The avengers: adolescents help adolescents to survive quarantine

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Abstract

This paper intends to present an Unconventional Practice Placement (UPP) experience, carried out remotely in a small town located in central-northern Italy, significantly affected by the pandemic. Through this experience, a student supported a group of adolescents in their reflection on the pandemic and, more specifically, on the discomfort caused by social distancing and lockdown. The presentation of this UPPs experience is based on the student's final report. A brief description of the project and the implementation process is followed by a methodological reflection on the possibility of applying the principles of Relational Social Work (RSW), even in a context in which it was not possible to meet people face-to-face.

Keywords

Unconventional Practice Placements, Relational Social Work, Adolescents, Covid-19 Pandemic, Online group work.

Introduction

In the context of social work education, practice placement experiences are fundamental as opportunities for future professionals to acquire the skills necessary for their work (Doel, 2010) and to connect theory and practice (Healy, 2014). For several years, The Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of Milan and Brescia has offered students attending the master's and bachelor's degree courses in social work an original path, called Unconventional Practice Placement (UPP) (Raineri & Sala, 2019; Corradini et al., 2020). UPPs are based on the Relational Social Work approach (Folgheraiter, 2004; 2017), and have the aim of applying the principles of «reciprocity, empowerment, recognition

of experiential knowledge, and service users' participation in the planning of their social care intervention» (Corradini et al. 2020, p. 16).

In UPPs, students have the task of developing a project in their local areas following the participatory planning approach (Panciroli, 2017). According to Raineri and Sala (2019, p. 8), the fundamental characteristics of UPPs are three:

> First, students should not reproduce professional social works that are already ongoing in the environment where their UPP is performed, as they are expected to carry out a «new» project. Second, students should develop initiatives related not only to their learning needs but also to *real* needs, which offer opportunities for the improvement of a community or service. Consequently, UPPs are based on a collaborative approach. Students' learning depends on the cooperation with the other people involved in their UPP (such as citizens, professionals, volunteers, services' users, carers, and family members) and, at the same time, these collaborators should also personally benefit from the students' work. A third specific feature of UPPs is the high level of autonomy required of students, even in relation to educational supervision. This means that, from the beginning, students are expected to conceive and develop the project themselves, through the required negotiation with the different stakeholders, i.e. their university on one side and citizens, communities, users and/or professionals and agencies, on the other.

These characteristics make the UPPs particularly suitable in group work and community work contexts, in which social planning interventions have the purpose of responding to the needs of a group of people in a specific area.

Between the end of February and the beginning of March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic heavily hit Italy, especially in the North. All activities were closed, university lectures and practice placement activities were suspended or carried out remotely. The students involved in the UPPs had to rethink their activities, which usually involved their active presence in local communities, and required a constant dialogue with citizens and institutions, and numerous meetings with the parties involved. Some students chose to suspend their activities while waiting to be able to resume them in person. Others, instead, replanned their projects and redefined their paths, to be able to implement them also during the lockdown period, which lasted four months, from March to June 2020. Many of these students decided to make their UPPs available to address the new needs created by the health emergency, particularly focusing on the most vulnerable people, such as older people, families living in poverty, children and teenagers.

This paper intends to present a UPP experience, carried out remotely in a small town located in central-northern Italy, significantly affected by the pandemic. Through this experience, the student supported a group of adolescents in their reflection on the pandemic and, more specifically, on the discomfort caused by social distancing and lockdown.

The presentation of this UPPs experience is based on the student's final report. A brief description of the project and the implementation process is followed by a methodological reflection on the possibility of applying the principles of Relational Social Work (RSW), even in a context in which it was not possible to meet people face-to-face. We

tried to highlight whether and to what extent it was possible through virtual meetings to promote the participation and empowerment of vulnerable people, such as adolescents who attend a day care centre.

The Unconventional Practice Placement project

In November 2019, the student, named Hillary, contacted a day care centre located in a small town in Lombardy to start her UPP project. The centre, open in the afternoon, welcomed teenagers between the ages of 11 and 16, who could do their homework and various socialisation activities in its premises. Two educators and some volunteers from a local association ran the centre. Hillary immediately felt comfortable and welcomed. She met with the educators and teenagers and began to think with them about possible paths to be activated through the UPP. The majority of the concerns shared with the student regarded bullying and confrontational relationships experienced by the teenagers of the centre at school. Just as these reflections were starting, the health emergency forced to rethink not only the meeting methods but the issue itself, as it was closely connected to school attendance, which had been suspended for the time being. The afternoon centre was also closed, and all activities were suspended. The teenagers of the centre had to remain home with their families, without any possibility of meeting either their peers or other adults apart from cohabiting family members.

