Service Users' Involvement in Social Work Education: Lessons from an Innovative Experience

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Abstract: The article critically analyses an innovative experience of the Social Work degree course of the University of Piemonte Orientale, Asti, Italy. Since 2013, it has introduced a systematic Service users' involvement in the training of future social workers. Based on the scientific debate, the first part deals with some issues that make up the theoretical framework of reference useful to define the phenomenon of Service Users' involvement - considered experts for the experience with services and social workers - in social work education. The second section of the article outlines the conceptual and value basis, the structure of the group called 'Diversamente esperti' (Otherwise experts), the method and main activities, as well as the main results achieved, and obstacles encountered. The third part, finally, concerns the evaluation of the experience, detected through an anonymous questionnaire, with 10 closed questions aimed at evaluating the agreement (with values from 1 to 5) on the proposed statements, administered to students and service users and the conclusions that derive from it. The results, based on the analysis of the responses of 100 questionnaires completed in the 2019-2020 academic year, highlight the value of Service users' involvement in education and some useful suggestions to develop it further in Social Work degree courses.

Keywords: service users' involvement, social work education, expert by experience, evaluation

Introduction

Worldwide, there has been a growth in Service Users' involvement (SUI) in social work education in recent years. In many countries, user involvement in social work education is common practice, while in other countries, initiatives for inclusion are currently expanding (Matka et al., 2010; Duffy, 2012; Robinson & Webber, 2013; Gutman & Ramon, 2016; Tanner et al., 2017; McLaughlin et al., 2020; Cabiati & Levy, 2021) as well as research involvement initiatives (Beresford, 2013; Littlechild et al., 2015; Ramon et al., 2019; Flanagan, 2020), although Boxall and Beresford (2013) have pointed out that service users are not yet central to social work research and there remains a need for further development.

The advantages and disadvantages of applying the term service users, or other relevant terms (such as clients, patients, consumers, or people who use services) have been debated in social work literature (McLaughlin, 2009; Smith et al., 2012) without reaching a conclusive agreement. As McLaughlin (2009) argues, the term service user can be criticised for focussing solely on one aspect of a person, that is that they are someone who is in receipt of social services.

In this article the terms 'service user' and 'experts by experience' are both used due to their common usage within literature, practice, policy and social work education, considering that this definition does not fully encapsulate their identity (Ramon et al., 2019).

According to the tradition of social work education it is quite common to ask some service users to tell their story within protected training contexts, as well as to invite social workers to expose to students their professional experience revisited in a critical way.

Instead, activating a group of expert users requires a strong change of perspective. It is necessary to prepare a training strategy that, on one hand, can involve service users in training activities addressed to students, promoting their empowerment and avoiding dangerous risks of stigmatization while, on the other hand, paying particular attention to the creation of co-learning contexts among users, students, tutors and teachers.

In order to understand the origins and meaning of the involvement of service users in university training, it should be noted, firstly, that since the last years of the twentieth century, at an international level, many movements of service-users have been activated in different areas to demand to be involved on an equal footing both in the processes of aid addressed to them and in the design of social and health policies (Beresford et al., 2006).

In short, it can be said that the users of social and health services claim their experiential knowledge and demand greater involvement in the decisions that affect them (Beresford & Boxall, 2012), assuming, in a specular

way, the perspective of the capability approach (Sen, 2009; Nussbaum, 2011), and the possibility of *aspiring to* (Appadurai, 2011) by a *conscientisation process* (Freire, 1970). In others words, those are the notions to highlight that when the person becomes aware of the way their oppression is determined they develop the capacity to take action to change their situation.

At the European level, the involvement of users in social work education is an objective of increasing importance, in direct proportion to the shortcomings of welfare systems and the difficulties encountered by the different training projects for future social workers. Thus, in 2002 the United Kingdom government introduced the requirement for all qualifying social work programmes to include service users (Department for Health, 2002; Anghel & Ramon, 2009) following the reform of the organization of degree courses in Social Work, later revised by Health & Care Professions Council (HCPC, 2014), which prescribed the obligation for universities to address service users not only in training, but also in the design of courses and in the incoming assessment of future enrollees.

