Becoming a relational social worker. Group learning in social work education: Considerations from Unconventional Practice Placements

Francesca Corradini
Catholic University of Milan, Italy

Camilla Landi
Catholic University of Milan, Italy

Paola Limongelli
Catholic University of Milan, Italy

Correspondence:
Francesca Corradini
e-mail: francesca.corradini@unicatt.it

Abstract

This paper highlights how Relational Social Work principles are applied in social work education. Particular attention is given to group work among the students in Unconventional Practice Placements (UPPs) at Catholic University in Italy. Indeed, the skills necessary to become a relational social worker are learned through group work. This paper is focused on the reflection of authors which derive from their accompanying work of the students and the reports written by the students at the conclusion of their UPP experiences. This article starts from a short overview of group learning in social work education and a brief summary of the UPP model, and then highlights how group learning strengthens students' practical learning progress while paying particular attention to the application of the principles of Relational Social Work to the process. In the end, paper shows the usefulness of group-learning methods for students of social work degree courses. Moreover, it appears to confirm that the Relational Social Work theory offers useful implications for promoting effective group learning.

Keywords

Group learning, relational social work, Unconventional Practice Placements, social work education.

Introduction

Relational Social Work (Folgheraiter, 2004, 2017) is a theoretical framework within the field of social work. The principles of the Relational Social Work theory are reciprocity, empowerment, recognition of experiential knowledge, and participation of service users in the planning of their social care interventions. These important principles are also applied to field-learning experiences in the social work degree course at the Catholic University.

Students learn the Relational Social Work theory in social work courses, and they put it into practice in the field-learning experiences that they have over the years. These experiences, indeed, are accompanied by group work among the students in the presence of a tutor who is a social worker. In these group meetings, equal exchanges and reciprocity between the participants are promoted and valued.

The field-learning experiences required by the bachelor's and master's degree courses in social work are numerous and differentiated. In the first year of the bachelor's degree course, an initial field experience of 75 hours is offered to students. This experience consists of initial direct contact with the concerns and needs typically faced by social workers and is aimed at clarifying students' expectations and attitudes. Students take part in projects and activities in social work fields, mostly sponsored by voluntary organisations. Students who participate in this experience also engage in group work facilitated by a tutor who is a social worker who is tasked with stimulating reflection and helping participants engage in a reflective process about their feelings related to their experiences in the field. A typical social work practice placement is offered in the second year of the bachelor's degree program. Students work alongside an expert social worker in a formal social service setting for 250 hours. This practical experience is also accompanied by work in small groups with the aim of promoting the exchange of views and experiences between students.

In the third year of the bachelor's degree course and in the second year of the master's degree program, an atypical practice placement is offered to students. This learning practice is known as «unconventional practice placement» (UPP). In UPPs, students work with a network of people (professionals, volunteers, citizens, service users, and caregivers) to plan and implement an innovative project/intervention in a collaborative way. In UPPs, students work in groups, facilitated by a tutor who is a social worker.

In summary, the training model of the Catholic University is complex because theory and practical experience are combined through traditional teaching methods and moments of reflection and group work among the students as well as self-assessment tools (Cabiati, 2017).

This article was written with the aim of highlighting how Relational Social Work principles are applied in social work education, particularly in UPPs. This paper is focused on the group work used to teach the skills necessary to become a relational social worker. The reflections included in this article are based on the accompanying work of the students

facilitated by the authors as tutors/facilitators and by the reports written by the students at the conclusion of their UPP experiences.

After presenting a short overview of group learning in social work education and a brief summary of the UPP model, we attempt to highlight how group learning strengthens students' practical learning progress while paying particular attention to the application of the principles of Relational Social Work to the process.

A brief overview of group learning in social work education

The use of group work among students is widespread in social work education (Baldwin, 2000). It has been studied particularly thoroughly with respect to specific training for working with groups of service users, e.g. in residential facilities and day care centres (Skolnik, 2019). However, the use of group work among students in social work education can also be considered a tool for developing useful skills in case work and community work, given that, even at the case and community levels, social workers must frequently interact with various groups of people (Raineri, 2017).

