

Unconventional Practice Placements. An Italian Experience in Social Work Field Education¹

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Abstract

Unconventional practice placements (UPPs) are a type of field education in which students are given high levels of autonomy in planning and developing original projects that do not reproduce work already conducted in that context by other professionals. Examples of such non-traditional placements are documented in the UK and the USA. Drawing on quantitative data from a larger study of 311 UPPs executed between 2008 and 2014 and informal narratives from practice teachers this article, presents the Italian experience carried out in the Catholic University of Milan. Data suggest that UPPs are an effective method to develop students' creativity, professional autonomy, and discretion. Additionally, UPPs can introduce new workplaces in contexts where professional social work was previously absent, and new ways of understanding social help.

Keywords

Unconventional Practice Placement, social work education, field education, participation, autonomy

Introduction

Social work practice placement is a learning experience based on direct contact with a real professional context. Tasks observed or directly experienced by students are not simulations or role play, but actual professional tasks which are usually chosen and organised by prioritizing students' learning (Raineri, 2003). Such field education belongs to the tradition of social work around the world (Dick et al., 2002; Gui, 2009; Wayne et al., 2010) and is considered of utmost importance for professional practice learning (Clapton and Cree, 2004). As Goldstein proposed, «We need to turn to the field as the educational setting where we can explore what, specifically, students need to learn and know» (2001: 4).

¹ Due to its scientific value and the prestige of the author, this article has been selected directly by the editor-in-chief and associate editors, without being subjected to a single- or double-blind peer review procedure.

However, widespread recognition of its importance does not correspond uniformly over educational models. Most decisions about implementation of practice placements' require mediation between different needs and requirements and are often difficult to reconcile. Thus, different arrangements are made, and present both beneficial and negative or critical aspects with respect to the learning process (Bogo and Vayda, 1998; Caspi and Reid, 2002; Shardlow and Doel, 2006; Wilson et al., 2009).

The main differences between various practice placements' models include the extent of assistance to be provided by the university, the schedules for practice placements within the time frame of social work courses, the number of placement hours requested and their distribution over time, and the forms of supervision used (Raineri, 2015).

A relevant issue is students' expected level of autonomy, and therefore, this criteria determines the tasks students choose. During practice placements, students can focus mainly on collecting information about the context and observing work performed by supervisors and other professionals, or, most times, they may be expected to perform real professional tasks themselves.

When such autonomy is granted, the planning of placement tasks can take two main directions. The first is a «listen, look, and repeat» approach wherein students are assigned tasks that are usually performed in the host agency and would be executed by supervisors or other social workers if a student was absent. The second is an innovation-oriented approach in which students are expected to develop new activities or new projects that would not be realized without them. So, it is not a requisite to reproduce the work of other professionals but rather to experience something new. This «new» experience doesn't necessarily have to be in an absolute sense: for example, it could be a program built along the lines of an existing program that has already been successful elsewhere, or it could include activities that an agency omitted due to insufficient staff to engage in them. In any case, students must venture on paths that are not completely beaten, if at all.

In Italy, the second type of practice placements are characterised by greater discretion from students in imagining and developing original projects, and are called UPPs to distinguish them from traditional placements. Such experiences currently exist in the Social Work Course of certain universities—the Catholic University of Milan and Brescia (Raineri, 2009; Calcaterra and Raineri, 2015), the University of Trento, and the University of Torino (Dellavalle, 2011; Cola, 2015) to name a few—and UPPs were the norm in the post-Second World War years, when the scarce presence of professional social workers forced students to tread new paths during their education. Similar non-traditional placements are also documented in the UK (Skills for Care, 2009; Scholar et al., 2012, 2014; Hek, 2012; Doel, 2014; McLaughlin et al., 2014) and in the USA where they are sometimes developed according to a service-learning approach (Nadel, Majewski, and Sullivan-Cosetti, 2007; Petracchi et al., 2016).

After a brief presentation about the general characteristics of these atypical practice placements, this article will present the Italian experience conducted in the Catholic University (UCSC — Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore). The description will be based on

first-hand knowledge of authors who have directly contributed towards the development of this model, informal information from practice teachers involved in UPPs supervision, and on data from a larger study about UPPs during seven academic years from 2008 to 2014 (Sala, 2016).

Non-traditional Placements

Non-traditional placements were introduced in UK in order to expand social work placement opportunities. They were performed in settings where there were no social workers, or where social services were not provided, for example police stations, schools, colleges, trade unions, employment agencies (Scholar et al., 2012; Hek, 2012), and local communities and groups, also with services users' engagement (Parker et al., 2003).

With the passage of time, despite initial scepticism, non-traditional placements have demonstrated that they can offer good opportunities to social work students and guarantee a field education that meets the requirements of traditional placements (McLaughlin et al., 2014). Tasks performed in these non-traditional education fields (direct work with users and carers; assessment, planning, intervention, and evaluation; teamwork; report writing; group work; project work, etc.) are similar to those expected in traditional fields, and the possibilities for inter-professional and inter-sectorial work are particularly interesting (Doel, 2010). Non-traditional placements can invite new contexts for the profession of social work because they sometimes result in the development of new services or in the expansion of existing services. It was also found that the presence of students could provide additional benefits, such as improving the public image of host agencies (Doel, 2010; Scholar et al., 2012, 2014).

