' discomfort caused by the interruption, change and reorganisation of activities (Zuchowski et al., 2021). The online survey of social work students in the United States conducted by Davis and Mirick (2021) investigated the different internships resulting from the containment measures of the infection and the related experiences of the students. In particular, the survey highlighted how the reorganisation of services, the reduction of staff in attendance and, in some cases, the closure of services significantly reduced the energy, time, and resources that supervisors could dedicate to supporting trainees. The study reveals that practice placements were conducted mostly remotely with increased workloads and stress. The related barriers linked to, for example, access to technology and adequate domestic spaces and the trainees' sense of isolation and loneliness. In a study conducted in Malaysia, Azman and colleagues (2020) also report experiences of fatigue and stress on the part of students coping with the numerous requests for activities in alternative to the traditional practice placement. According to the research by Sarbu and Unwin (2021), the internships conducted online did not allow informal and incidental learning, namely the serendipitous learning, typical of being in a work context. In addition, opportunities for individual supervision and direct peer group support were significantly reduced (Sarbu & Unwin, 2021). In this scenario, the competent authorities for the training of social workers in various countries - Australia, England, USA - established guidelines to allow students to proceed with their practice placements, such as the reduction of hours of field training, flexibility in their modalities and the possibility of non-traditional or alternative, substitutive placements, for example performed remotely (Zuchowski et al., 2021; Morley & Clark 2020; Azman et al., 2020; Casula, 2020; Guidi et al., 2020). The extraordinary nature of the situation also prompted the adoption of innovative and creative strategies. Some examples of replacements of direct field experience found

in the literature are the following: the use of vignettes and case studies - also in recorded videos - including individual works and group discussions (Azman et al., 2020; Guidi et al., 2020); ideation and the use of “simulations” - of which role-playing is only one of the possible modalities - (Tortorelli et al., 2021); involvement in online community work projects (Azaman et al., 2020; Zuchowski et al., 2021); remote implementation through video calls, telephone calls, virtual contacts (Casula, 2020; Papopuli et al., 2020; Davis and Mirick, 2021; Sarbu & Unwin, 2021). As these studies show, despite the pandemic context, the standard goals set in the study programme and the acquisition of new knowledge and skills were achieved. Zuchowski and colleagues (2021) highlight that interpersonal communication, project management and *online* technical skills were acquired thanks to the online experience proposed by the university. Davis and Mirick (2021) report about the skills linked to professional practice and helping relationships that it was possible to practice during the health emergency. Such as adaptability and flexibility in dealing with different situations and maintaining calm in meeting and facing human uniqueness. The practice placements during the pandemic also made it possible to acquire new practice perspectives, especially related to the reorganisation and the new ways of providing services (Davis & Mirick, 2021). Various authors, therefore, report about positive outcomes, highlighting how the pandemic offered the opportunity to reconsider field training by exploring “alternative educational models that respond to the emerging community needs” (Morris et al. 2020 p. 4-5; Zuchowski et al., 2021).

## Methodology

The research aimed to understand which elements contribute to the success of a practice placement conducted during the Covid-19 emergency and how these features could be standardised and applied to future experiences. In particular, the research aimed to investigate the learning path, the successful characteristics of this experience and the role of the key players involved in its realisation.

The research team consisted of five tutors from the “*Practice Placement Guidance and Elaboration*” workshop and two PhD students in Social Work and Personal Social Services.

The exploratory nature of the research required the use of a qualitative method aimed at gathering the point of view of all the people involved in the practice placement experience. Such as students attending the second year of the bachelor’s degree course in Social Work at the Catholic University of Milan and Brescia, their Supervisors (qualified as social workers) and Tutors

of the “*Practice Placement Guidance and Elaboration*” workshop of both campuses.