In general, the authors (Birnbaum & Auerbach, 1994; Drumm, 2006; Wong et al., 2019) emphasise how students' preparation for conducting social work in groups is lacking because of the prevailing generalist approach in social work education (Papell, 2015). The research shows that the most effective way to transmit the necessary skills of group work to students is to require them to participate in direct experiences with teamwork (Clements, 2008; Skolnik, 2019) in which theory and practice are intertwined. Experiential learning mainly refers to the Kolb model (1984), a circular model in which concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation intertwine in the learning process (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 194). Group learning in social work education can include various modalities, such as role-playing (Domenech-López & Giménez-Bertomeu, 2020), intervision groups (Staempfli & Fairtlough, 2019), or the conceptualisation of the class itself as a group (Gutman & Shennar-Golan, 2012; Humphrey, 2014). There are documented cases of students working in a peer-to-peer group with a tutor acting as a facilitator (Warkentin, 2017; Calvo-Sastre, 2019; Wong et al., 2019; Domenech-López & Giménez-Bertomeu, 2020).

Group learning in social work education has various objectives. Baldwin (2000) highlights some specific dimensions: (1) facilitating cooperative learning through the use of feedback; (2) helping students develop the ability to work in a team and reinforcing communication, listening, and conflict-management skills; and (3) creating dynamics of mutual trust and help, which help students cope with stressful moments in the learning process. Group learning also promotes the development of a reflective practice (Schön, 1983) through dialogue and exchange. According to Milne and Adams, the group offers a space in which students can «explore, reflect upon and gain understanding about their

experiences» (2015, p. 78). Calvo-Sastre (2019) emphasises the importance of a cooperative approach through which students can learn and put into practice skills that will be useful in their future profession, working together to «create a space of confidence» and «build positive interdependence among students» (p. 8).

Critical issues with and benefits of group learning in social work education

Encouraging group work among students helps build a strong connection between theory and practice because they directly experience the significance of participating in a group and gain an opportunity to put the skills they have acquired into practice (Humphrey, 2014; Milne & Adams, 2015; Wong et al., 2019), particularly that of facilitation (Gutman & Shennar-Golan, 2012).

Group learning creates a climate of support and trust, which helps students manage uncertainty, especially in contexts that generate anxiety (Calvo-Sastre, 2019). Students also gain self-confidence (Warkentin, 2017) and learn to collaborate (Wong et al., 2019) in this context. Students work together to maximise their own learning and that of others (Calvo-Sastre, 2019). In this sense, Wong et al. (2019) mention mutual learning, which «was demonstrated when the classmates exchanged views, asked questions, gave feedback or even challenged one another» (p. 151). In the group context, students can recognise their own skills and learn from each other (Warkentin, 2017).

Some research has focused on students' perceptions of group learning: in general, students show a high degree of satisfaction with working in a group (Gutman & Shennar-Golan, 2012; Milne, 2015; Domenech-López & Giménez-Bertomeu, 2020), especially with respect to acquiring the skills necessary to structure and facilitate a group (Humphrey, 2014). In Warkentin's research (2017), students recognised their growth not only in terms of technical skills, but also in terms of self-confidence and awareness of their abilities and limitations. They also recognised that mistakes are a legitimate part of the learning process and that it is beneficial to take realistic risks (p. 241). In another study (Wong et al., 2019), a connection was observed between the degree of student satisfaction with group learning and students' ability to cooperate within the group beyond the prompting of the tutors.

In some research (Baldwin, 2000; Wong et al., 2019), critical views also emerge: some students report that working in a group has hindered their learning instead of supporting it. According to Baldwin (2000), this could result from the difficulty of these students in recognising the strengths of group work, especially in the context of a culture that promotes individual learning and accentuates competition with others. In the study by Wong et al. (2019), negative experiences are instead connected to an unsupportive, critical attitude among tutors.