This reform was followed in 2003 in Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2003).

In support of this organisational change, annual ministerial funding was provided for each degree course that could also provide cash recognition for user engagement. Later, other pioneering European experiments include that of Norway, in Lillehammer University College, where an intensive three-week residential course on the development of empowerment was tested, attended by a mixed group of internal students (university students) and external students (experienced users) (Askheim, 2012), or that of Sweden, in Lund University, with *Gap-Mending Strategies*, i.e. paths of professional and personal reflection that develop knowledge in a mutual comparison between professionals and users, teachers and researchers (Heule et al., 2020).

Moreover, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) jointly updated the Global Standards for social work education (IASSW& IFSW, 2020). While considering that the educational experience and policy framework in different countries varies significantly, with regard to SUI, Global Standards recommend to schools and universities must incorporate the rights, views and interests of service users in curriculum and develop a proactive strategy towards facilitating SUI in all aspects of design, planning and delivery of study programmes.

The contribution proposed here aims to present the salient features of the experience gained in the project activated in recent years, and intends to highlight, through the critical and positive aspects and the evaluation carried out by the various actors involved, its innovative character in the Italian social work education system. It can be considered pioneer not only because it is the first - and so far the only one- to introduce training in social work

education by a service users' group, but also because of the participatory method that has been applied over time, as will be illustrated in the following sections.

In the first part, after a short review of the literature of SUI in social work education, the article analyses the features of the group of service users. In the second section, the conceptual and value base, structure, methods, and main activities will be outlined. Lastly, the third part of the article will approach the issue of experience evaluation as well as the main achievements and barriers and the conclusions, focusing on students' point of view.

2. Involving Service Users' as experts by experience in Social Work Education

On the topic of service users' involvement in social work education, there is an extensive research literature that has discussed the aims, perspectives, and limitations of this device (Robinson & Webber, 2013).

This last aspect, concerning limitations and barriers in the projects that have multiplied in Europe, is particularly interesting because it reflects the lessons learned by those who have experimented with SUI in universities, to be understood also as suggestions for improving future projects and as a contribution to the co-construction of knowledge on the subject (Tanner et al. 2017). SUI has entailed inclusion in processes such as admissions, student assessment, curriculum planning, co-teaching, development and program management and influencing student perspectives (McLaughlin et al., 2018; Cabiati & Raineri, 2016). In this regard, Arnstein's (1969) *ladder of involvement*, which extended from *manipulation* and *therapy* on the bottom rungs to *delegated power* and *citizen control* on the top rungs, has provided a theoretical framework to inform the development of SUI in social work education, considering that, hopefully, every project aims to break stereotypes and tokenism.

On this matter, Duffy, Chaitali and Gavin (2013), drawing on an previous study by Levin and Weiss-Gal (2009) about the more or less unintended resistance by social workers in the field to share power with service users, highlight that also the stated willingness of academic social work staff to engage in creative service user engagement initiatives in social work education should not be considered unquestionable.

However, as the Global Standards pointed out despite some progress in SUI in education and research there is still a dearth of relevant literature (IASSW & IFSW, 2020).

The term 'relevant' could be interpreted as a lack of empirical evidence of improved student outcomes. Addressing this gap, Robinson and Webber (2013) reviewed the literature on service users' involvement in social work

education to identify the models and methods that have been used and the evidence of their effectiveness. By mapping the 29 studies included in their study, inspired by a modified version of the evaluation framework proposed by Kirkpatrick (1967) and previously adapted by Carpenter (2005), they found widespread support among service users, carers, students and teachers for involvement initiatives, but little empirical evidence of improved student learning. Furthermore, no studies have shown evidence of changes in their behaviour once they become professionals, in organisational practice or in benefits to service users. The authors conclude that longitudinal studies following social work students into the world of work are needed to assess the effectiveness of involving service users and carers in qualification programmes.