The research sample consisted of eight practice experiences held in the academic year 2019/2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic was at its height. Those practice placements were identified by the “*Practice Placement Guidance and Elaboration*” workshop tutors, who had direct access to the fieldwork carried out. The cases selection was based on the tutors’ point of view due to their competence and expertise about the training path. Each tutor identified two or three successful experiences (Corradini, Avancini & Raineri, 2019) from the student group followed in the a.y. 2019/2020. The request made to the tutors was to choose exemplary situations which had proved to be positive paths from their perspective. This methodological choice was made because, thanks to their role, tutors knew the students and their practice placements well and could identify the successful experiences. The criteria used by the tutors for the selection was their meaning of “successful experiences”, that was subsequently investigated during the research, in particular during the third phase within the tutors’ focus group.

The research was conducted in three phases using the tools of documentary analysis and focus groups. 1. In the first phase, a collection and analysis of the international literature were carried out on social work education in emergencies and social work internships in a pandemic. The “*Practice Placement Guidance and Elaboration*” workshop tutors analysed the experiences carried out in the academic year 2019-2020. At the end of this preliminary analysis, eight internship experiences considered successful were selected by the tutors of each “*Practice Placement Guidance and Elaboration*” workshop group. 2. In the second phase of the research, was conducted an analysis of the content (Sala, 2010) of the *Practice Placement Plan*, students’ final reports, supervisors’ evaluations, and the notes of the tutors collected during the final meeting between the tutor, the supervisor, and the student. 3. In the third research phase, three remote focus groups were conducted: one with the students who implemented the eight successful experiences selected; one with the Supervisors of the eight successful experiences selected; finally, a focus group with the five tutors who selected the successful experiences. All focus groups were video recorded, transcribed in full and subjected to analysis of the content (Sala, 2010).

All the data collected were subjected to thematic content analysis carried out by two separate groups of the research team. The thematic analysis conducted in the second phase made it possible to identify the themes for the focus group questions. In the third phase the analysis was conducted, with the aid of Excel files, by dividing the materials into category of participants in the focus groups (students, supervisors, tutors) (Arosio, 2013). For each group, main thematic areas were identified, then divided into sub-themes,

creating a codification. Then, the analysis was organised in concept maps, based on a grouping of themes by semantic analogy (Sala, 2010), building a hierarchy from the general to the particular.

The research was conducted in accordance with the Code of Ethics of the Catholic University of Milan approved with Rector's Decree no. 9350/2011. In particular, we had paying attention to the double role of the five tutors, who were also members of the research team and, so, to the possible power imbalance that might discourage honest responses, especially from students. Due to this critical issue, the data collection was carried out by the two PhD students, members of the research team not involved in those training experiences. The data was collected and processed in accordance with EU Regulation 2016/679 concerning the protection of individuals with regard to the processing of personal data. All participants were provided with a copy of the privacy and data processing information, and their consent was requested for the focus group recording and data processing. All data collected was anonymized.

## **Results**

The main results that emerged from the analysis carried out are related to the following areas: learning and predisposition to learn; criticalities emerged during the experiences; "thanks to covid-19"; the elements of success of the experiences taken into account. Furthermore, emerged the areas related to the role of the supervisor, the role of the "Practice Placement Guidance and Elaboration" workshop and the role of the tutor. The main aspects of the identified areas are presented below.

### **Learning and predisposition to learn**

The survey conducted revealed multiple elements connected to social work education. Most of the reports and focus group content concern the topic of learning considered from different points of view. Despite Covid-19, students were able to acquire considerable knowledge and skills that they could identify and describe.

The practice placement experiences carried out during Covid-19 allowed the students to gain skills and knowledge that seemed impossible to acquire at the beginning of the pandemic. The students were able to understand the service context they were assigned to and fit in. They managed to acquire the skills required to carry out help interventions, experimenting with their professional role and achieving the objectives set for field training.

Although the emergency temporarily interrupted in-person internship activities, the documents analysed show how the interns could be involved in numerous and diversified social work activities. Such activities included



observing interviews, analysing computerised social work records, drafting documents, identifying and mapping entities and services, remote participation in groups, teams, and network meetings.