A critical issue is to have a well-prepared placement ready for students beforehand, with shared aims defined between students, host agencies, and universities. Moreover, in a non-traditional placement, it is important to help students link users and community needs with placement tasks and educational goals stated in the placement program. For this purpose, in non-traditional placements, there are both in-place supervisors (even if they are not professionals) who guide students daily, and off-site supervisors (placed in universities) who are experienced practicing social worker teachers (Doel, 2010). Student learning groups are also very useful in offering peer support and stimulating reflective practice (Scholar et al., 2014).

Service-learning in Social Work Education

Service-learning is a pedagogical approach that integrates lessons content with the experience of serving others so that collaborative and mutual relations between students

and community members are developed (Hatcher and Bringle, 1997; Harkavy, 2004; Fiorin, 2016). For this purpose, service-learning provides a specifically structured program that improves theoretical learning provided by a school or university course through the realisation of actions aimed to address one or more needs of the local community. In other words, while traditional placements prioritise students' educational goals, service-learning also focuses on community needs. Students learn the content of one or more courses while simultaneously make it possible to address these needs (Petracchi, Weaver, Schelbe, Song, 2016). Consequently, service-learning requires an intense collaboration between universities and local communities (Campbell, 2012).

Service-learning is not exclusive to social work; it is implemented in different educational degrees for different disciplines and in many countries around the world, with significant adoption in Spain and South America, linked to the legacy of Paul Freire, while North American experiences are influenced by the theory and philosophy of John Dewey (Deans, 1999). Dewey had significant ties to social work through his relationship with Hull House Settlement; its founder—and pioneer of US social work—Jane Addams articulated the theoretical foundation for service-learning and involved Dewey in order to make her social work school a place for real social work practice (Bortoli, 2013).

Service-learning is generally proposed for specific courses in the first year of Bachelor's programs connected with social work, to be conducted for about 25 hours, and completed during the course calendar or in one academic semester—with longer experiences being infrequent (Gerstenblatt, Gilbert, 2014).

In 2008, the National Association of Social Workers (USA) acknowledged that service-learning foundations and their civic commitment are clearly aligned with core principles of social work and the mission of social work education (Begun et al., 2010). Among the strengths of service-learning, it recognised its effectiveness in promoting students' reflexivity, critical thinking, and problem solving—all pivotal goals in social work education (Lemieux, Allen, 2007). Social work students involved in service-learning report an increased civic commitment, a growth in self-efficacy perceptions, in their sense of responsibility, and are more interested and confident in performing research activities (Byers, Gray, 2012; Ericson, 2011; Maccio, 2011).

Among critical aspects for which improvements would be necessary, inadequate educational methods (Gestenblatt, Gilbert, 2014) and risks, and the needs of universities and students taking priority over those of communities (Butin, 2010) are sometimes reported. Further, Wayne and colleagues (2010) suggest a wider use of learning groups, both among only students, and between students and other entities engaged in service-learning, similar to South American experiences that generally consider service-learning not as an individual experience, but that of an entire class.

Unconventional Placements in UCSC: What They Are and How They Are Organized

When combined, non-traditional placements and service-learning summarise the characteristics of UPPs realised in UCSC. First, students don't reproduce professional social work that is already provided in the environment in which their UPPs occur, but instead are expected to perform «new» work.

Second, students have to develop initiatives related not only to their learning needs but also to *real* needs, with opportunities for the improvement of a community or service. Consequently, UPPs are based on a collaborative approach: students' learning depends on cooperation with others involved in his/her UPP (citizens, professionals, volunteers, services' users, carers, family members etc.) and, simultaneously, these collaborators must also gain something that is personally useful to them from the student's work.

A third specific feature of UPPs is the high level of autonomy required of students, even in the framework of educational supervision. This means that students are expected to conceive and develop the project themselves from the beginning, with the required negotiation with various stakeholders: their university on one side and citizens, communities, users and/or professionals and agencies, on the other.

UPPs were introduced in UCSC Bachelor's degrees' courses of social work from the academic year of 2008/09, becoming mandatory in 2009/10. They weigh 9 European Credits Transfer System ECTS, with 175 hours on the field and 40 in the classroom; an additional 2 or 4 ECTS can be (50 or 100 hours) taken from the ECTS that students can freely choose. UPPs are judged and evaluated with a report and grade given by a practice teachers' commission.

Regarding implementation, UPPs are undertaken in the third year of the course, after students have completed an introductory and a traditional placement, in the first and second year, respectively. Although there may be differences between one UPP and another, generally from October to December, alongside classroom work and individual study, students begin to identify first ideas for their projects. In January and February, the planning is developed and realised, eventually ending between June and September.

A range of supports are provided: from October to May, classroom workshops are conducted with a practice teacher, who is an experienced social worker, with groups of 15 to 25 students over 40 hours; at least three or four individual interviews with the practice teacher; and an experienced secretary helps students with the necessary paperwork. Furthermore, a social work professor coordinates all the field education of the UPPs.