In this vein, drawing on previously cited studies, Tanner et al., (2015) and later Levy and others (2016) suggest a model of outcomes that can be a template for meaningful, sustainable and outcomes-focused SUI in social work education. Schön (2015) argues that still projects of SUI in social work practice are often developed on an *ad hoc* and inconsistent basis, and knowledge about the effects of these efforts is still limited. Hatton (2017) suggests to fuse together a multi-dimensional analysis of power co-produced learning activities and experiences, a recognition of the degree of agency exercised by people using social services and a commitment to using a collective, creative, and political imaginations to work in new ways.

In conclusion, within the debate that accompanies such experiences at an international level, criticism is essentially of two types.

In the first, the frequent reference to the risk of tokenism stands out, i.e. the danger for Social Work academics and practitioners to make purely formal concessions, or small symbolic gestures, in order to give an appearance of fairness.

The second type of criticism sticks to the minimum number of the expert users involved, such that it does not justify the meaning of the declared process of empowerment of the people involved. Obviously, user involvement should not be understood as something that is self-evidently good.

On the contrary, as Schön points out, many experimental projects present as "a rather complex concept that is bound up with changing and contested understandings of the role of the social worker, academia and the users themselves" (2015, p.15).

3. The Context

As far as we know, in the Italian social work education system, only two service users' involvement experiences can be found: that were carried out

by the University of Piemonte Orientale [Eastern Piedmont] in Asti and that by the Catholic University of Milan.

Our project is experimental and innovative in being the first to attempt to break the barriers of stereotypes and tokenism in social work education and in paying service users for their involvement (drawing on funds from a small private donation).

On the basis of international exchanges between professors at our university and those of the University of Hatfield (Unit Kingdom), in 2013 the group called 'Otherwise experts' was created. It consisted of services users' who were "expert by experience". In other words, they are experts by life experience by relationship with social workers and social services.

After an initial phase, necessary for the structuring of a protected and collaborative climate and for the *ad hoc* training of the members, the group actively participates - in each academic year - in some training initiatives aimed at future social workers, which will be described further on. Composed of about fifteen people with different life experiences: from disability to mental health, from addictions to foster care and adoption, and from migration to violence, the group has worked hard to make this heterogeneity an asset. People were recruited through different ways: networks with social workers and social work organisations, self-help groups, voluntary organisations (Warren & Boxall, 2009). The name 'Otherwise experts' was coined by the members of the group themselves after several months of work and sharing their life stories and highlights their feelings: to feel like experts in a different, but equally necessary and useful way, compared to teachers, students, and professionals. Two senior lectures of Social Work, and a university tutor participate too in supporting capacity.

4. Conceptual Framework and Objectives

The objectives identified stem from the following considerations. Often, in our role as teachers and tutors, we ask ourselves how to combine the students' learning with the need to promote in them a greater degree of awareness with respect to the virtuous ideals (for example: respect for all diversity, solidarity, social justice) and motivations (for example: a propensity to listen, to relate to others, to activate comfort and emotional closeness for people who turn to services) which they present when they enter university (Banks & Nøhr, 2012). The university course aims, on the other hand, to train future professionals who are not only aware and competent, but also deontologically oriented and capable of activating critical thought within the service organisations and anti-oppressive pratice (Baines, 2007).

Wilson and Beresford (2000, p. 565) have warned against a simplistic attempt to think that a commitment to anti-oppressive values of itself ensures that service users' views are respected. Instead they argued that:

> such a theory [of anti-oppressive practice] is by definition reliant upon user knowledge and ideas. Social work's adoption of a façade of "anti-oppressive practice" which in reality appropriates and incorporates the knowledge and experiences of service users, whilst retaining the power to determine just what it is that counts as 'anti-oppressive' is for us the most oppressive aspect of its anti-oppressive stance.

They concluded that one way of ensuring this in the academic environment is to recognise that SUI should be across the curriculum and not just in those areas where the service users are deemed to be experts because of their experience of a particular service (Hatton, 2017).

In this theoretical and deontological path, we wonder about the need to identify some training strategies that can contemplate observation, knowledge of themselves and others, the impact with their own strengths and limitations, to prepare them to face the obstacles that they will inevitably find in the future daily social work, without however repressing their ideals.