In compliance with the virus containment measures, some activities were conducted independently, such as conducting interviews, telephone monitoring of situations of fragility identified by the supervisor, taking charge of problematic situations or managing parts of the help process, supervisor's replacement in specific tasks. Through this experimentation, they were able to recognise and understand the professional specificity of social workers. Observing the operator and themselves in action, the students experienced and analysed the characteristics of this professional role, acquiring a new understanding of it.

Furthermore, from the analysis of the evaluation documents drawn up at the end of the internship by the supervisors, the tutors of the "Practice Placement Guidance and Elaboration" workshop and by the Focus Groups, it emerges that even if remotely, the students could understand the role of a social worker and focus on the distinctive features of the profession. The health emergency and the necessary rotation of professionals in the services allowed some students to work alongside more than one social worker.

An essential aspect of the work of the social worker that the students noticed concerns teamwork. There are many references to this "tool" and the dynamics that arise within a team, which prompted the students to have interesting and in-depth reflections. Finally, the students of the internships selected for this study showed the ability to recognise and respect professional ethics.

*A fundamental element of helping relationships and networking projects is that people feel part of them and collaborate. Sometimes, no matter how perfect the service projects are, they fail because people do not feel welcomed. However, I observed that, although administrators or guardians are appointed to help manage users' lives and assets, people are free, even free not to seek treatment and not to accept any help project.  
(Student 5, final report)*

It is important to note that the ability to learn, which can be considered the starting point for acquiring all the other skills included in the university study programme, assumes great relevance. The documents analysed and the focus groups show the students' ability to grasp the theoretical aspects of what they were learning during the internship. These elements were processed thanks to the knowledge acquired in the university environment, especially during specific bachelor's degree course classes. Students (also by supervisors and tutors observing the attitude of the trainees) are recognised the opportunity to experiment, both alongside the supervisor and independently. Furthermore, the richness of this experience is recognised,

despite the awareness of still having to work on one's professional skills. This last aspect is also a sign of a good attitude towards learning. That is, the ability to identify the skills we still need to work on, which requires critical thinking, being proactive and a high degree of motivation.

*I think that this year the students had the ability to reinvent themselves pretty fast, much more than us supervisors. And maybe they wanted to redeem themselves, not to waste their internship [...] they did their best to have quality experiences anyways [...] to do more than what they would have done in an ordinary internship. (Supervisor 2, focus group)*

### Challenges

It is essential to mention that there was no shortage of difficulties. In this section we want to focus on challenges experienced as a result of the pandemic and of the related public health restrictions. These challenges are divided mainly between those that emerged in the field and those that emerged within the group. As far as the latter are concerned, they are strictly linked to the online modality used to conduct the workshop meetings. Such a setting did not help the participant express themselves and share. On the contrary, it hindered it and made it cumbersome.

*Personally, I had some initial difficulties in trying to understand how to convey closeness to others without using body language, such as a look or a smile. (Student 1, relationship)*

The same is true for the challenges emerged in the field: the use of technology, in some situations, did not allow students to engage in direct contact with users; it was not possible to carry out home visits. Finally, some perceived a sort of discontinuity in the experience.

*I appreciated having been asked to write on some projects on parenting support independently. However, I would have liked to engage in identifying possible participants and carrying out the actual activity. (Student 3, report)*

### Thanks to Covid-19

These challenges do not detract from the value of the experiences; on the contrary, they emphasise an interesting element emerged from the survey conducted. The critical situation that students had to face precluded some of the opportunities available in pre-covid internships. However, they also encouraged students to experiment, to experience something unique, unrepeatable, so much so that we can talk about knowledge and skills acquired "thanks to Covid-19". Such valuable skills and personal and professional development are acquired through experience. The intention is not to downplay the effects of the health emergency or the critical issues that had to

be faced. The goal is to highlight what the students in their relationships and during the focus group reported about the experiences and opportunities they had precisely because of the pandemic. Thanks to Covid-19, the students had to show adaptability, developing this skill professionally and personally, grasping the learning elements that this experience, albeit in its gravity, allowed them to acquire during the internship.