Some Data

A survey carried out a few years ago (Sala, 2016) documented that, according to the university's administrative data, between the academic years of 2008/9 and 2014/15,

714 students engaged in UPPs. Even though it was possible for two or more students with similar aims to collaborate for the realisation of projects, it was mandatory for each student to develop a piece of work they were individually responsible for. On this basis, it can be assumed that each respondent realised an UPP project distinct from their colleagues, for a total of 714 UPPs. In the study by Sala (2016), 657 of these students were contacted. UCSC has two social work courses, both in Lombardy (a region of Northern Italy): 421 of those 657 students were from Milan, and 236 from Brescia. A total of 311 (203 in Milan and 108 in Brescia) responded to a questionnaire with 55 multiple-choice questions, administered by e-mail between March and June 2016.

About half of the respondents did not remember how many hours they spent on UPPs; 29.7% completed a 175-hour UPP; 12.3% students spent 225 hours on their UPPs; and 10.9% students spent 275 hours.

All UPPs took place in parallel with lectures or exams, therefore no student was involved full-time. In the academic calendar, two days a week were reserved for UPPs, but each student was free to allocate time according to the project's needs and his/her preferences, and compatibility with other educational commitments. This flexible schedule led to different time distributions: more than a half of UPPs were carried out over a period of four to six months (58.6%), 33.3% of them spanned 7-10 months, while UPPs spanning over three months (3.6%), and 11 months or more (4.5%) being less frequent.

First Step: To Find a Context

At the beginning, each student must identify:

- a potential context for his/her UPP (i.e. a local community, an informal organisation or agency) with people who might be interested in a possible project;
- one or more problems or improvements that need addressing.

At this stage, a suggested key rule is: «Start with people concerns or desires, not from what *you* — the student — wants to learn». This suggestion is important because students are sometimes confused about the higher level of «autonomy» required of them in project designing (Raineri, 2015). It may seem paradoxical to say that the student has to be autonomous in defining the project and, at the same time, the project design must be shared and collaboratively defined. But, in a more precise sense, the student is autonomous in building collaborations to devise and to develop his/her UPP's project. Therefore, autonomy does not mean being able to do whatever is wanted, and doing it «alone»: Otherwise, what kind of *social* work would it be? Students need an entity (an organization, or some services' users, families, a local community, a group, etc.) that is interested in a possible project, and considers it potentially useful and is, therefore, willing to participate. Therefore, the student is required to identify a possible UPP project that combines their educational needs and interests with the needs

and aspirations of others. The suggested reflection to start the ideation process is, for example, the following:

As a social work student, you already completed a traditional practice placement: you can draw on it to identify open problems that people care about, or potential improvements that interest an agency, or a local community, or a group of services users.

Or you can use your personal experiences: for example, as a patient or family member, you may have found yourself thinking about possible social care improvements useful in a hospital, or in an elderly residential service where your relative was hosted, or in the secondary school your brother attends or you attended a few years ago, or in a sport or musical association you frequent, or in your parish, or in your neighbourhood, and so on.

Based on these observations and thoughts, you should be able to put together a list of problems/themes/issues/desires that have to do with social work. Review each one and ask yourself: which of these could benefit from social work contributions?

Only after this step is completed, think about what *you* could learn and, finally, decide whether to orient yourself towards that kind of project or field, or not. (Raineri, 2015: 70. Author's translation)

Once a problem or an issue has been identified, students make first contact with potentially interested parties who could help them directly or provide useful information to proceed. The goal of this step is to probe the «social base» of the possible project (Folgheraiter and Raineri, 2017). In other words, it is necessary to understand whether the issue is of interest, whether the potential stakeholders (as individuals and/or representatives of organisations) are willing to cooperate; if their neighbourhood, their informal group, their association, or their agency could be suitable for developing a project, and what kind of project might be most appropriate. Generally, it is suggested to spend some time «exploring the field», rather than immediately settling on the first available possibility, in order to have some choice possibility.

In the next step, students examine the pros and cons of possible locations or «places» the project might take i.e. in the public sector or non-profit service, or in an informal association, or in a private company; with a formal agreement between that organisation and the university; or as an internship formally based in the university, without an agreement with an external agency.

Some Data about Targets and Formal Arrangements

Data about formal arrangements for UPPs (Sala, 2016) seem to confirm that social work can take place anywhere, as long as there is an issue regarded as «problematic» by a «social» entity, with a relational guide able to connect motivated people for catalysing a coping network interested in addressing that social problem (Folgheraiter and Raineri, 2017). As in the UK (McLaughlin et al., 2014), this Italian experience seems to disprove

widespread notions that field education would only be possible in conventional social services, dealing with well-known social problems. As Fig. 1 shows, 25.2% of students carried out their UPPs without a formal agreement with an external organisation, thus, their project was carried out in collaboration with informal groups of citizens, users and/or carers. There were formal agreements in 220 UPPs, half of which were with third-sector or private organisations. This is interesting because in UCSC only a minority of traditional placements were hosted in third-sector organisations.