After all, they are the same ideals that, in a critically revised form, we propose to them: equity, social justice, respect and advocacy of the rights of all, that is, promotion of interventions oriented to the reduction of social inequalities and access to the social protection system. In addition, and this is a founding objective of the innovative project, the experience of getting to know the users in a concrete way is highly expected and considered very important by the students. Therefore, building a context of protected encounter and mutual learning means recognizing that the services-users of services, the first users of social work practices, are probably the most suitable to report critical and constructive issues related to professionals, services, aid processes, communities, proposing their point of view, certainly different from the one currently proposed by institutions, organizations, professionals and academics.

Learning from the experience of service users' in their relationship with services is probably a key to forming future social workers who are attentive and sensitive to the voice of others, to accepting other points of view, to fighting stereotypes and prejudices towards those who turn to social services.

Based on the above, the objectives of the SUI in social work education project are: to enhance the experience of expert service-users; to integrate academic knowledge with experiential knowledge; to contribute to building the theory of Social Work starting from practice; to suggest some possible innovations in the architecture of the degree course; to develop initiatives proposed by users and students; last but not least, to be able, over time, to

consider the 'Otherwise experts' group as a valid help to students in difficulty or uncertain about their motivation for their future profession.

5. Methodology

In order to make the proposed reasoning clearer, this section is subdivided in two parts. The first one concerns the method applied in building the service users group; the second one approaches the method of evaluation of the experience.

5.1. Building the group of experts by experience to teach students

The services users group meets systematically once a month for two hours and thirty minutes. The meetings foresee a fairly loose and alternating method of facilitation: a teacher or tutor facilitates communication and group decisions when necessary, the others academic staff members are present but silent.

The meetings also include moments of training of the participants in order to develop the type of involvement most appropriate and suitable to the role of trainers for the students, their contribution in seminars and workshops (Anghel & Ramon, 2009).

The most difficult phase was the initial one: avoiding the group from assuming the characteristics of a self-help group and transforming their life stories from testimonies to suggestions for future social workers required commitment, courage, humility, and the ability to get involved for all the members of the group, including the teachers and the tutor.

Applying the participatory action research (PAR) approach (Reason & Bradubury, 2006) through biographic narrative interviewing in focus groups (Wengraf, 2001), each life story was analysed by the group extrapolating in particular those experiences connected with processes activated by the social services and noting the relationship between the individual and their social worker. Then, the experts by experience culled some tips to suggest to students how to build a critical approach in their future organizations, mixing professional and organizational dynamics with those relating to social policies.

It was also a matter of supporting the group members in recognising their needs, their motivation to participate in the project and the potential impact that contributing to the teaching would have on each of them.

Stefania, one of the group's founders, remembers the initial phase was fundamental to understand the stories of each participant in order to go beyond categorizations and prejudices and to avoid the group becoming similar to a self-help context as follows:

none of us would have been able to be a credible "expert" towards the students if, excluding our own sphere of belonging, we had involuntarily implemented or kept alive the stereotypes that are often associated with realities that, until then, many of us had not encountered. In full respect of everyone's privacy and time, we therefore met and discovered first of all people, not only representatives of a life problem, who opened us, with their point of view, new perspectives towards multiple realities.

In addition, it was necessary to propose to the experienced users some exercises and some exchanges of perspective on role-play, on non-verbal communication, on how to give feedback to the students, on the use of emotions; and to decide what to say and what not to say about their own life experience, as a protective choice for everyone.

Again, it is appropriate to highlight, on a methodological level, that each time the group decides on a concrete objective and identifies the most appropriate training strategies to bring out the strengths and weaknesses of the professional/user relationship, the organisational paradoxes that can compromise the usability of a service, the complexity and bureaucratic-administrative distortions that often increase the negative perception of the service-user.

All this is translated into training devices that are useful to the students.

The group 'Otherwise experts' participated to many events both organized by the degree course in Social Work and external ones. Among these, we would like to highlight: the World Social Work Day; the international seminar that took place at the seat of the degree course in the presence of two representatives of the group of users and carers of the University of Hatfield, who have been collaborating many years for the training of future social workers. On that occasion, it was significant to witness the meeting and exchange between the two groups. Our role, in that case, was only of translation.