Tutor as a facilitator

It is evident that the role of the tutor is fundamental in building an adequate learning context. Accordingly, many authors (Kolb & Kolb, 2017; Warkentin, 2017; Calvo-Sastre, 2019) recognise the importance of leaving the classical context of frontal teaching and allowing the tutor to assume a guiding role. As Calvo-Sastre states, «The professor takes on the combined role of facilitator, subject expert, evaluator, and coach», building a welcoming and cooperative learning space (2019, p. 4).

Students learn facilitation techniques by observing tutors (Gutman & Shennar-Golan, 2012) who show them what to do without acting for them (Warkentin, 2017). Personal and professional characteristics are also important: the tutor must be knowledgeable, supportive, and capable of providing encouragement and stimuli to guide the group in the correct direction and manage internal dynamics (Wong et al., 2019). In addition to these characteristics, according to Kolb and Kolb (2017, p. 39), the tutor must know how to treat students «as equals» and show genuine interest in them.

As part of social work education, Cabiati (2017, p. 74) underlined how the principles of Relational Social Work have led to a «relational teaching and learning approach» in which it is important to encourage the maximum possible degree of reciprocity between tutors and students, even in the university context. The involvement of experts in the courses and work within peer-to-peer groups leads students to experience egalitarian relationships, allowing them to become involved personally and enhance their experiential knowledge. The intent of applying this approach is to develop students' reflexivity and critical thinking and help students distance themselves from a deterministic approach to social problems (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2012).

Unconventional Practice Placement: An atypical approach to learning typical social work skills

Unconventional practice placement is a practice learning experience that has been integrated into Catholic University social work courses since the 2008/2009 academic year.

The defining characteristics of UPPs have been inspired by various international experiences with atypical practice placements, particularly non-traditional placements in the UK (Skills for Care, 2009; Scholar et al., 2012, 2014; Hek, 2012; Doel, 2014; McLaughlin et al., 2014) and service-learning in the USA (Nadel, Majewski, & Sullivan-Cosetti, 2007; Petracchi et al., 2016).

Raineri and Sala (2019) offer a description of the main elements of UPPs:

> 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 (p. 8).

The principal characteristics of UPPs can be summarised in three key terms/phrases: autonomy, social innovation, and a collaborative approach. The student must exhibit a high level of autonomy and identify contexts in which to design and implement innovative social work interventions. However, autonomy does not equal solitude. Indeed, according to the Relational Social Work theory, students must identify potential partners interested in collaborating in the planning of innovative projects to cope with community-wide problems. The student guides the group of people involved in the design and implementation of *new* projects.

These two short examples show how students can experience their UPPs:

Silvia was interested in working with children with ADHD diagnoses. At the start of her unconventional placement, her first step was to contact a manager of a sports association particularly sensitive to the topic of ADHD and Terry, the mother of a boy with this diagnosis.

In the second step, the student contacted other associations and other parents of ADHD children, also through online social networks. In talking to these people, great loneliness and the need for information emerged from the parents of children diagnosed with ADHD.

Silvia, along with the manager of the sports association and Terry, organised an initial meeting on the topic of ADHD. Eleven parents of children with ADHD took part in the initiative. At the end of the meeting, the participants expressed their desire to continue meeting and to share their experiences. The reflections among people interested in the topic led to the creation of a self-help group facilitated by Silvia and Terry. For the past several months, the group has met every two weeks and has become an important point of reference in the community.

Michela was aware of the degraded conditions in the neighbourhood of the city where she lives. The student met all the people and organisations that had an important role in the neighbourhood (social workers, the parish priest, tutors, charity organisations) and some inhabitants of the area. These contacts and moments of discussion allowed Michela to get to know the local community, its needs, and its resources. The difficulty of integration between the various charity organisations, the fragmentation of the activities carried out in the neighbourhood, and a lack of dialogue between the inhabitants (young vs. old; Italians vs. other immigrants...) were the issues that characterised the community. Michela met with a social worker, two teenage boys, and two voluntary pensioners from

an association, all interested in reflecting with her on what to do to improve life in the area. Together, they decided to work to promote social cohesion among the inhabitants. The group decided to organise a neighbourhood party with activities for people of all ages. The party was planned and carried out in collaboration with some neighbourhood inhabitants and volunteers from charity organisations.

