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Learning by Doing Within Communities: Experiences of Innovative Practice Learning in Social Work Education During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Learning by Doing Within Communities: Experiences of Innovative Practice Learning in Social Work Education During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: This paper refers to a practice learning method in social work education, called Unconventional Practice Placement (UPP), offered in the bachelor's and master's degree courses in Social Work at the Catholic University in Italy. During the UPPs, students work with a network of people (professionals from public or private organisations, service users, caregivers and members of the public) to create or implement innovative social interventions collaboratively. The health emergency and social distancing forced a significant redefinition of how UPPs are conducted. The article presents the findings from an online survey aimed at knowing how UPPs are defined and their specific characteristics, particularly, during the Covid-19 pandemic. The participants are 511 social work students. This paper focuses on a comparison between the UPPs conducted before and during the pandemic. Most of the students performed social interventions in Northern Italy, the area most affected by the first wave of the pandemic. Nevertheless, the number of people involved in social planning increased considerably compared to the previous academic years. Despite social distancing, digital tools made it possible to carry out community social work and group work. However, these tools also showed some limits, particularly about the involvement of people in vulnerable conditions. Furthermore, this paper highlights the role of social workers and local community resources in the Covid-19 pandemic, thus proving that UPPs could be a valuable model for training future social workers to cope with crises.

Keywords: Social Work Education, Practice Learning, E-learning, Social Work Disaster

Introduction

This article presents an innovative practice learning experience, proposed by the Catholic University of Milan and Brescia in Italy, called Unconventional Practice Placements (UPPs). It also describes the findings from a survey online aimed at knowing how UPPs are defined and their specific characteristics during the Covid-19 pandemic. This innovative practice learning experience proved to be a field learning opportunity that connected students, universities and local communities.

Starting from a brief introduction about the role of social workers in emergency and disaster situations, this study presents a synthetic theoretical framework on Social Work Education, particularly during the Covid-19 emergency. Such presentation is followed by a description of the UPP experience and the reflections emerged from the analysis of the data collected through the research study. Starting from the Social work students' views, this study indicates that, despite the pandemic, practice learning experiences enabled students to work with local communities, and that the UPP model proved to be useful for training social workers to deal with emergencies.

Social Work during emergencies

Promoting local community skills for coping with human-made and natural disaster is one of the social work functions included in The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development from the beginning (ISFW, 2012). The relevant research highlights that, in many countries, social workers have been active in supporting people organising and making help interventions more accessible, especially for the most vulnerable groups (Zakour, 1997). However, despite their commitment, their work has rarely been publicly acknowledged (Dominelli, 2015). In emergency contexts, social workers can intervene at various levels, such as casework, group work and community work, soliciting and devising interventions and coping strategies. Their action is based on the need to satisfy people's primary needs, providing psycho-social support, information on rights and facilitating the connections among the different agencies and services (Sanfelici & Mordeglia, 2020). Social workers' specific skills make them capable of facing situations characterised by uncertainty and lack of control (Calbucci et al., 2016). Community social work is essential as it develops and strengthens ties, social cohesion, and solidarity thus helping mitigate the consequences of emergency situations. Moreover, such work is particularly important for the most vulnerable people (Mathbor, 2007). In this sense, it is essential to guarantee the involvement of people in the definition and implementation of social interventions

that respond to real needs (Sanfelici et al., 2020) and promote the empowerment and resilience of communities (Harms et al., 2020).

When carrying out social work practices during crises, resilience is not considered only as an attribute pertaining to individuals and groups but also as related to the contextual interactive dimension, the available resources, structural conditions and people's ability to cope with adversity (Paton and Johnston, 2006). Drolet and colleagues (2015) define resilience as a concept that should be considered in a holistic-relational framework, according to a global and ecological approach (Ungar, 2013), observing and sustaining the relationships and the interactions between individuals, communities and environment. Hence, social workers' role is to facilitate and enhance people's and groups' coping strategies, providing support, both at methodological level and through resources (Dominelli, 2015). Collective actions, accompanied by the concrete support from institutions and governments, are essential to enhance the social capital, a fundamental element for building collective efficacy in facing risky situations. In fact, community social workers act at the intersection point of people, society and environment, with the purpose of assessing community resources and increasing recovery skills (Ersing, 2020).

The need to contain the emergency could lead to adopt an oppressive approach, not respectful of people's values and their self-determination skills (Dominelli, 2015). Consequently, it is crucial to train future social workers in managing increasingly frequent emergencies. Their training should promote skills that help them deal with highly stressful and complex contexts, such as creating and implementing group work experiences and conducting research to acquire in-depth knowledge on specific contexts (Harms et al., 2020; Wodarski, 2020).