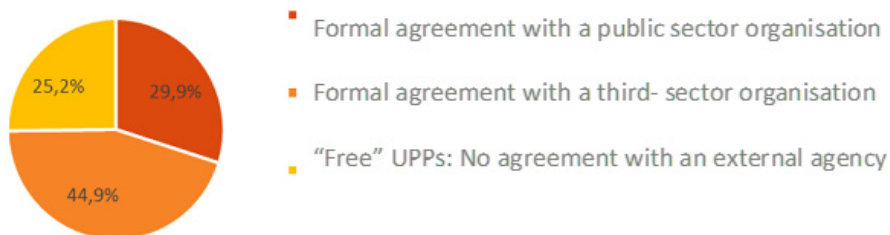


Fig. 1 Formal arrangements of UPPs realised in UCSC from 2008 to 2014; percentage values (N=294).

Fig. 2 shows UPP projects' targets i.e. types of people or types of problems. Although many UPPs were not carried out in traditional settings, most of the problem areas where students worked were typical of social work. This seems to confirm the hypothesis that there are many different places in which social work can be performed. Additionally, some unusual targets were also revealed, which are rarely considered in traditional placements i.e. the «general population of a local community» (8.3%), «young people and/or students» (1.6%—this target was detected from open answers given to the item: «other»). So, UPPs seem to be an opportunity for new social work experiences, sometimes «on the border-line» between social work and socio-cultural animation (Lorenz, 1994).

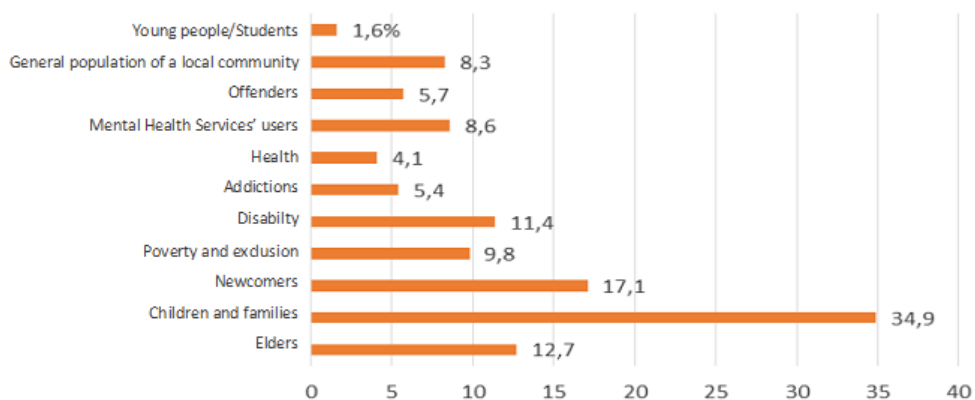


Fig. 2 Target of UPPs realised in UCSC from 2008 to 2014; percentage values, N=311 (multiple answers were allowed)

Second Step: Guiding-group's Catalysation, and Project Design

Students are asked to research their target's problems and socio-cultural features, the local community in which they will work, and similar programs they hypothesize to carry out. The following step involves designing the project. In line with the contents of courses about Relational Social Work, students are asked to follow an «open» and participatory planning process, which allows for unpredictable behaviour during the process, or other variables: for example, some choices of citizens, users, carers, or by other professionals or services. To develop this kind of planning, students need to find a small group of people who:

- are interested in the field they have chosen;
- have some degree of expertise in that field, whether as experts by experience or as a professional;
- are willing to collaborate.

Students can be anxious or find it difficult to make first contact, because they are uncertain about how to introduce themselves and what to ask. On the other hand, people are often used to being asked about programs already well defined, while it is quite unusual to be asked to collaborate on an undefined project. Some suggestions proposed to students in order to help them manage these first contacts are, for example, the following:

What can you tell an organization's delegate or a citizen, user, family member, or volunteer who might be interested in collaborating with you?

- You are a social worker student and you need his/her help to realise your internship, which is necessary to complete your degree course. You are looking for people/organisations to collaborate with.
- Your degree course prepares you to work on social problems. So, you are interested in the topic/issue ... and you think it might be useful to talk to him/her.
- You have to carry out a project of interests for the people you are talking to, a program that they must consider useful, meaningful and appropriate.
- The project has to include some social work task, for example ...
- The project will be supervised by your university.
- You're not asking for a paid job.
- You are interested in getting to know him/her or his/her organisation and if they have any ideas or suggestions for a possible project.
- You have some tentative ideas, too. For example, ... (Raineri, 2015, p. 75. Author's translation)

In the end, if all goes well, the student invites a small group of interested people, called the «guiding-group», to a meeting to discuss what purposes the UPP's project could have. At this point, the project shifts from being an individual's to a shared one. After reaching an agreement on the aims of the project, the group proceeds to consider strategies to achieve these their goals and together define what is to be done. Finally, the student will write the plan (including contingent or outstanding issues to be decided later). He/she will submit it for approval by the guiding-group, the university and, if the case may be, the host organization.

Obviously, a number of variations may arise. More meetings may be necessary for something concrete to be decided; the initial guiding-group may change, for example, because some members are no longer interested or available and have left, and/or new members have joined, often thanks to a suggestion by initial members; only a basic agreement can be defined regarding a first short initial project, with the intention of later extending it, all going well, etc.