UPPs are supported by a classroom workshop in which students engage in group work to help each other during their UPPs. The group work of the students is facilitated by a social worker in the role of university tutor. The group work helps students to overcome the numerous challenges typical of UPPs (Raineri and Sala, 2019): first, unlike in typical practice placements, students are not placed with a formal organisation and do not have a supervisor who assigns them precise tasks. This often causes anxiety among students because they do not have a priori instructions for what they must do or how to do it. The fear of making mistakes is also connected to a final evaluation by a tutors' commission.

Moreover, students must define and implement a social work project along with professionals, volunteers, users, and citizens, but it is clear that, as students, they risk not being taken seriously by the other people involved, especially in institutional contexts.

Furthermore, it is important to consider that students may experience difficulties exercising appropriate skills in communicating with and facilitating a group during the planning process. In fact, UPPs often represent the first instance in which students have independently interacted with a group and facilitated a collective planning process, given that prior practice placement is often focused on casework. Therefore, group learning is also used to provide students with facilitation skills through a process of practical learning and direct experimentation. Classroom workshops are particularly similar to self-help groups (Steinberg, 1997), with the tutor assuming the role of facilitator.

During the classroom workshop, students develop additional reflections on professional learning derived from their fieldwork, and working together encourages and enables them to plan and improve their practice learning activities: this process is important in helping students connect social work theory and practice (Healy, 2014).

In this part of the paper, a reflection on the use of group learning to help students acquire the principles and key ideas of Relational Social Work is presented, and the role of relational guides is discussed.

Learning together and supporting one's peers

In the Relational Social Work theory, the first principle is that social problems «may often have solutions, but they can never be solved» (Folgheraiter, 2015, p. 220). The paths to improve problematic situations do not depend only on the expertise of the professionals involved but also on reflection on them by all those involved in the situation. The basis of the processes of change is this relationship, with an emphasis on mutual help (Calcaterra,

2017). According to principles of self-help and mutual aid (Steinberg, 1997; Calcaterra, 2013; Raineri, 2017), group work among students is characterised by peer exchanges between them. Therefore, students are encouraged to share their experiences freely and without guidelines. The group becomes a safe space where one can freely express doubts, questions, and difficulties. Comparing one's experiences with those of classmates helps students overcome stressful moments, mitigate anxiety, and develop confidence in their own abilities. On this theme, a student in the master's program said in her UPP report that:

> We have all contributed to the creation of a context without judgments within which each member has been able to freely report not only doubts and difficulties but also the positive results and satisfaction obtained from their work. (Sarah, UPP report, not published)

In this way, the group of students functions as a coping network according to the definition of the authors as «A set of relationships between people concerned about a shared aim, for example the aim of sorting out a social life problem» (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2017, p. 17). A fundamental characteristic of coping networks is equality: the contribution of each person is important to achieving the shared aim, thus there are no hierarchies. Within coping networks, professionals contribute scientific knowledge, while the persons involved are considered «experts by experience» and their knowledge is treated with the same dignity as that of professionals (Folgheraiter, 2007).

The aim of such group work among students is to impart professional skills, and the tool for achieving this aim is dialogue, which is intended as a reflective practice and as a means of mutual learning, according to Freire (1971). Through this modality, students are therefore invited to co-build an educational path in which each person takes responsibility for their own learning and contributes to improving the paths of others. Students have declared that they have learned lessons from classmates' interventions and, in turn, have come to view themselves as supporters, as Anna wrote in her UPP report:

> The group meetings during the unconventional practice placement were an authentic opportunity for self-help. Sharing the experiences that each of us had during the traditional practice placement was also useful for helping the others to learn. [...] In order to always learn new lessons, during each intervention by a colleague, I tried to ask myself, «What can I learn from what my classmate is telling me?». (Anna, UPP report, not published)

