Social Work Education: Innovations and Experiences

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Editorial

We're delighted to present this special section published in the *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education* edited by Padova University Press.

This Section stems from the national conference "*Social work education: innovations and experiences*" organized by the *Relational Social Work Research Centre* (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore) in Milan in October 2022.

The conference and the call for contribution for this section have received great interest, confirming that Social work education in Italy and beyond is a sparkling area of research.

We wish to highlight that the conference and the special section of the journal were ideated and developed during the Covid-19 pandemic, two years in which Social work education has been forcibly transformed, the flexibility and the resilience of the Universities, the Welfare organizations and the communities were tested.

As confirmed by several of the articles proposed for this section, educators and researchers have stepped up their efforts reshaping traditional setting, activities and tools of teaching and learning and capturing evidence from practice to better understand potential and limits of this unedited condition. Among lessons learnt, the virtual environment produces effects on who learns but also on who teaches, and the virtual educational strategies can be effective only within a relational framework, in order to integrate the educational activities in the presence, not to replace it. Social work education are processes that develop through human relationships.

Innovation and experiences are the 2 distinguished elements of the Call for this special section. According to this, the issue, composed of *13 articles*, can be read as a canvas of different studies exploring social work educa-

tion in Italy and beyond. This canvas reproduces the variety of paradigms and approaches who inspire Social work education across Italy and other countries, also with reference to the Ministerial directives governing the architecture of undergraduate and graduate social work programs. Even if from different starting points, all the proposed articles critically discuss the responsibilities to educate the students, social workers to be, in facing the challenges of social work practice in contemporary societies. Highlighting commonalities within the contributions, this special section offers insights on 3 main themes: *social work curriculum, practice placement experiences* and *community based social work education practices*. These themes have been explored through specific key elements such as the innovations in the digital era, the internationalization, the reflexive practice, the processes of knowledge production. Some of the themes are not new in the literature, but it requires continuous efforts to go more in depth and to further explore through a critical perspective key concepts, key questions and key experiences about Social work education paths, programs, models and practices.

The special section involved *29 authors* belonging to *13 different Universities*.

The first paper addresses questions of internationalization of social work education programs, presenting innovative approaches developed in the social work degree program at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano (UNIBZ) including a mandatory course in "Inter- and Transnational Social Work" and a project of collaboration with the California State University in San Bernardino (CSUSB). The authors of this paper, *Andrea Nagy and Urban Nothdurfter*, offer a critical assessment on the content and the pedagogy of the experiences, in the light of human rights and social justice perspectives.

The second paper written by *Prospera Tedam* continues offering an international perspective, presenting the findings from a 2- year research project examining the role and purpose of social work schools in 3 different countries: the United Arab Emirates, England and Ghana. Through international lenses, this paper explores how schools of social work can contribute to the realization of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

The following four articles present, through different specific themes, the relationship between *Community social work and Social work education.*

Paper number 3, proposed by *Landi, Limongelli and Corradini*, analyzes the role of the students in Unconventional practice placements within the communities during Covid-19 pandemic. Through findings from an online survey conducted with more than 500 students, the authors offer an interesting comparison of the unconventional practice placement experience before and during the pandemic.

The theme of Community social work arises also from paper number 4. The authors, *Antongiovanni, Chessa, Cocco, Ghibellini and Vargiu*, present and

discuss an ongoing process of curriculum design (based on Community Social Work and Community Based Participatory Research) for the MA Course in Social Work and Social Policies at the University of Sassari. Through the lessons learned from a 10-year process, the article offers insights useful to inspire similar processes.

Through the following article, *Irene Psaroudakis* from the University of Pisa underlines, from theoretical and methodological perspectives, *the need to adequately prepare students for Community Social work research by giving them a methodological background through standard and non-standard methods.* This paper gives particular attention to the conceptualization of the role of social workers in contemporary societies, highlighting the political meaning of their daily action.

Paper number 6, proposed by *Calcaterra, Panciroli and Sala,* discusses an educational experience realized at the Catholic University (Milan and Brescia campuses) in which Experts by Experience presented to students *group work or community work experiences.* The authors present and discuss the findings from a qualitative research conducted on this workshop to better understand what students learnt through the Experts by Experience voices.

The involvement of Experts by experience in Social work education programs is the theme of paper number 7. In the light of international literature on the topic, *Elena Allegri* critically presents the experience of involvement at the Università degli Studi del Piemonte Orientale, discussing the salient features of the project, critically examining the achievement and the limits and reflecting on the students' point of view.

Emotions in Social work education is the title of the original paper (number 8) written by *Alessandro Sicora.* The starting point of the paper is the greater emotional pressure that students can experience in the practice placement or other educational activities. The purpose of this contribution is to support students and educators in constructing a positive relationship with feelings and emotions, going beyond feelings of blame or shame. Through 'the bonsai stories' (a form of very concise narrative) the author exemplifies some of the most common circumstances in which social work students feel strong emotions during their field practice.

Fieldwork practice is invoked also in paper number 9. The authors, *Avancini, Bertoglio, Masciocchi e Scalvini*, present a qualitative research conducted on practice placement during the first year of Covid-19 pandemic. The study focused on identifying the elements that made the practice placement experiences "successful experiences", highlighting specific knowledge and skills relevant to their success.

The fieldwork is also present in the following paper. The authors, *Tarsia and Cellini*, present a participatory teaching and research initiative carried out at the University of Messina.

Starting from an experience in which practitioners from addiction services, service users, students and academic scholars were directly involved in the construction of a virtual co-teaching lesson, the paper offers interesting insights about *co-production processes of knowledge.*

Paper number 11, proposed by *Cellini and Dellavalle*, explores *the relationships between theoretical and practical knowledge* with reference to the social work training needs. The authors present the findings of a research conducted carrying out a comparative analysis of the training needs indicated by the degree courses through the analysis of institutional documents and interviews with managers of social services, academics, and social workers.

The following paper proposed by *Sanfelici and Bilotti* presents an innovative experience named *Digital Advocacy Laboratory* designed to encourage and train social work students to use digital media for macro practice interventions to promote social rights of individuals or communities.

Paper number 13 brings attention to another important theme: *empowering social workers transformative role in migration field.* The contribution, proposed by *Di Rosa and Reich*, arises from a summer school program promoted by the University of FHWS-Wurzburg and University of Palermo involving students with different educational and cultural backgrounds (from Nigeria, Ghana, Kameroon, Kenia, Germany, Italy). The variety of experiences and participants allowed the authors to reflect on methods and perspectives of Social Work educational practices in the field of migration.

We hope that each of the papers published in this section can inspire social work educators, practice teachers, students and researchers in imagining new projects, in envisioning changes, in establishing national and international collaborations and in taking a step towards a Social work education coherent with the Social work core principles.

In changing societies, the role of Social work research will be ever more important in producing knowledge on what we are teaching, learning and living and on how we are helping, transforming, constructing.

We want to thank all the authors and the editors of the journal for this promising collaboration.