According to Dominelli (2021), emergencies are an important opportunity for social workers to support human rights, promote social justice and act ethically. The international literature (Banks et al., 2020) shows that, when performing social work, emergencies give rise to ethical challenges. Facing them involves balancing people's right to be supported with the risks that social workers face while performing their work during emergencies. On the one hand, social workers are on the front line, close to people, groups and communities; on the other hand, they feel - and actually are - at risk while performing their job. Therefore, social workers need to make choices in carrying out their professional tasks at their discretion. However, disaster training is hardly offered in bachelor's and masters' degree courses in Social Work (Mathbor, 2007).

The pandemic raised important questions both on the methods of providing social work education and on its objectives, which should meet the need

to train social workers capable of responding to the emerging challenges of society.

Social Work Education and Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic had a strong impact globally, changing, sometimes even radically, everybody's daily life. Governments worldwide have taken substantial measures to contain and limit infections by planning massive interventions, including lockdowns. These measures, based on physical distancing, have also deeply affected the academic world. Therefore, universities had to quickly turn traditional teaching (based on face-to-face interaction) into online teaching. Technology and digital platforms have played a crucial role in learning processes. However, this transformation calls for a reflection on future social workers' skill and relational skill acquisition processes (Papouli et al., 2020). This is especially true for practice learning experiences, which underwent several modifications to compensate for the problems triggered by the pandemic. Various solutions were implemented, such as, for example, the suspension of social services, online work or the anticipation of social workers' entry into the world of work (McLaughlin et al., 2020). The literature review (Linh et al., 2020; Nguyen & Foster, 2018; Papouli et al., 2020; Pentaris et al., 2020) highlight the difficulties educators and students faced during the transition from traditional to new teaching methods. In particular, in social work education, specific problems were met related to learning through interpersonal relationships and group work. After a preliminary adjustment period, Social Work degree courses quickly managed the transition to online teaching with student satisfaction. While this strategy proved successful in guaranteeing teaching and practice learning experiences, it also highlighted the effects of students' digital exclusion (Pentaris et al., 2020). Indeed, those who did not have the necessary resources to virtually access university activities were more disadvantaged and isolated (Linh et al., 2020; Nguyen & Foster, 2018; Smoyer et al., 2020; Cabiati et al., 2021). Although the restrictions left educators and students without a physical space for meetings and discussion, technology offered the opportunity to stimulate the creativity of professionals, educators and students (McLaughlin et al., 2020). In many universities worldwide, initiatives aimed at promoting student well-being have been recorded, such as dedicated listening occasions and group activities (Smoyer et al., 2020). In turn, social work students took part and/or started social and solidarity initiatives to support their communities in facing the pandemic in the most challenging months. For example, some Greek students initiated or participated in various initiatives offering support in daily life, material assistance, emotional support, and acquiring and disseminating information on services available

to the community (Papouli et al., 2020). In this challenging time, social work values, such as social justice, integrity, competence and service to humanity (IFSW, 2018), were a source of inspiration for educators and students. They dealt with the health emergency by promoting the development of initiatives and new operational paths, which proved to be crucial for social work and local communities (Archer-Khun et al., 2020).

In summary, the pandemic paved the way for new experiments by starting reflections and re-elaborations useful for the future of the profession and social work education.

Unconventional Practice Placements: future social workers supporting their communities

An UPP is a practice learning experience in social work education, started more than a decade ago within the bachelor's and master's degree courses in Social work at the Catholic University of Milan and Brescia (Italy). During the UPP experience, students are asked to network with a group of people (professionals from public or private organisations, service users and family members, citizens) to plan and implement an experimental project in social work. Students promote and guide a participatory planning process to cope with social problems shared with their interlocutors (Calcaterra & Raineri, 2015; Raineri, 2015; Raineri & Sala, 2019). In traditional internships, students are asked to observe and carry out activities and tasks that the supervising social worker usually carries out. In UPPs, instead, students are asked to experiment with greater autonomy in facilitating participatory planning processes, launched thanks to the involvement of people interested in taking action in view of the achievement of a shared purpose (Calcaterra & Panciroli, 2021). In other words, students are asked to give innovative contributions, through a process connected not only to their training needs but above all to the real needs of a community, in a dialogical process with various stakeholders: the University on the one hand and the public sector, the community, service users and professionals on the other. An UPP is, in some respects, similar to Service Learning experiences (Nadel et al., 2007; Schelbe et al., 2014; Petracchi et al., 2016), with which it shares the possibility of developing interventions of social utility and, at the same time, the acquisition of professional skills for the students in training. We can find some similarities with a particular form of field learning developed in the UK, named *non-traditional placement* (Doel, 2010; Scholar et al., 2012; McLaughlin et al., 2014).