The theme of co-responsibility is linked to reciprocity, a fundamental concept in the Relational Social Work theory: if everyone contributes equally to reflection, everyone gives and receives help simultaneously. While being helped, the user takes on the role of a helper, and the professional is helped by the user (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2017). In the classroom workshop, reciprocity concerns not only the relationship between students but also that between the students and the tutor. The concept of reciprocity is described by students in various ways: on the one hand, the presence of emotional support is evident; on the other, each person's reflections become a learning opportunity for others, even when their experiences have been very different, as the students wrote in their UPP reports:

> The group [...] gives me the necessary security to feel like I'm not the only one with a «concern» [...] and therefore we encourage each other. (Jessica, UPP report, not published)

> Through these meetings, it was as if I had experienced the UPPs of my colleagues «behind the scenes» because, from their experiences, I always brought home some lessons, both when they said they had faced difficult situations and when they managed to get some excellent results. (Sofia, UPP report, not published)

The group learning method allows students to focus on and rework personal feelings linked to social intervention planning and realisation. The ability to share emotions is highly appreciated by students, who feel the confidence and security necessary to receive and give support. However, even in these circumstances, it follows that students are responsible for mutual requests for help. As in classic self-help groups, the support dynamics often transcend the context of the group, extending beyond it. Claudia and Andrea clearly expressed this sentiment in their UPP reports:

> The classroom workshop made a fundamental contribution to my learning, helping me avoid losing enthusiasm, helping me avoid becoming discouraged, and helping me start again in the face of obstacles, as well as providing me with feedback and addressing my doubts. (Claudia, UPP report, not published)

> The classroom workshop encouraged me to reflect not only during class but also outside the university context. During the group meetings, we told each other about our UPP experiences and this allowed us to use each other's experiences as food for thought. (Andrea, UPP report, not published)

Group learning helps students consolidate not only the technical skills necessary for group work, but, more generally, the skills necessary for a social worker who works in a relational context, including listening, paying attention, and encouraging an open dialogue. Students learn the importance of dialogue and open confrontation through direct experience, as a student in the master's program said at the end of her UPP:

> From every workshop meeting and from the thoughts of every classmate, I have always managed to learn a little lesson. This confirms the extent to which the dialogue and the continuous exchange of feedback play an important role in a profession like that of a social worker. (Michel, UPP report, not published)

In this sense, the students said they appreciated their UPPs more than traditional practice placement:

> Over the past few months, I have repeatedly asked myself how useful the traditional practice placement could be for my training, even compared to the classic traineeships expected in most other universities; it was only during the project that I understood and was able to appreciate, thanks also to the group meetings and constant comparisons with classmates, how useful this experience could be in our degree course. (Anna, UPP report, not published)

The group setting helps students re-examine the emotions that emerge during the phase of social care intervention planning and that result from the strong involvement required of the student. When required to develop social interventions through continuous reflection with many people, students experience strong uncertainty. Dealing with uncertainty is a central issue in Relational Social Work: in contexts of uncertainty, professionals also often encounter difficulties because they do not have predefined paths to follow. It is necessary to act in a creative and open way «to resist and actively combat an evil without knowing «how to do so» in advance» (Folgheraiter and Raineri, 2017, p. 18). When engaging in shared reflection and dialogue within coping networks, original, innovative paths, which often transcend the standardised interventions of formal services, can arise (Folgheraiter, 2015).