Such shared planning processes involve a negotiation in order to find a balance between the educational needs of the social work student, the specific characteristics of the UPP and the needs or the desires expressed by the guiding-group. This negotiation is, in itself, a valuable opportunity to learn how to promote collaboration between people, and is a fundamental skill for all social workers.

Third Step: Working Together towards Project Implementation

All planned actions decided upon for implementation of the project are carried out, with constant guidance from the guiding-group, through meetings held periodically. The student has the responsibility to facilitate the guiding-group's work: he/she is a point of contact for the various people involved, and organises meetings in order to promote better collaboration.

In the UPPs realised in UCSC, the idea of participation by citizens, service users and carers is an important one for developing social work innovations. A participatory approach is consistent with the ethical principles of international and Italian social work (Warren, 2007; Fawcett et al., 2017) and, according to Folgheraiter (2004; 2017), social work essentially consists in facilitating different forms of participation. However, although a participatory orientation is embedded in the social work history (Bortoli, 2013), there is still a long way to go before it can be translated into social welfare services' practices. In many Italian social services, participatory policies are implemented with difficulty and unevenly (Bifulco and Facchini, 2015), and social workers tend to work in a «professional-centred» way, following the idea that experts should know, on their own, what is best when addressing users' problems. So, in Italy, projects aimed at developing participation often have a significant innovative dimension, especially when they promote the participation of the most fragile people, those who seem to have very little to offer, and instead much to receive. Between 2008 and 2014, among the UPPs realised in USCS there were many projects characterised by a participatory approach. The most representative kinds of projects were the following:

- Projects aimed at giving a voice to experts by experience, to develop advocacy actions or participatory planning processes (for example, about social services, local welfare provisions, or other forms of support). Experts by experience can be identified based on a local community or a kind of problem or concern.

- Projects aimed at addressing some needs in a new way—an absolutely new one, or one that is new for that specific context.
- Projects aimed at introducing typical social work tasks (for example counselling interviews, referring to other services, social work assessments, and so on) in completely new contexts, or in places where these aids are not yet provided, even if elsewhere this has already been initiated.
- Projects aimed at developing or improving—hopefully in a participative way—guidelines or operational tools. For example, an assessment checklist, or an outline for social folders, or guidelines about first contacts with new services' users.
- Projects aimed at informing, promoting or sensitising a local community about a social problem, with the participation of experts by experience.
- Community work projects, aimed at improving relationships and collaboration in local communities, for example through socialisation initiatives, community mediation or advocacy, or small community development programs.

Some Data about Professional and Informal Collaborators

Sala (2016) calculated the number of collaborators that got involved with students to facilitate their UPPs. 44.9% of respondent students (N=216) involved from one to three collaborators; 35.6% collaborated with four to six; the remaining 19.5% collaborated with seven or more. Overall, 906 people were recruited. The presence of so many collaborators is a significant difference compared to traditional placements, in which there are mainly two participants: the student and his/her supervisor. In UPPs, however, the approach seems to recall a «learning community», in which the student can learn from various people, professionals and non-professionals, and these people, in turn, can get some insight from the student about how to improve their local community, their service, or their life situation.

Fig. 3 shows the different types of collaborators involved. About half (47.4%) are experts with formal positions. Among these, some people were not employed in social services, but due to their role they often had to deal with social problems: for example, general practitioners, teachers, parish priests, and local politicians. The other half were «experts by experience»: Users and former users (13%), carers and family members (8%), volunteers (16.9%) or active citizens (14.6%).

The survey (Sala, 2016) also shows which people each student contacted first, in order to start his/her placement.

Of interviewees who answered this question (244), 50% said they consulted with service professionals; 19.7% talked with citizens or volunteers and 11.9% with managers and administrators, while first contacts with services' users or carers were quite rare. In other words, at the beginning of their UPPs, the students turned mostly to the professional world they were introduced to for their traditional placement the previous year.

Interestingly, this initial absence of users, family members and carers changed during the UPPs. As shown in Fig. 3, when considering the overall duration of the project, these categories represent 21% of total collaborators. This seems to indicate that UPPs were effective in encouraging students to work «with», instead of working «for», people in need.

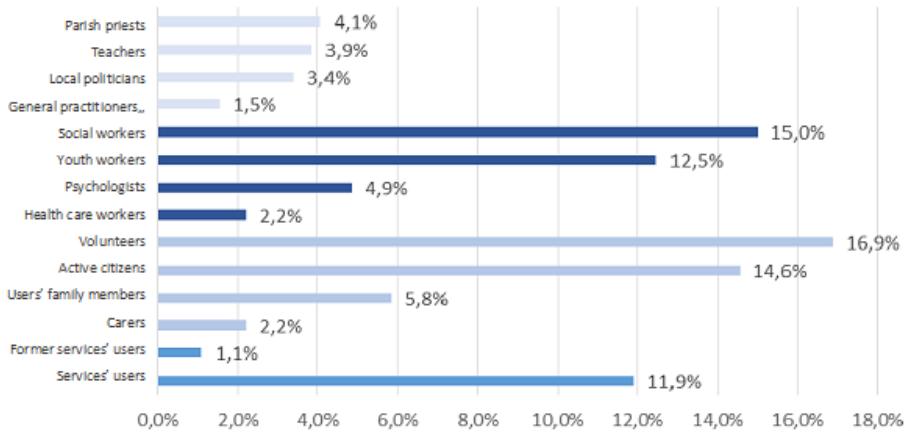


Fig. 3 People who collaborated with students for realisation of UPPs, from 2008 to 2014; percentage values (N=906)

Fig. 4 (Sala, 2016: 192) summarises what types of tasks students' collaborators performed. Their activities concerned reaching a shared agreement about planning goals, in both practical organisation and implementing tasks. Interestingly, contributions with regards to increasing the number of participants' were well represented: the students seemed able to get help from their collaborators to «expand the network» (Folgheraiter, 2003) and involve more people.