In each academic year the group organizes three seminars of three hours each aimed at students of the three-year course, using simulations with role plays and focus groups. The seminars are modified based on the evaluation of the students, the teachers and the reflections of the group.

The topics covered in the seminars were identified based on each specific curriculum of the Social Work disciplines:

1st year - *The complexity of ethical dilemmas*: starting from the theoretical definitions, the students developed a practical and reflective work on what a problem can be for an operator: a technical issue (i.e. the simple application of rules) or an ethical dilemma, avoiding to look for standardized solutions.

The 'Otherwise experts' group has dismantled, with great wisdom and ability, some obvious prejudices and stereotypes present in the discourses of the students, helping them to widen their gaze on social problems.

The workshop used the Photovoice technique devised by Wang and Burris (1997), which falls within the methodology of participatory action-research, focusing on the evocative power and representation of the points of view of those who often cannot otherwise communicate their ideas. Students and experienced users presented and discussed their photos, which represented their idea of social justice and self-determination, thus comparing different points of view.

At the same time, this exercise allows students to reflect on the fact that the subjects they are going to work with hold their own image of family and community and that they will need to connect to and understand it.

2nd year - *The Professional Relationship*: three expert users recreated the situation of an interview with as many students in the role of social worker, 'pressing' them on different aspects of need, on the empathic attitude, on the definition of the objectives of the relationship and on the development of the specific phases of the interview as the main tool of the professionals' work. Phrases such as "*if you say that to me in that tone, I feel like leaving*" or "*I felt listened to and understood, but I have the feeling that you don't know what concrete indications to give me to find a solution to my problem*" had a great impact on the students and stimulated a lively discussion among those present.

3rd year *Self-help and mutual-aid groups and Community Social Work*: the expert users, in this case, proposed a simulation of a self-help group meeting inspired by reality. An expert user interpreted the role of facilitator and the students that of participants, subsequently dedicating a space to re-elaborate emotions and analyse theoretical and deontological references about the practice of social work with groups. The emotional and cognitive impact of this simulation on the students is very strong and useful, and the discussion is generally very lively.

Student attendance is not compulsory, but strongly recommended and is generally around 100-130 students in each academic year, on average 60 for the first year, 40 for the second and 30 for the third.

Since the attendance for all the courses of the degree is not compulsory, except for the internship, where the presence is required to the total number of hours provided, the decrease in student attendance is generally attributable to the condition of student workers.

5.2. The evaluation of the experience

Mindful of the danger of slipping into tokenistic involvement, the experience has included an evaluation which explored the views of all project

stakeholders, thus establishing the project as an evidence-based educational innovation, which can be supervised over time.

More specifically, in addition to the free exchange between participants provided at the end of each workshop, the evaluation was organised through both the students and the 'Otherwise experts' completing a short questionnaire anonymously, including informed consent/ethical approval, which also included a final space for free-form comments.

There were no negative implications for students who did not complete it. The aim of the evaluation was to detect level of satisfaction and factors that may have hindered or facilitated the learning process and the change in students' attitudes towards expert users.

All results were discussed in a final meeting involving 'Otherwise experts' group and all academic staff members in order to promote a reflection upon the training process and the dynamics occurring among the participants and between students and service users'.

The questionnaire was composed of Likert scale questions to explore the following areas:

a. level of satisfaction;
b. organizational factors that can hamper or promote the learning process and the change in students' attitudes towards service users;
c. the students' perception of their engagement commitment to building an authentic and sensitive relationship with service users.

The students expressed their opinion on the 10 statements reported in the questionnaire by choosing a value between 1 and 5 (where 1 corresponds to full dissatisfaction while 5 corresponds to satisfaction).

The 10 statements covered topics such as:

1. the workshop programme;
2. the relationship with the 'Otherwise experts' group was effective;
3. the contents were consistent with the stated objectives;
4. exercises and group work were very useful;
5. the workshop has been useful in the future work;
6. the workshop has been useful in improving knowledge, skills and ethical sensitivity;
7. the workshop provided a better understanding some fears regarding the relationship between social worker and services users;
8. the suggestions by service users group were helpful;
9. the facilitators were clearly and effectively;
10. I would recommend this workshop to future students.