In August 2020, the International Federation of Social Workers updated the Global Standards for Social Work Education and training. They highlighted how, among the tasks of social work education, there is that of contributing “to the advancement of the Social Work profession and the em-

powerment of communities within which a school strives to operate (locally, nationally and internationally)” (IFSW, 2020, para.1). In Italy as well, there is a growing number of experimental placements in contexts where social workers are not necessarily present and the work done in partnership with other professionals, volunteers, and service users is crucial (Allegrì, 2021).

The theoretical and methodological framework of the UPP training is Relational Social Work (Cabiati, 2016; Folgheraiter, 2004; 2017). Its fundamental principles and key ideas are reciprocity in helping relationships, participation of users, family members and active citizens and their empowerment. Although students help people, groups and communities sharing a difficult life situation, a concern or a desire for improvement, they are helped, in turn, by this people to identify the most effective ways to do it. In this sense, at every stage of the process, UPPs are characterised by virtuous encounters between technical knowledge and experiential knowledge and an effort to promote the actual participation of the people involved in a specific problematic situation.

UPPs start from the students’ knowledge and understanding of a specific community, where they search for possible collaboration in planning and implementing a social project. Community profiling work (Twelvetrees, 1991) allows students to meet community members, practitioners, and other potential interlocutors to discuss community resources, concerns, and/or desire for improvement. Thanks to this preliminary phase, it is possible to catalyse the “guiding group”, which consists of a small group of people who know the community through their professional commitment or direct experience as members of the community. The guiding group helps the student define a shared goal and identify other partners interested in coping with the problem.

Subsequently, the students and their collaborators continue in the participatory planning process, defining objectives and action strategies consistent with the shared goal. The project is conceived, implemented and monitored thanks to the partnership with professionals, active citizens and volunteers of associations and/or informal groups, current and former service’s users, users’ family members and carers.

UPPs involve group work with other students, facilitated by a University tutor, qualified as a social worker. The group work purpose is to promote a discussion on project ideas, the methodological steps to be followed to implement interventions, the ongoing experiences and professional skills acquired through the UPPs (Corradini et al., 2020). Group work with other students is offered as an interactive workshop for the entire duration of the academic year. Students can also avail themselves of individual or sub-group supervision interviews conducted by a University tutor. Participation in groups and the support of University tutors are based on the principle of “reciprocity in

teaching and learning” (Cabiati, 2017, p. 74), whereby students learn from an equal debate with peers and tutors.

UPPs during the Covid-19 pandemic

The health emergency forced us to rethink the ways of implementing UPP experiences. In the 2019-2020 academic year, students and tutors questioned themselves about the effective possibility of initiating participatory planning at the time of physical distancing and lockdowns. It’s possible to speak of a real “offset” experience (Gui, 2020), as the contexts in which the practice learning were usually carried out were no longer accessible. Furthermore, the tools for social planning and teaching were no longer valid. After an initial collective reflection, the students accepted the UPP challenge. Despite (and perhaps because of) the health emergency, they made themselves available to local communities to support them so that the need they expressed could find an answer. Some of the students managed to continue the social planning paths started before the pandemic, albeit using new meeting modalities (online meetings, use of social media) and with short interruptions.

Many students, instead, decided to promote paths aimed at supporting people and families affected by the countless consequences of the pandemic (such as loneliness, stress, social isolation, balancing of private life and work), and/or entities and associations directly involved in the coping of the health emergency. The result was the beginning of field learning experiences defined as *UPPs in an emergency setting*.

Other students took the opportunity to carry out social research to know the emerging needs of groups and communities or how social services had reorganised following the health crisis. The students involved in social research were asked to share their purpose and methods with the guiding group members, with a view to participation and sharing.

As UPPs had to change to adapt to the new situation, some ethical challenges emerged. It was necessary, in fact, to balance the need to offer students the opportunity to carry out practice placements with the risk of exposing them to Covid-19. In order to cope with these challenges, University tutors asked students to comply with the ongoing Covid-19 restrictions during their practice placements. Moreover, students had the option of choosing the path that would make them feel more comfortable.

The support and methodological supervision by the University tutors were guaranteed for the entire duration of the educational experience. Since March 2020, group work and supervision interviews with students have been conducted remotely. Given the physical distance, meetings were organised in thematic sub-groups to facilitate comparison and mutual help among peers.