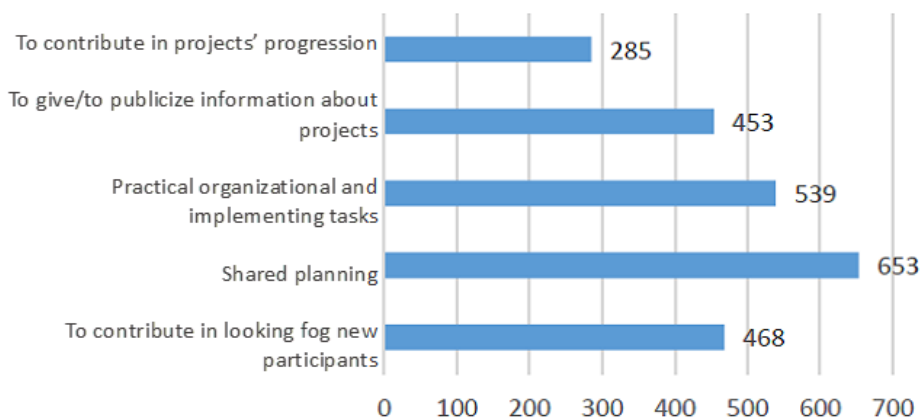


Fig. 4 Types of tasks performed by people who collaborated with students for UPPs' realisation, from 2008 to 2014 (absolute value; N=2398).

Fourth Step: Learning Evaluation

At the end of their UPP, each student produced a written report that documented the achievements and what he/she learnt. In this report, it is required to connect the field experience with theoretical contents of the courses they are learning at university.

Students and university practice teachers carry out a learning assessment through a specific form, in which four broad areas of expertise are formulated into some professional skills, with some items that describe a more directly observable learning (see an example in Fig. 5). This assessment form helps students to connect the activities experienced during UPPs with typical social work skills.

SKILLS	ITEMS	WAS THE ITEM OBSERVED?				NOTES <i>On what occasions was it possible to observe what this item describes?</i>
		YES: NOT GOOD ENOUGH	YES: PARTLY GOOD	YES: COMPLETELY GOOD	NO, IT ISN'T	
B.6 <i>Skills in working with informal helpers</i>	1. The student is able to identify informal helpers, such as carers, family members, neighbourhood, peers etc. who could collaborate in carrying out UPP's project.					
	2. The student knows about voluntary or self-help/mutual-aid initiatives relevant to the internship.					
	3. The student takes care of involving carers, family members, neighbours, peers, or volunteers in planning and carrying out the project.					
	4. The student is able to facilitate a small network of people (informal helpers and professionals) interested in developing a project, helping them to come together and keep in touch with each other.					

Fig. 5 Example of some items in a section of the Assessment Form (Raineri, 2015: 369, Author's translation)

To link activities and professional skills is a crucial operation for field education, in particular for UPPs, in which there is no senior social worker already entrusted with those activities and can therefore testify, with his/her presence, that they undertook an example of social work. Highlighting the connection between the UPPs' activities and typical social work skills helps students to reflect on how they can also use these skills in contexts other than UPPs, both in traditional and other innovative ones. At the same time, it helps to connect theory and practice, as a kind of «bridge» between them. Professional tasks require a range of skills, and utilising these skills involves applying social work theories for practice.

The assessment is not only about the students' learning, but also opportunities offered to them in their UPPs contexts. From this point of view, practice teachers also receive feedback useful for programming UPPs in the following years.

Data about the Overall Outcome of Unconventional Placements

A different level of assessment regards the overall impact of UPPs «outside the university classrooms»: on local communities, social services, and the professional social work community. In Sala's (2016) research, some data testify to the social relevance of UPPs, which can effectively contribute to the university's third mission (Pinheiro et. Al., 2015; Inman and Schütze, 2010).

Data regarding the projects' goals achievement rate are not available, but students were asked about how much interest their projects aroused, and how much participation they obtained, on a scale from 1 to 10. More than 55% of respondents assigned a score greater than or equal to 8 in all three aspects, and about 30% rating the level of interest, participation and goals achievement between 6 and 7. In all, 10% of respondents expressed low ratings (between 1 and 5). To better understand these results, a deeper investigation into students' points of view would be necessary. However, their assessments are overall positive.

The wide range of collaborators (Fig. 3) seems to indicate that UPPs encouraged people (professionals and non-professionals) to get involved and take up responsibilities for improving their communities. 120 projects proceeded thanks to material resources (for example, rooms, work material, promotional flyers, small professional services, etc.) provided by public agencies, by voluntary organisations or even by private citizens. In 30 cases (19%), funding was obtained through a public tender. These data are relevant as fundraising was never included as a priority goal of the projects, and students had no specific training or guidance about it.