The evaluation by the expert service users, based on the 10 statements presented above, is carried out in a meeting following each workshop.

Moreover, at the end of each academic year we ask the members of the group to evaluate, freely and in writing, as well as orally.

In this vein, it should be highlighted that careful attention must be paid to any type of request for engagement addressed to service users, keeping in mind that service users are not a homogenous group and have different perspectives, identities and needs.

6. Findings and discussion: what have we learned?

The results are reported here with reference to the responses obtained by the students and by the service users in the academic year 2019 -2020, when the activities took place in presence in the first semester, i.e. before the Covid-19 pandemic.

The questionnaire was completed by 100% of the students (n=100) who participated in the workshops.

The results are presented considering the highest positive value (=5) attributed by the participants in their responses.

With respect to statement nr.1 (1) the organization of the workshops, 71% of the students considered that workshop programme corresponded to their needs with respect to the theme addressed (value=5); (3) 81% considered that the contents of the seminar were consistent with the stated objectives (value=5) and (9)73% considered the role and function of the facilitators of the seminar (tutors and group referents) effective (value=5).

No significant differences were found among students from each year of the Social Work degree course.

Students' feedback shows how they benefit from the strong engagement of service users and that their learning was facilitated by the dialogical and transformative approach such participatory approaches favour.

Students perceived the participation of service users as beneficial, in an atmosphere of openness and willingness to listen. Service users offered a glimpse into the worlds in which they lived, which improved students' respect for their coping strategies for their experiences. In fact, for 84% of them, (2) the relationship with the representatives of the 'Otherwise experts' group was effective (value=5); for 80%, (4) the exercises and group work were very useful (value=5); for 71% of the students, (7) the workshop allowed them to better understand some of their own fears with respect to relationship with service-users and how to face them (value=5).

Some free comments can complement the results presented above:
Student- First Year:

> Despite the embarrassment and difficulties in dealing with simulated group, I was able to better understand what should characterize the figure of the social worker

Sophomore:

> Meeting people who have had strong experiences has allowed me to understand, even more than books, how useful it is, for our future profession, to really listen to the point of view of the people who turn to the services. This experience has also taught me to counter some of my prejudices and to be more aware and self-critical.

Student-Third Year:

> Soon I will face the ultimate experience of professional training before the big jump; receiving these stimuli encouraged me to work on my personal criticality and to be more aware of the work that I'm going to do is not "for" but "with" the people.

Finally, with regard to the future profession, the evaluation reveals that: 99% of the students consider the observations and suggestions of the 'Otherwise experts' group very helpful (value=5); for 75% of the students (6) the seminar provided useful ideas for the acquisition of knowledge and specific skills in the professional field, including deontology; 75% of the respondents (5) considered what was developed in the workshop very useful in carrying out their future work (value=5).

100% of students (10) would recommend the workshops to future Social Work' students.

As far as the students were concerned, their learning from service users increased their sensitivity to the importance of professional key issues such as open and clear communication, and their ability to feel empathy with service users was seen as helping them to respond with genuineness, rather than officialdom.

They also noted that the project enhanced the meaning of the university course: the theories started to come to life and the students were able to practise working with real-life practical situations, integrating what they learn through practices and supervision activated during their placement.

The findings seem to show that there is overwhelming evidence that students value highly the opportunities encountered during their social work education to meet with and learn from service users.

This supports other research (Robinson & Webber, 2013; Levy et al. 2016; Tanner et al., 2017) that has explored similar student experiences, as highlighted in the first part of this article.

Furthermore, others benefits of SUI can be summarised as helping students to gain greater insight and awareness into the perspectives of people on the receiving end of services; to challenge stereotypical views of service users and recognise their strengths and to see people in their contest.

However, it is possible that service users teaching in the workshops may have contributed to make a positive bias with students being keen to attest to their learning and to please the academic staff (Tanner et al., 2016).