Research purpose and methodology

The creativity and energies promoted by the social planning initiated thanks to the UPP internship experiences, over the years, offered valuable learning opportunities to the students and development and well-being to the communities involved. Given the originality of these paths, in April 2019, the “Relational Social Work” Research Centre of the University launched a quantitative research aimed at describing the UPPs carried out by the students of the bachelor’s and master’s degree courses in Social Work of the Catholic University of Milan and Brescia. In particular, the research envisaged the creation of an online survey based on the following research question: “how is the Unconventional Practice Placement defined and which are its defining characteristics?”. At the end of the practice learning experience, students were asked to fill in an online questionnaire. The questionnaire is mainly composed of closed questions to investigate the following areas: socio-demographic information, administrative issues, course of study, participatory planning process, the continuation of the project and any work proposals deriving from the UPP. Some open questions were also included to gather information on project aims, objectives and actions and the scope of the social work within which the project was carried out. The collected data were processed using the Spss- version 26 and Maxqda-2020 software. The research participants are 511 Social work students who performed their UPP experience between the a. y. 2015- 2016 and the a. y. 2019-2020. This study presents the data relating to the UPPs conducted by the Social work students during the a. y. 2019-2020. These data were analysed in light of the data relating to the UPPs conducted in the period of time between the a. y. 2015- 2016 and the a. y. 2018-2019.

The data were processed in compliance with the current legislation on privacy. The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical research standards established by the Ethical Code of the Catholic University (Chancellor Decree no. 9350/2011). Students were involved in the research after they received the evaluation by the University tutors and the data were anonymously collected and aggregated.

Findings

The research sample

Of the 129 Social work students who have performed the UPP experience during the 2019-2020 academic year, 120 students participated in the research. The response rate is 93%. The almost interviewees were female gender (99.2%) and were born between 1995 and 1998, and their average age is 25. The sample consists of 77 students who completed the UPP as part of

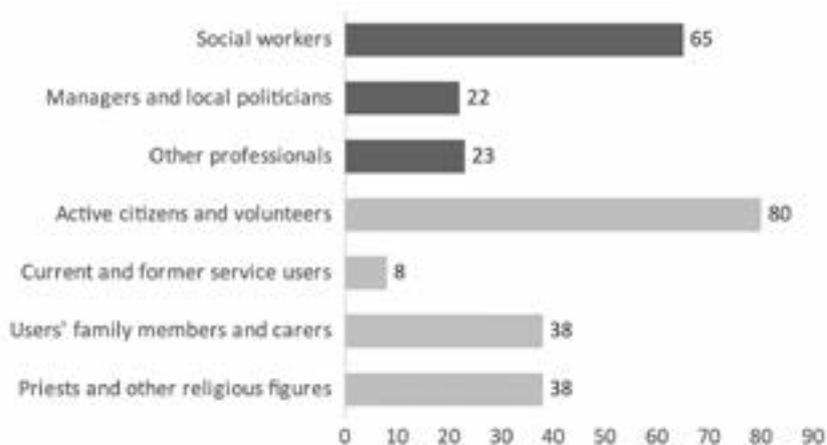
their bachelor's degree course and 43 students who conducted it during their master's degree course.

Most of the students (67.3%) conducted their UPP experience without a host organisation, outside structured institutions and social services. For 32.7% of cases, it was necessary to sign an agreement between the University and the host organisation, primarily non-profit. The bachelor's degree course students dedicated an average of 186 hours to the field learning experience, while those in the master's degree course 219 hours.¹

Steps of the participatory planning process

The first step required of Social work students is to identify people (professionals and non-professionals) interested in reasoning about common problems and/or concerns expressed by a group and/or a community. The data show that 60% of the people met in the initial phase are non-professional individuals, including members of the public and/or volunteers of associations (80), users and former users of social services (8), their family members and caregivers (38), as well as parish priests and other religious people (38). At the same time, the students also chose to refer to professionals, asking for help mostly from social workers (65). A total of 274 people were contacted to start the 120 UPPs (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 – First people contacted to start the practice learning



(N= 274; absolute values; multiple answers were allowed)

¹ As provided for in the Study Programme, the UPP of the bachelor's degree course includes 40 hours of classroom activities and 175 hours for the project implementation and the drafting of the final report. At the student's choice, it is possible to add 50 or 100 extra hours to the Study Programme to complete the internship. The UPP of the master's degree course, on the other hand, includes 40 hours of classroom activities and 210 hours for the project implementation and the drafting of the final report. At the student's choice, it is possible to add 75 or 150 extra hours to the Study Programme to complete the UPP.

After their first contact with professionals and community members, the students started the phase of catalysation of the guiding group and the consequent phase of planning the interventions. In this methodological step, students work in close collaboration with the interlocutors identified so far and whoever else expressed an interest in the addressed problem.

On average, guiding groups are composed of 5 to 6 people. The majority of those started in the a. y. 2019-2020 mainly comprises non-professionals (57.1%), confirming what had already emerged in the previous survey (a. y. 2015- 2019). Compared to previous years, the percentages of guiding groups made up equally of professionals and non-professionals (so-called homogeneous guiding groups; 24.4%) and guiding groups with a prevalence of operators is unchanged over the years (18.5%).