The continuation of many projects after the work formally required of students (Fig. 6) suggests their «enabling effect» on local communities. In absolute value, the UPPs that continued were 160. It is an encouraging result, as these projects were initiated by students with little experience, whose motivations were mainly educational.

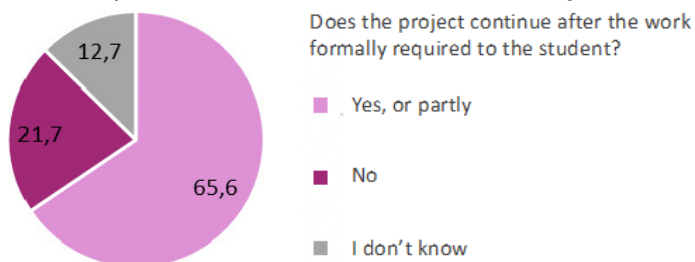


Fig. 6 Projects that had, or had not, a continuation beyond the end of the placement's curricular hours; percentage values (N=244).

Projects that had a continuation (N = 160) lasting over three years were 13.3%; from one to three years were 13.9%; from six months to one year were 26.5%; less than six months were 22.9%; while 23.5% of respondents did not know if their projects continued or not. It should be noted that this data could underestimate the actual duration of projects as they include UPPs launched less than six months earlier.

As shown in Fig. 4, approximately 11% of the activities carried out by collaborators—who were involved due to the students—were directed to allow the continuation of the projects even beyond the end of the placement's stipulated curricular hours. In fact, in 62% of the cases, the projects continued beyond the educational requirements, thanks to people involved during the UPPs. From within 24% of cases, 17% of projects continued thanks to the student continuing as a volunteer and, in a small but important 7% of the projects, as a paid social worker (see below).

As Fig. 7 shows, the most fruitful context for the continuation of the UPPs projects seemed to be the third-sector organisations, where 49.1% of projects continued after the end of the students' placements, followed by public services (31.7%). Interestingly, some projects realised without a formal agreement with any organisation (19.2%) continued too. It would be expected that these projects, launched by students who inevitably had little experience and also lacked the formal support of an organisation, had no chance of continuing. On the contrary, continuations of 31 such projects were detected. More data would be needed to explain this result, but our hypothesis (according to practice teachers' perspectives) is that the students have been able to intercept the interests and concerns of motivated collaborators and given value to their experiential knowledge.

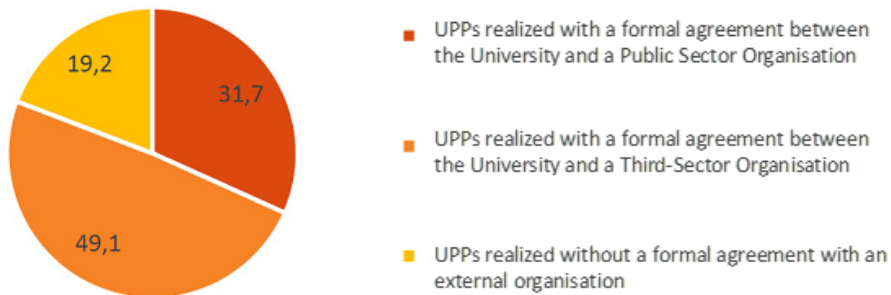


Fig. 7 Formal arrangements of the UPPs with projects that continued beyond the end of the placement's curricular hours; percentage values (N=160).

Finally, a fifth of UPPs (21.7%, 54 cases) also had an impact on students' job opportunities, either once they have graduated or, in some cases, even before. Among the 54 students who declared they had found employment thanks to their UPPs, 10.8% were recruited as social workers, 6% as youth or care workers, and 4.8% with other tasks that connected to UPPs projects (Fig. 8).

16% of the 54 students who found employment thanks to their UPPs were hired to continue the work they had already started. Their projects correspond to 7% of the total number of projects that continued beyond the formal placements' duration. This data is interesting because it is plausible to assume that, without the creative work required by UPPs, these job opportunities would not have been in place.

About half of the students employed thanks to their UPPs were hired by the same organisation in which they had carried out their UPP projects. It would be interesting to investigate if any social workers were already employed in those organisations. Otherwise, UPPs contributed in creating new workplaces, and making social work available where previously it was not considered a possible resource.

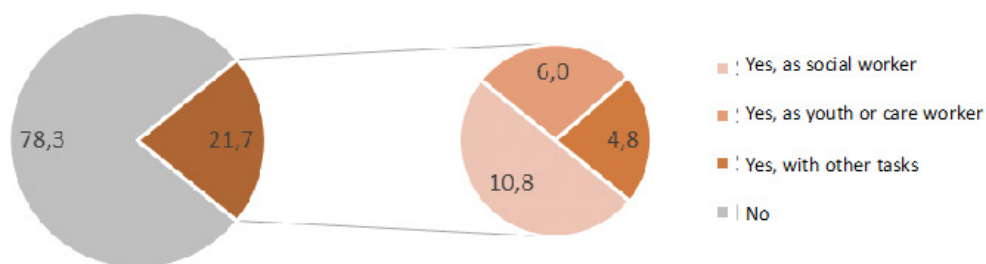


Fig. 8. Job opportunities found by students thanks to their UPPs, percentage values (N=249).