With regard to evaluation by the service users group, they identified many benefits from being involved in social work education.

The most relevant include: being valued as respected partners in the learning process; being proud of improving the quality of future social workers gaining in confidence and self-esteem; developing skills which may open up future opportunities.

This supports other research (Matka et al.,2010; Levy et al. 2016; Duffy, 2006; Tanner et al., 2017) that has explored similar student experiences.

This is how some of them express themselves, for example:

> Mario: I have to say that initially I struggled, especially about how it would be to relate with students and what would be the role that I was going to play. But recollecting my personal experience with this particular purpose also encouraged me, and I realized that it can really become a constructive and reciprocal force to spread.

> Luigi: The idea of being able to be protagonists, to become a resource and not just users of the services, to be able to tell "something else" than what each of them would have found in books, filled us with pride, but also with great fear. You have to be willing to admit that we don't have answers, or at least not univocal ones, that we will often have to confront each other - maybe even clash - and it won't always be easy to find the right interaction to work together. All this explains why we are here.

Speaking of barriers encountered in the project, the most important one reported by service users is a need to including more their experience in others specific areas in the Social Work degree curriculum. If this become further embedded, however, it is important for students, service users and academic staff to engage with and reflect on issues of power, partnership and risk.

Finally, the findings suggests the inextricably circular link between theoretical and practical knowledge, and the knowledge of service users in the undergraduate social work training process.

In particular, this assumption provides insight into the inherently transformative nature of group processes and supports ongoing evaluation and redesign of training programs.

 Beyond these points, this experience shows that services users, if recognised as experts, benefit in terms of inclusion from being seen as social actors in the full sense, to be fully consulted and informed in order to transform their contact with the services into a pathway of connection with the wider reality in which they are embedded.

Concluding remarks

The analysis carried out aimed to critically explore the innovative project concerning the involvement of the Otherwise Experts group in the training activities of the degree course in Social Work at the University of Piemonte Orientale. Drawing on the literature on the subject, the structure of the group, the method, the evaluation, and the outcomes of the experience were illustrated and discussed.

The study has some limitations, such as the impossibility, at present, of assessing the real impact that the workshops conducted by expert users will have on the professional identity and practices of future social workers (Robinson & Webber, 2013; Schön, 2016). As has been highlighted in the previous paragraphs this is a common problem to all projects carried out at an international level, which must be addressed in future research designs, in a comparative key to develop a co-constructed knowledge both at the national and international level (Driessens et. al., 2016).

More specifically there are some critical points to face up, i.e.: identify and use specific areas in the Social Work curriculum; the SUI group need to avoid friction within the institution and get in touch with other SUI projects across Italy and Europe. More recently, in 2020 and 2021, two online seminars have been organized by the service users group together with two other groups of service users involved in mental health and in the carer leaver's movement, reserved for all students of the degree course in social work, gaining great interest.

This was a small-scale study and it was not possible to design a comparative study with other similar Italian experiences since at the moment they have not yet been activated.

However, as the findings suggest, some advantages can also be traced.

For students, the main benefits are intrinsically linked: the change in attitude towards service users is reflected in the increased awareness of the need for a flexible professional role.

This process should break down the barriers created by stereotypical and symbolic dynamics in favour of an anti-oppressive approach.

For service users', the main benefits are to be found, on an individual level, in the recognition of new skills as well as in the increase in self-confidence and on a group level, in the construction of a positive, competent, proactive identity, elements that form the basis of real empowerment.

The findings highlight the value of service users' involvement in the qualifying Social Work degree and the steps needed for the cultural change required for such an involvement to become more comprehensive and embedded in the degree course.

In the seminars and workshops service users focused on the critique and positive aspects encountered in their relationships with social workers as a guide to building anti-oppressive professional actions. This focus empowered service users to convey their knowledge to the students as a framework for the latter's future work as professionals (Ramon et al. 2019). This was a significant change in Italian social work education in that it offered an effective basis to challenge traditional user representations. It challenged dominant social work models focused on individual pathology (Conrad, 2007) and engaged students in broader social systems and structural perspectives (Beresford et al., 2009).

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