As in self-help groups, the collective problem-solving process (Folgheraiter, 2007; Steinberg, 2004) is used in workshop classrooms. This practice allows students to cope with the various steps of open, participatory design. Moreover, it helps each student work out the difficulties of the process. Making comparisons between multiple experiences allows the individual to identify the most suitable solution for his/her difficulties, and the entire group benefits from the reflections of all members. This issue is explained in the UPP report of a student in the master's program:

> I tried to take every opportunity to meet with others and share my concerns while also asking for opinions on what my collaborators and I were doing. The main concern about the UPP was that no one knew what would happen. We were in a state of uncertainty that could only be resolved through action and over time. [...] but the beauty of having a path that is not defined is that we have to build it together step by step. (Maria, UPP report, not published)

Within the group, students received opportunities to recognise and strengthen their personal skills and to begin to feel competent. The power dynamics typical of university contexts are attenuated, and participation in the group contributes to reinforcing student empowerment (Raineri, 2015), as a student in the master's program noted in her UPP report:

> Working with a lot of autonomy requires developing skills that have strengthened me. In fact, the UPP, like a double-edged sword, makes you independent, but it also makes you responsible. [...] Although I once would have responded to some dynamics with scepticism and mistrust, during this experience, I found myself feeling optimistic and confident, first in myself, and then in the project. (Teresa, UPP report, not published)

Rebalancing power within the relationship between professionals and users is a central topic in Relational Social Work. Folgheraiter speaks of «relational empowerment», which is defined as «a rebalancing of therapeutic and manipulative power in which the party with most of it (generally the professional practitioner) cedes some to the less empowered interlocutor so that she or he becomes more autonomous and active in dealing with the situation» (2015, p. 223).

The role of relational guide

The relational guide's role is another aspect that merits attention. In the theory of Relational Social Work, professionals are responsible for gathering motivated people and helping them interact, share goals and objectives, and make decisions. It is the role of «relational guide» that consists of facilitating the reflections and actions of the people involved (Folgheraiter 2011) without imposing his/her opinion. As Folgheraiter states, «To facilitate» is not to lead, coordinate, or command. A facilitator accompanies the action of these people and supports them in all the displays that she or he deems able to mitigate the problem' (2015, p. 224). The interventions of the relational guide take place mainly through feedback, which helps others reflect on the situation, stimulates dialogue, and directs everyone's actions towards achieving a shared aim.

In UPPs, this role is carried out by both the students and the tutor. The student is expected to perform the role in the field by promoting reflective processes with the collaborators with whom the entire design process is carried out. The people involved progress as equal partners and, beginning with a shared purpose, they initiate a participatory process. The relational guide takes on a predominantly non-directive style, although, if necessary, he/she can (and sometimes must) direct the network of people to achieve the goal that has been established. This is not easy for a student who finds himself/herself working with professionals and citizens for the first time. The members of his/her team are often older than him/her and have different professional, educational, and experiential backgrounds. The learning of facilitation skills is a central node for students. These skills can be observed and experimented with within group-learning settings and then replicated during the UPP field work. Marta, student in the master's program, mentioned this topic in her UPP report:

> I started to take ownership of the principles and challenges that a facilitator is called to face. First, the groups should not be led, but facilitated. I started to stimulate dynamics of mutuality with greater confidence. I managed to create the necessary conditions so that everyone could express themselves in total autonomy and freedom despite the difference in age. I gained greater awareness of group dynamics. [...] It was through these experiences, mainly due to the contributions that emerged during the group meetings with my classmates and my tutor, that I was able to guide the reasoning process of many people and implement a community social work project. (Marta, UPP report, not published)

The tutor takes on the role of a relational guide who facilitates group work among the students (Cabiati, 2016), supporting them in building their own educational path: the tutor guides the group towards the goal but accepts a degree of indeterminacy (Cabiati, 2017). The tutor shows students how to perform the role of the relational guide so that they can replicate it in practice learning contexts and, subsequently, in professional ones (Cabiati, 2016).