*I, too, in my small way, tried to instil courage in others, highlighting the positive aspects of this situation, from which a lesson had to be learnt anyway. In my opinion, in fact, this health emergency allowed us to acquire greater skills, not only from a university point of view but above all from a personal one. (Student 5, final report)*

In addition, the pandemic made it possible to deepen certain aspects of the work and service to which the students were assigned because they had more time to carry out the assigned tasks (such as drafting reports, doing more in-depth research on the service, and analysing the documentation). Besides, the pandemic stimulated students' critical thinking and led them to reflect on how it affected the internship's service and the social worker profession. The changes generated by the emergency on professional social services and the role and functions of social workers prompted the students to reflect on the organisational transformations occurring primarily in the context of their internship and the role and functions of their social worker/supervisor. The documents analysed show that the students learned about the new measures, initiatives and services activated as a result of the Covid-19 emergency in their internship context (not only by their institution but also by other local entities); they directly followed the reorganisation of pre-existing services and, therefore, were able to witness the "reorganising" of the services and professional roles.

*The opportunity to conduct the internship during most of the year allowed her to see the processes, observe the changes [...] she [the trainee student] was able to see how processes are transformed, how relationships produce things [...] we have just observed the dynamics and what these dynamics lead to ... (Supervisor 4, focus group)*

The first element of discontinuity with respect to a pre-pandemic practice placement is evident precisely in the relationship modalities between professionals and users. The students were able to learn alternative ways of relating (for example, remote supervision interviews, meetings with other operators to learn about the service conducted remotely), compatible with the imposed harsh measures of social distancing. They had the opportunity to experiment with new work tools (for example, participation in remote meetings with people, families, and professionals). It also emerged that sometimes the stu-

dents supported their supervisor during the meetings managed remotely by solving technical problems.

During the reorganising services and the role and functions of the professionals working there, students had the opportunity to assist their supervisor or colleagues in the management of emergencies and contribute directly (for example, analysing and drafting the assessment in a quarantine situation).

The students showed that this experience was an opportunity for them to work with motivation and creativity, enhancing the uniqueness of this experience and turning it into a successful internship.

*I reflected a lot on the delicate balance between personal protection and the ethical-professional task of continuing to perform the assigned tasks. In the face of the stagnation of services and the legitimate fear of many social workers, I reflected a lot on the meaning of “non-postponement of services” and often wondered where to set the boundary between acting and not acting above all how to act. (Student 3, final report)*

### **Building blocks of success**

The challenges do not detract from the elements of success identified in the practice placements analysed. The analysis of the evaluation forms, the practice placement plans, the reports, and the tutors' notes allowed us to uncover the elements that make successful these internships, which were also confirmed in the focus groups.

The reflexive capacity of the student is the first element that makes a practice placement a successful experience. The ability to critically review, analyse, and evaluate what they are experiencing in the field, and above all, the critical issues. This element connects with another element: the ability to grasp and value the opportunities emerging during the experience. Furthermore, the students developed observation skills that go beyond the mere shadowing. Those allowed them to improve their expertise and the critical reflective capacity described above.

These students not only recognised the value of their experience but were able to highlight, describe and develop it thanks to the other skills just described.

*I appreciated the great ability of these young people, the students (...), to link all the stages of their experience and also realise that, however fragmented and in some moments suspended, it made sense and allowed them to move some steps forward also in terms of reflection. (Tutor 2, focus group)*

*[Referring to the internship] Instead, I began to look at it as a precious opportunity for me and my life, not to be wasted or lived in a superficial way, but to be performed with all I got. (Student 2, final report)*

In the evaluations, in the tutors' notes on final meetings and in the focus groups, it emerged that the supervisors and workshop tutors recognised and appreciated the students' ability to actively deal with the emergency, reacting and responding to it. The students worked both to reshape their experience and help reinvent the activities to be carried out, proving to be flexible in responding to the emerging needs and adapting to the new context. In many cases, students faced the *impasse* caused by the lockdown by independently documenting the changes involving the services and the people they followed.