Regarding the UPPs created during the first stages of the health emergency, 678 people collaborated in various ways with the students to carry out the projects. As shown in Fig. 2, the students reported that in 96% of cases, the guiding group members were engaged mainly in the reflective planning and in 72% in the organisation and implementation of the project actions. The guiding group members actively supported the students in identifying additional people interested in the project, publicising the proposed initiatives and contributing to the continuation of the project at the end of the UPP.

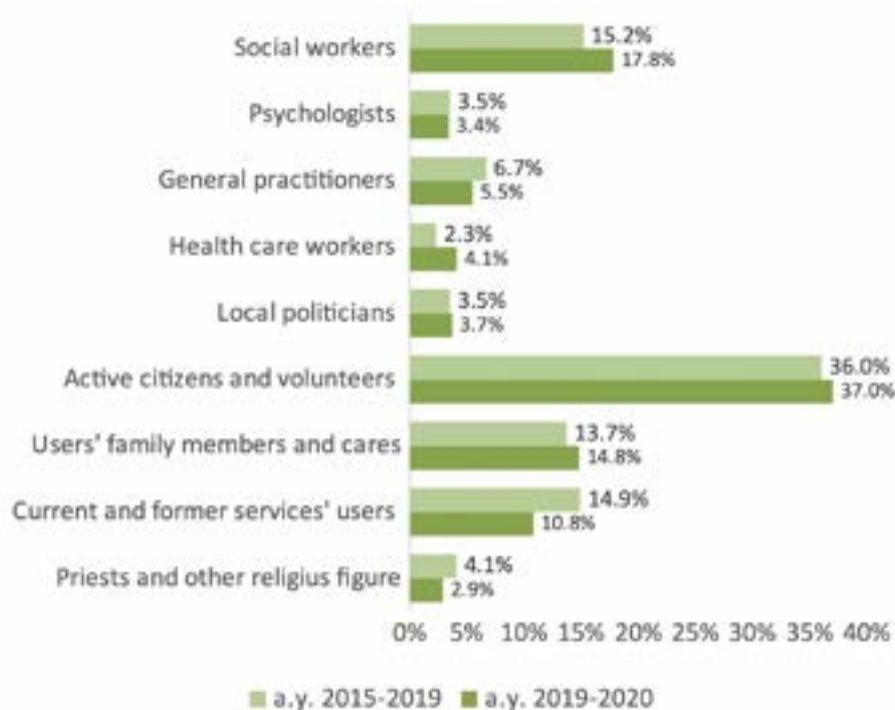
Fig. 2 – Types of tasks performed by guiding group members who collaborated with students for the UPP implementation (N=120, %)



The UPP experiences also saw the involvement of other people willing and motivated to contribute to the project implementation. These people, professionals but also members of the communities, are in total 465. In this regard, the interviewees report that in most cases, the collaborators exter-

nal to the guiding group helped them identify other people interested in the project (25%) and publicise the proposed initiatives (23.3%). Similar percentages are observed with the organisation and implementation of planned social interventions (20.8%) and the conception and planning phase (19.2%).

Fig. 3- Types of collaborators relating to the period between the a. y. 2015-2019 and the a. y. 2019-2020 (a. y. 2015-2019 N=1,845; a. y. 2019-2020 N=1,143; %; multiple answers possible)



Considering the guiding group members and the other people who collaborated on the project, the data show that a considerable number of professionals and community members were motivated and interested in coping with social concerns and needs. The data become even more relevant if compared to those of the previous survey, referring to the period 2015-2019. The latest survey revealed that 1,845 people collaborated with the students to carry out the UPP experience against the 1,143 involved in the academic year 2019-2020 alone. As shown in the graph (Fig. 3), in some cases, there is a percentage increase for some categories of collaborators, such as social workers, health care workers, active citizens and volunteers of associations, and users' family members and caregivers. However, the data show a decline in the involvement of service users and former service users (-4.1 percentage points).

The research also highlights the substantial number of people who, according to the students, benefited from the interventions and initiatives carried out thanks to the UPP projects. In the academic year 2019-2020 alone, the total number of recipients of the project actions is 7,990; on average, each UPP project saw the involvement of 66.6 people who participated and benefited from the initiatives promoted.

The findings reveal that almost all the projects continued after the end of the educational experience (80.7%) thanks to the contribution of the guiding group members, the students themselves (as volunteers or as paid practitioners) and by other collaborators who, for various reasons, decided to promote the project continuation. A proof of the usefulness and effectiveness of the projects promoted is that 5.1% of the UPPs received funding during their development or at their conclusion. These findings show how the projects succeeded in identifying and responding to the real needs expressed by the groups and communities involved and activating effective participatory planning processes that involved both professionals and community members.² Moreover, for 2.6% of the students, the training experience resulted in job opportunities as social workers. These findings, albeit small, become significant when considering that these UPPs were performed at the time of the pandemic.