Unconventional Placements' Strengths and Critical Issues

In terms of student learning, the UPPs typical ideational autonomy encourages development of important professional skills (Nino et al., 2011; Poulin, Kauffman and Silver, 2006; Schelbe, Petracchi and Weaver, 2014), as an ability to analyse individual or collective situations to devise caring or promotional actions, different from usual standard processes or provisions. UPPs train students to consider their future practice from an innovative perspective. Students learn not to settle into routines, but to exercise creativity, and seek alliances for developing new ideas (Billingham and Roberts, 2002). Without these abilities, a social worker could become a bureaucrat, and authentic professional social work could risk being wiped out altogether.

Furthermore, the ideational and operational autonomy required by a UPP conveys an approach oriented to students' empowerment (Williams et al., 2002; Anderson, 2006). Students are not required to simply «observe and reproduce» others' work. They are expected to be critical, to propose their ideas, and to put them into practice. They are given the confidence and the possibility that their thoughts and their actions can lead to something good. There is often parallelism between the attitude that we endorse upon

ourselves as social work students, by our teachers and supervisors, and the attitude we adopt towards our users (Ford and Jones, 1987; Urbanowsky and Dwyer, 1988). So, if a student is treated in an over-protective manner, he/she will tend to hyper-protect in turn; if a student is monitored and accompanied at every step, he/she will tend to do the same with people he/she will serve. On the positive side, if students experience an empowering relationship during their field education, they will be more likely to reproduce those qualities towards the people they will help.

As data presented in the previous section suggests, an advantage of UPPs is learning to explore new areas of work and to build new opportunities (Jones, 2011). Knowing to walk off the beaten path is a vital skill and, given the current turbulence in the public welfare system, is bringing significant changes in social care professions.

UPPs rely on the hypothesis that professional social work can find new contexts of practice, alongside those currently consolidated, and new ways to use its typical skills even in traditional contexts. The new avenues opened by UPPs indicate that they can be an effective way to promote professional social work (Beverley and Worsley, 2007; Bellinger, 2010a, 2010b; Scholar *et al.*, 2014; McLaughlin *et al.*, 2014). For such promotions, new graduates must be sufficiently equipped to look for new ideas, without settling for what they find on the field, or taking for granted that it cannot be otherwise.

Along with these strengths, UPPs also present some critical issues that need to be addressed. According to practice teachers that guide UPPs in UCSC, most students' have trouble with the initial anxiety caused by having to «invent» a real project, without a precise model to reproduce or specific instructions to follow that «guarantee» a successful outcome. Social workers often address this experience in their practice, but the majority of students experience it for the first time when asked to start their UPPs. Some students can find the «looking and repeating» approach—typical of traditional field education—much more reassuring, so they can complain of not feeling guided enough. Also, feeling uneasy about having to develop a job that will not depend only on them, but also on their collaborators—people from the local community whom they will have to identify and involve. The first weeks can be hard, but negative feelings are usually overcome as projects take shape, and students realise they can actually succeed.

Another critical factor is time. All programs involving field education must be adapted to the progression of real work; while in traditional placements, students' tasks are quite predictable, this is not the case in UPPs, as these paths are often unknown. To reconcile university times (lectures, exams, and other deadlines) with the times of informal collaborators, volunteers, users and carers, people from local communities involved in projects can be difficult. In some cases, this problem can be solved by differentiating the time of the formal conclusion of a UPP (with the university exam) from the time when the student leaves the project. However, this strategy is not always feasible.

A further critical point is that the Italian professional social work community sometimes considered UPPs with a perplexing gaze. It is perhaps inevitable that a track less used, if at

all, would be considered with caution and suspected to be outside the realm of «real» social work. On the other hand, the development of professional social work requires navigating new territories and, in all societies and cultures, new generations will undertake this scouting. So, it is important to support new social workers and understand that they can provide good practices even in unusual contexts, as UPPs propose (Scholar et al., 2014).

Limits

This UPPs' description is based only in part on a systematic data collection, while some information derives from the authors' direct experience and informal narratives by practice teachers involved in guiding UPPs at UCSC. More rigorous qualitative data would be necessary for a study less influenced by the author's point of view. Quantitative data offer only an initial picture of UPPs, which should be expanded at least by collecting the opinion of involved people: students, citizens of local communities, services' users and carers, and professionals.

Conclusion

Although further studies are needed to evaluate the educational and social impact of the UPPs, the experiences carried out in UCSC for over a decade suggest that these unconventional placements are an effective training method to develop students' creativity and discretion, through the construction of shared projects. In UPPs, students find themselves *asking for help* from service users and carers, active citizens and local communities so that they collaborate in programs that are useful both for students' learning and for improvement in the well-being of users, carers and citizens themselves. Thus, UPPs open new avenues for social work practices: new workplaces in contexts where professional social work did not exist, and also new ways of understanding social help.

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