*These students were like a sponge. They managed to gather everything positive from the experience they were performing in such a demanding situation. They managed to balance the facilitating aspects and the more complex ones that required greater flexibility. (Tutor 3, focus group)*

In the final evaluation, the practice placement supervisors frequently mentioned their willingness to exchange views and share during the daily operations as a qualifying element of the experience. The supervisors particularly appreciated the trainees' ability to reflect and discuss work situations with them, addressing procedures and operational choices.

Another element that makes a practice placement successful is the ability to clearly connect the theory learned with the field experience, which is essential in practice placement experiences.

Finally, another element of success that emerged is the ability to work on oneself to improve and enhance personal and professional characteristics.

### **The role of the Supervisor**

Another element that emerges as a determining factor in the success of a practice placements is the role played by the internship supervisor; that is, the social worker who supports the student within the service where (s)he is carrying out his/her experience. In all the successful internships analysed, the supervisor collaborated with the student, ensuring that the intern lived an enriching experience, probably enriching for both.

*I had some difficulties; I had them in the beginning ... I'm not young and for me working like this [online] shocked me at first, so the fact that we were talking [with the trainee], we talked about it, I think it was useful for her but also for me! (Supervisor 1, focus group)*

*[The supervisor] has always included me in all activities, recognising my work even with her colleagues, she has always given me plenty of opportunities to discuss and reflect together on any thought I had. (Student 8, final report)*

The students involved in the research included numerous supervisory meetings in the Practice Placement Plan that were held at fixed intervals

(weekly or fortnightly) also through methods deemed unusual, in Italy, before the emergency (telephone interviews, use of specific platforms for meeting). The analysed documents show how the supervisory interviews were a valuable tool for both supervisors and students. In particular, the Practice Placement Plan highlights the importance of the supervisors' role and the need for continuous coordination with them.

An essential element for the success of a practice placement is to be able to establish a positive relationship based on dialogue, openness, sharing and reciprocity. For example, the supervisor showed a welcoming attitude through words and gestures when relating with the team. This element allowed to build a relationship based on trust and strengthened the student's willingness to experiment.

*I listened to her a lot ... I think I had the ability to listen to her, to have patience, and she had patience too. (Supervisor 1, focus group)*

Furthermore, supervisors were not only a major source of information but were also able to combine their supporting role with the need to stimulate the student to perform specific tasks, face particular situations, and reflect on them, maintaining the dual role of support and stimulus.

*She was able to understand my fears and insecurities about what we were going to do and supported me in all those moments... slowly leading me to conduct interviews by myself. (Student 1, focus group)*

Supervisors also played a crucial role in the management and processing the emotions that the student experienced during his experience.

Finally, in the final reports, it emerges that supervisors had a fundamental role as a reference point in acquiring professional development skills and, above all, in defining the students' professional role. The students had the opportunity to reflect on the role of social workers, going beyond the mere application of what they observed. Observing their supervisor, they had the opportunity to reflect on and acquire awareness on this role.

*To me, the supervisor, who is also the service coordinator but also of the whole service and all the people who worked in the service, was an "ex-ample of professionalism" [...] Because there was openness, attention to proximity, to closeness to people, which was truly exemplary. (Student 3, focus group)*

### **The role of the group**

The "Practice Placement Guidance and Elaboration" workshop was important in developing and analysing the experience that each student was conducting.

What emerged from the practice placement relationships analysed is that, despite the difficulties caused by conducting these meetings online,

the group was a source of comparison, sharing, re-elaboration, and support, particularly during the total lockdown. The group was for the students a space for listening (listening to themselves and others), specifically created to respond to this need. It was used in an intelligent and generative way. It also allowed some of the students to work on themselves and their personal characteristics.