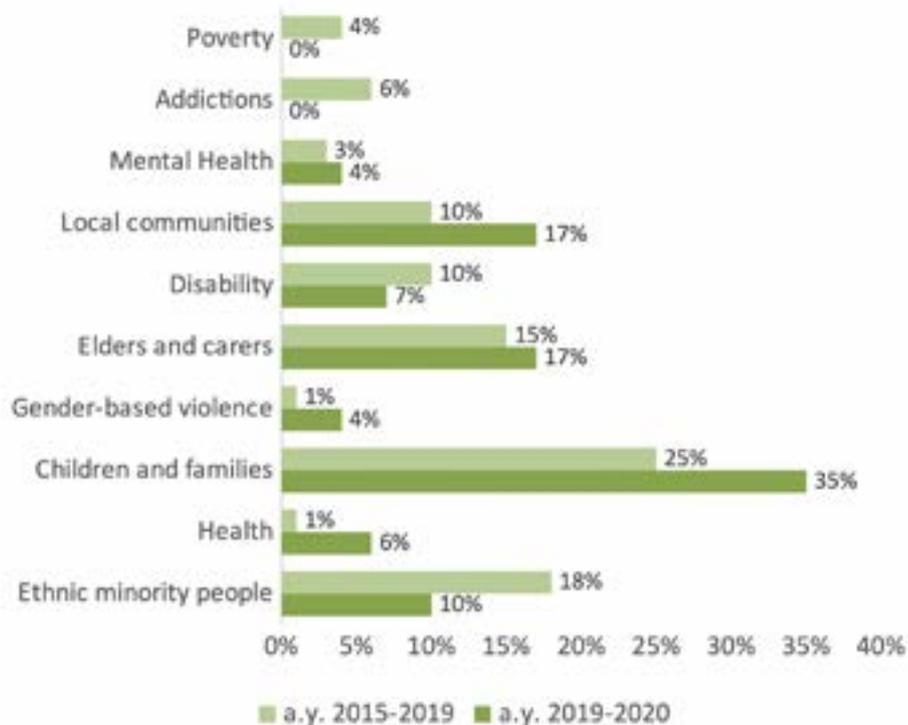
Project aims and initiatives carried out

The analysis of the open questions made it possible to obtain further specific information on the UPP implementation, which is quite relevant when compared with the data collected in the 2015-2019 period. The first data concerns the prevalent work area of the practice learning experiences (Fig. 4): the majority of UPPs (35%) carried out interventions aimed at supporting children, adolescents and their families, also with the involvement of schools of different types and levels. In this regard, there is an increase of 10 percentage points compared to the previous survey. Likewise, there was a significant increase in UPPs aimed at local community members without a specific area being identified. Most of these practice learning experiences had the purpose of supporting people and families belonging to a local community in dealing with the problems created by the health emergency. Moreover, there was an increase in projects carried out in the health sector, aimed at people with Covid-19 or the practitioners who took care of them. However, the more specific areas of intervention (such as migration, mental health, and addictions) were considerably reduced, probably also due to the closure of many specialist services during the lockdown. About the goals of the UPP

² The funding was both financial (provided by profit and non-profit organisations and public tenders), and in materials, facilities and paid staff that allowed the realisation of the planned activities and their continuation.

projects (Fig. 5), the research highlights that almost 30% of the UPPs have as their primary purpose the promotion of mutual support among people sharing similar difficult situations. This finding is consistent with the past and documents the effort to enhance reciprocity and people's resources. However, the pandemic situation brought about significant changes compared to other possible project purposes.

Fig. 4 - Main work area, a. y. 2015-2019 and a. y. 2019-2020 (a. y. 2015-2019 N = 147; a. y. 2019-2020 N = 113; percentages)



It was considerably reduced the number of UPPs aimed at promoting the social inclusion of marginalised people and raising community awareness on specific problems. This data could be explained by the impossibility of physically being in the field and directly relating with the members of the concerned communities. However, there was a significant increase in research UPPs (from 2% to 20%) and in UPPs aimed at community problem solving, representing 23% of total UPPs.

The data show that in most cases (30%), the students, assisted by their collaborators, promoted group work experiences, including support and/or self/mutual help groups, primarily online.