According to Folgheraiter (2011), the tutor, by supporting students in learning how to assume the role of relational guide, performs the role of «double guide», observing and guiding each student, who, in turn, observes, guides, and facilitates the network of people

involved in the UPP. Students can observe the guiding role at a distance, a practice that indicates the direction they should follow without imposing predefined routes. A student in the bachelor's program mentioned this topic in her UPP report:

> The tutor supports and helps from afar, encouraging us (students) to act. (Elly, UPP report, not published)

This role is also performed during the work that the tutor carries out with each student individually. In addition to classroom workshops, students have access to individual supervision interviews. In these interviews, the student is encouraged to reflect on his/her practice placement and plan future actions. In this context, the tutor does not evaluate the student. The interview techniques, such as reformulating ideas and giving feedback, are meant to promote self-awareness of the problematic issues to be overcome by students. Thus, in line with the aim of promoting as much autonomy as possible, participation in supervision interviews is an opportunity offered to students, not an obligation. A student in the master's program mentioned this topic in her UPP report:

> Supervision interviews have been the key. On the one hand, the supervision interviews allowed me to gradually confirm that my project was going in the right direction. On the other hand, they allowed me to overcome moments of stalemate in which I had difficulty understanding how to put social work theories into practice. They were also important meetings because I received support and guidance from the tutor in moments of despair. After participating in the supervision interviews, I had the feeling of being regenerated and felt the desire to roll up my sleeves and go on. (Federica, UPP report, not published)

Conclusions

The group-learning model of the Catholic University is inspired by the principles of Relational Social Work and provides a framework for its application. More specifically, group work among the students follows the self-help group model wherein the tutor undertakes the role of facilitator. The students share their experiences in the field in a peer-to-peer setting. In this way, the students collaborate to build their training pathway. In the group-learning experience proposed by the Catholic University, most of the elements that the literature defines as central to promoting social work education can be found. Indeed, it is evident that the group setting contributes to creating a mutually beneficial learning environment (Wong et al., 2019) in which students participate personally in the construction of their learning path (Warren, 2007) and are jointly responsible for achieving the learning outcomes of the whole group as both tutors and classmates. This leads to the development of cooperation and dynamics of trust among students (Baldwin, 2000; Calvo-Sastre, 2019) and to the perception of the group as a space where one can express his/her own concerns and overcome stressful moments without feeling judged (Warkentin, 2017; Wong et al., 2019).

The dynamics of mutuality present in the group context favour autonomy and individual growth. Students appreciate group learning (Gutman & Shennar-Golan, 2012) and claim to be supported in acquiring the skills needed to function as a social worker, particularly with respect to facilitation skills (Humphreys, 2014). Group work fosters empowerment among students because everyone takes responsibility for his/her own learning experience while simultaneously contributing to improving colleagues' pathways.

As highlighted in the literature (Kolb & Kolb, 2017; Warkentin, 2017), the tutor's role is central to guaranteeing the progress of learning. According to the relational approach, the tutor carries out the role of relational guide in the group of students. The tutor, as part of the learning group, guides the students toward a shared aim: learning the theoretical skills required to become a social worker. The tutor is responsible for creating a learning space in which students do not assume a passive attitude but take responsibility for co-building their educational paths, as Cabiati articulates: «Educators as Relational guides should encourage students to be collaborators in the project of helping themselves to become social workers» (2017, p. 75).

While maintaining awareness of the educational objectives students must strive to achieve, the tutor accepts a degree of indeterminacy (Cabiati, 2017). In this view, the facilitator role, in which the tutor treats the students «as equals» (Kolb & Kolb, 2017), prevails, encouraging mutual exchange. Following the principles of the Relational Social Work theory, reciprocity is maximised because even the tutor, in a dialogical and open atmosphere, learns from students to improve his/her skills in helping them determine their learning paths. In fact, within the group, students learn skills that will be useful in the future professional lives from both tutors and classmates and, at the same time, tutors learn skills that will help them better guide future students from the current students. In this view, the boundaries between those who teach and those who learn overlap (Cabiati, 2017), just as, in Relational Social Work, the boundaries between those who help and those who are helped are unclear (Folgheraiter, 2011).

In summary, it can be posited that the results of the classroom workshops in the UPPs experienced by students of the Catholic University appear to confirm the usefulness of group-learning methods for students of social work degree courses. In addition, the results appear to confirm that the Relational Social Work theory offers useful implications for promoting effective group learning.

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