The strength of the group was perceived perhaps even more strongly than in previous years. The fatigue that everyone was experiencing was a stimulus to strengthen the group connections. A strong bond was created among the participants.

*Indeed, the group experience was fundamental [...] I believed that the group began and continued beyond our presence [...]. Also, because we had, unfortunately, the limit that at some point we had to stop our meetings and yet they somehow went on, luckily a group was created that went beyond the formal gatherings. (Tutor 5, focus group)*

### **The role of the tutor**

Finally, the analysis of the final reports and the focus group with the students also highlights the tutors' role in this experience. The students perceive their role as strictly connected to the group context, thus stressing the importance of the group and how the students relate to the tutor both as a group facilitator and one of its members. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, tutors played a crucial role in stimulating reflection and promoting support within the group.

*The tutors [...] have always given me advice on how to move forward [...] above all they gave me the strength to move forward, to recognise my successes, they were present and flexible in the reorganisation when we resumed the internship. (Student 4, focus group)*

### **Conclusions**

The crisis linked to Covid-19 can be considered, despite its tragic nature, as a unique learning opportunity for student trainees (Smoyer, O'Brien & Rodriguez-Keyes, 2020; McCarthy, Glassburn & Dennis, 2021). Even before the onset of the pandemic, preparing for professional practice was a challenge requiring the collaboration of students, teachers, and supervisors (Raineri, 2015). In the complexity of the current context, the relations between the key players were crucial. In line with the relevant literature (Davis and Mirick, 2021; Zuchowski et al., 2021), the findings clearly show how challenging the health emergency was for Social Work Education. Similarly, they reveal that the strategies implemented to meet practical training needs

were diversified and creative (Azman et al., 2020; Guidi et al., 2020). Unlike the experiences presented in the literature (Zuchowski et al., 2021; Morley & Clark 2020; Azman et al., 2020), the contacts between the students and the internship services were maintained even during the times of strongest pandemic restrictions. The field experience was continued, albeit with various remote modalities similar to those identified in the relevant literature (Casula, 2020; Papopuli et al., 2020; Davis and Mirick, 2021; Sarbu & Unwin, 2021). The research analysis confirms that the minimum level of learning goals was maintained in pandemic practice placement (Azman et al., 2020). Besides, cross-cutting, and additional skills were developed (Singh, Doyle & Wobbe-Veit, 2021; Zuchowski et al., 2021). The findings also define the characteristics of a successful practice placement, which are shown below. The following definition of successful practice placement is the result of the words and reflections emerged during the three focus groups conducted. This shared definition contains the visions of successful practice placement experiences of supervisors, tutors and students that can also be applied to practice placement in non-emergency situations.

*“A practice placement in which the students, in their path of personal and professional growth, manage to: acquire skills, enhance and elaborate their field experience by addressing its flaws in a proactive and creative way aimed at improvement; cope with the uncertainty and complexity of the situation with a resilient attitude that will allow them to seize opportunities and share their experience with others (supervisors, service, group, other students, tutors)”.*

The elements mentioned in the above definition can be recognised and enhanced whenever present. Above all, the participants – the key actors of practice placement – can stimulate and implement them in practice placements to enhance and strengthen these experiences.

Despite the limits of research presented – identified in the focus only on the bachelor’s degree courses in Social Work of the Catholic University, the Lombardy region area, and the analysis of 8 experiences - the success elements and the definition reached are deemed to be valuable to students, tutors, and supervisors in the realisation of field experiences.

The findings of this study highlight elements of success that can be focused on and enhanced even in non-pandemic situations. In particular, the research highlights a potentially new element related to the support that the student trainees were able to provide to the supervisor, not only that which the supervisor provided to the student, showing a strong reciprocity between them. This and the other aspects described, including the ability to cope with the situation, reflexivity, and the ability to exploit opportunities, can become the subject of training for students, supervisors and tutors to



improve their awareness and working specifically on them during the practical placement path.

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