Fig. 5 - Description of the project goals

| Project goals | Description of the project goal | a. y. 2015–2019 | a. y. 2019–2020 |
|-------------------------------------|--|-----------------|-----------------|
| Community awareness | Community awareness campaign on a specific problem, both in terms of prevention and dealing with a problem. | 13% | 7% |
| Social inclusion | Promoting the inclusion of marginalised people in the community | 27% | 9% |
| Mutual support | Encouraging mutual support and/or socialisation among people who share a problem or belong to the same group. | 29% | 28% |
| Promoting active citizenship | Promoting people's engagement in their communities. | 7% | 4% |
| Community problem solving | Encourage dealing with specific community problems through collective actions. | 8% | 23% |
| Social service planning | Planning/organising/evaluating a service or professional practice with the collaboration of those directly involved. | 10% | 9% |
| Casework | Individually supporting people experiencing a specific problematic situation so that they can solve it. | 4% | 0% |
| Social research | Acquiring knowledge on a phenomenon using participatory research tools. | 2% | 20% |
| Tot. | | 100% | 100% |

As shown in Fig. 6, about a quarter of the UPPs initiated community awareness and concrete support actions for people and families in difficulties. In 15% of cases, workshop activities were also conducted. In the a.y. 2019-2020, the support interventions were prevalent compared to community awareness campaigns and training activities. However, activities promoting socialisation and aggregation through the organisation of social events, supporting the actions of workgroups and recreational-sporting activities were considerably reduced, just as work at the level of casework has completely disappeared, which already constituted a residual part of the internship projects.

Fig. 6 – Social interventions in the a. y. 2015- 2019 and the a. y. 2019-2020 (a. y. 2015-2019 N= 317; a. y. 2019-2020 N= 113; %; multiple answers possible)

| Project actions | Description of actions and events | a. y. 2015–2019 | a. y. 2019-2020 |
|---|--|------------------------|------------------------|
| Workshops | Group activities involving the creation of tangible things, such as videos, community gardens, and collective writing. | 16% | 15% |
| Support, awareness and/or training actions | Activities aimed at raising awareness and informing the community on a specific problem and/or supporting people and families in difficulties. Such as Italian language courses for foreigners, social counters, support telephone lines. | 26% | 23% |
| Self-help groups | Support meetings with people who share the same problem or belong to the same group. | 15% | 30% |
| Social events | Activities aimed at socialisation, aggregation and the development of bonds. Such as neighbourhood parties, trips, and social lunches. | 16% | 5% |
| Recreational activities | Activities in which play and/or sport were used to achieve the project goals. Such as tournaments, matches, prize games. | 7% | 5% |
| Workgroup support | Activities in which students worked with one or more pre-existing groups to design and/or redesign an intervention or a service or verify the progress of an initiative. Such as drafting of inter-service protocols, supporting groups of volunteers, experimenting with innovative professional practices. | 12% | 6% |
| Social research | Research on social work to explore needs, evaluate services, acquire knowledge on a specific problem through questionnaires, interviews or focus groups. | 5% | 16% |
| Casework interventions | Activities aimed at improving the situation of a single person and/or family unit. Such as interviews, job placement or the start of professional internships. | 3% | 0% |
| Tot. | | 100% | 100% |

UPP experiences from the students' perspective

The research was a significant opportunity to collect the point of view of Social work students on the educational experience conducted. In particular, they were asked to talk about their UPP project, the group work experience performed in the classroom, and the supervision interviews with the University tutor.

Almost all the students stated that their conceived and implemented project achieved the objectives set during the planning phase (97.5%). The participatory planning process and the joint implementation of the project also had unexpected positive outcomes (98.8%). Besides, 96.6% of students declared that they achieved a good level of participation in the initiatives proposed by those directly involved, thus confirming the potential of this educational experience in encouraging the activation of community members, family members and caregivers in coping with shared concerns.

Regarding the students' opinion on the group work experience conducted in the classroom, most interviewees had a favourable opinion about the usefulness of group meetings. Specifically, 83% of 120 students stated that they felt listened to during the meetings, and 77.5% said they had received the information necessary to face the educational experience better. In addition, 76% of the students also stated that they felt useful in supporting other classmates during the reflection on the planning phase. Similar results were found for the supervision interviews with the University tutor. 83% of the students interviewed stated that these interviews were crucial for the success of the UPP experience. The survey also found that most students felt listened to by the University tutor (83%) and believed they had received helpful information (84%) for the activities to be carried out. These results are in line with previous years' data.

Discussion. Social work students as promoters of group and community resilience

Before discussing the research results, it is important to premise that they refer exclusively to the context in which the research was carried out and, therefore, they cannot be generalized. However, they can provide useful insights for contexts different than the Italian one.

Practice learning experience during the early stages of the pandemic represented a challenge for everyone: for the students who were required to connect with people interested in addressing common concerns in a period of social distancing and restrictions; for University tutors, who supervised and supported the students in their educational experience; for the communities affected by the pandemic and in a status of great vulnerability; for welfare services, engaged in the management of old and new social needs. Nevertheless, this research shows how much the students were able to face an experimental and innovative practice learning experience in an unprecedented, emergency context characterised by uncertainty for everybody.

The research shed light on the following key elements. First of all, the validity of the Service learning approach (Schelbe et al., 2014; Tapia, 2009) even during a pandemic. The ability of students to make themselves avail-

able to communities, with a listening and project co-construction attitude, shows how the Relational social work approach provided valuable tools to implement practice placement experiences even during Covid-19. The students stated that they could achieve the project objectives. They described a positive learning experience, which made them feel useful to the people they collaborated with and their classmates.

The survey highlighted that professionals and members of the communities were proactive in helping students develop UPP projects in a participatory and collaborative perspective and in taking care of their member of the communities. In this regard, it is important to recall that, in the 2019-2020 academic year, 1,143 people participated in the UPP experiences as collaborators. The findings of the research must also be considered in light of the pandemic that hit Italy. Besides, the same communities, albeit severely hit by the pandemic and professionals, have actively collaborated in the implementation of the UPPs. The most considerable number of UPPs was conducted in Lombardy. As the literature on social work and disasters suggests (Dominielli, 2015; Calbucci et al., 2016), the students were able to identify the communities' real needs and respond to them by implementing a collaborative approach. According to the findings, 80.7% of the UPP projects continued after the educational experience. Furthermore, some of them were supported through funding and material resources provided by public and private social organisations and private citizens.

The research also shows that students favoured informal channels to identify the first possible collaborators to start their UPP project. The members of the families', friends' and community networks involved by the students proved to be available. They were motivated to share needs and desires for improvement and help to cope with the situation alongside the students. Social services were less ready to get involved in participatory planning with groups and communities, given the need to reorganise and the difficulties created by the entry into force of the restrictions to limit infections. Nevertheless, social workers contributed to crucial phases, such as community profiling. The comparison with the previous survey (a. y. 2015-2019), as mentioned before, shows a greater involvement of health and social practitioners, which proves that some of the UPP projects were conducted in the health sector in response to problems arising from the spread of the virus.

The UPPs analysed are a clear example of how social work can use modern technologies to promote and implement innovative social interventions in response to new needs (Smoyer et al., 2020). As shown in the reflections proposed by Archer-Kuhn and colleagues (2020), remote working, made possible by digital tools, did not prevent (indeed, it helped) students, professionals and community members from actively contributing to every stage of the project planning and implementation.

Undoubtedly, the need to perform the planning mainly online showed the full potential of tools such as virtual platforms and social media. The students managed to reach and involve a much higher number of people than in previous years. However, it was more challenging to involve service users and former users in the planning, as they are more subject to digital exclusion (Pentaris et al., 2020). Interestingly, the students felt listened to by the University tutor and had the perception of having supported their classmates in percentages equal to the previous years since the group meetings and supervisory interviews were conducted online. Digital transformation is a topic that needs to be explored for research and the education of social workers.

The pandemic modified, at least in part, the tools available for the implementation of UPP projects. However, the change also affected project aims and actions. The findings document how the students identified the concrete needs of local communities and tried to provide adequate responses through paths that could be defined “care paths”. Such paths aim at satisfying basic needs or coping with loneliness and isolation. We defined them as “UPPs in an emergency setting”. They dealt with problems - such as the elderly’s loneliness, young people’s and adolescents’ isolation, the families’ difficulties with distance learning - through concrete interventions (such as telephone support lines, supply of digital tools, assistance in handling paperwork). This evolution is consistent with what is described in the literature as one of the main tasks of social workers in times of emergency and crisis (Sanfelici & Mordeglia, 2020), together with the promotion of support groups and community social work (Harms et al., 2020). The students also referred to the research to explore the changes caused by the pandemic in groups and communities and learn about the living conditions of the most vulnerable people and the trend in services. This approach provides valuable tools and action strategies to modify future interventions on a scientific basis.

Conclusions

The research presented, although limited to a specific context, reminds us how communities can find new sources of energy during emergencies and crises and restore solidarity to cope with difficulties (Calcaterra & Panciroli, 2021). In this particular pandemic, students stimulated resilience processes in the groups and communities involved, which proved to be capable of “taking care” of themselves and their most vulnerable members.

In the light of these results, we can state that these experiences fuelled community resilience, as the students tried to strengthen the bond among community members and enhance their resources. Furthermore, we can also affirm that participating in these projects also reinforced the sense of com-

munity belonging and provided people trying to cope with difficult situations with some additional tools.

However, mutual concern and care are not always triggered spontaneously. Sometimes, conscious and reflective action is necessary to encourage the participation of people and the creation of networks connecting those who want to get involved in coping with shared concerns. The students supported groups and communities in identifying needs and resources, enhancing the existing community networks and activating new ones (both formal and informal) in response to the emerging needs. These experiences made it possible for them to learn fundamental skills for working in disaster conditions and showed the importance of considering this topic in the social work education of future social workers. Moreover, the UPP model proved to be a useful methodological tool for constructing participatory planning and research paths that met communities' real needs even in an emergency. Additional experimentation and research in social work education could be helpful to further evaluate the model effectiveness.

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