During the lockdown, Hillary resumed contact with the centre's educators through the telephone and web platforms. They discussed about the importance of restarting relations with the teenagers who attended the centre and the need to help them cope, as far as possible, with their experiences of loneliness and isolation. Together they decided to propose to the interested teenagers to resume their reflection on the UPP project, this time starting from the emergency and isolation situation that everyone was experiencing. A virtual group was then set up, which was assigned the name of «Avengers», made up of the student, an educator, a volunteer, and five teenagers, who met twice a week to reflect together through the «Hangouts» platform. Three members of the group, although eager to participate in the reflection, did not have the opportunity to connect to the internet regularly. Therefore, they were kept updated and could express their views through a WhatsApp group.

The first meetings dealt with the experiences of the group members that were described and discussed. Such as how their lives had changed to respond to the lockdown, what troubled them, and what their ideas and reflections were on the situation. The group reflected on the fact that this new condition of life was common to all, and that everyone was experiencing it with difficulty. Based on this reasoning, a girl proposed to the group to create a «Manual to survive the quarantine» to be diffused among all adolescents. The idea was immediately accepted and shared by everyone. There was a moment of intense

excitement because, according to Hillary, the teenagers in the group realised they were going to do something useful for other people. The declared goal of the group was to «help all teenagers, children, parents with children, practically anyone in quarantine, to fight the boredom and monotony of their days, offering practical, psychological advice and encouragement».

The Quarantine Survival Manual

The drafting of the manual took place through a dozen meetings, facilitated by the student, always in the virtual presence of all the teenagers involved and the educator. A reflection and working group, as equal as possible, was set up in which the rule was always to discuss the opinions of all and to assign tasks democratically. The group started from the analysis of the feelings prevailing during the quarantine, about which everyone was able to express their point of view. The group then proposed to represent such feelings through a «word cloud» to highlight the prevailing emotions. The second step was to represent what the quarantine meant for the group members. Each of the participants proposed images or photographs, which led to a discussion. The teenagers in the group expressed a series of concepts, metaphors, words, reflections, which were represented and synthesised in small clouds describing their thoughts. The discussion continued starting with the question: «what advice would you give to a friend of yours if he/she were to go into quarantine tomorrow?». A series of ideas emerged, both practical and concrete (such as stocking up on masks, disinfectants and food) and sentimental and profound (such as «stay as long as you can with your friends because you don't know when you will be able to see them again, go to visit your relatives and hug them because you will not be able to see and touch them for a long time, and enjoy the freedom of being outside your home»). The «daily routine» topic was then addressed, starting from how each group member spent his/her days and then thinking about activities to suggested to those in quarantine. Many ideas emerged, such as learning a new language, singing and dancing, cooking, and shopping online. The group then chose to focus on two topics in particular: social networks, intended as a tool to maintain relationships even at a distance, as well as to pass the time, and TV series and video games. For each of these tools, the group included in the manual not only a brief description of the most used ones, but also of the less known which they deemed useful and/or interesting. The group then reflected on the lockdown period, trying to highlight the positive and negative aspects of the quarantine. Many concepts emerged, some defined as positive, others defined as negative, and others defined as «uncategorised». A boy then thought of inserting a third classification column, called «neutral zone». In this section, the students included those elements — such as not going to school and have more free time — that initially were experienced as positive

because seen as a novelty and different from the usual routine but which, however, in the long run, highlighted the strangeness and heaviness of the situation.

Subsequently, the reflection led to consider the future, starting with the question: «What do you expect from the end of the quarantine?». Everyone participated in the #EPOIVORREI [andthenIwish] social campaign, highlighting hopes and desires. The students then proposed to insert a section entitled: «Pills of positivity», to instil positivity to readers and emphasise the commonality of the ongoing situation that everyone was experiencing. The following phrases are some of the most significant «pills«: «everything will be OK», «we'll make it», «you are not alone». The manual concludes with «A Decalogue for the Time of Quarantine», i.e. the ten tips considered essential to cope during a similar period.

Dissemination of the manual

The group's choice was to disseminate the manual through social channels, also giving readers the possibility of contributing with comments and additions. Therefore, the teenagers in the group decided to create an email address where anyone could send stories, tips and suggestions.

The dissemination was very successful, and many positive opinions and comments were collected. Sharing the manual with various school groups through WhatsApp was the most significant action. The group promoted the manual while it was still a «work in progress» and then diffused it when it was completed, inviting their peers to add ideas and comments. Many responded, sending photos, images taken from social networks, and practical advice. Some of them shared how this time of confinement had helped them to become passionate about activities they would have never thought of doing (such as reading, painting, gardening, yoga, starting a blog, learning magic tricks, and cooking). It also emerged that the quarantine had helped children and teenagers to deepen the relationship with the other members of their family, having more opportunities for sharing. This «forced coexistence» made it possible to reclaim the time stolen by routine and improve the relations with their family members, for example by playing with their brothers/sisters, chatting and discussing, watching TV together and talking about their future together.

The group decided to share the manual also with their teachers. Therefore, they send it to their class coordinators so that they could introduce it to the other teachers. This decision was made because these teachers were aware of this activity and, on several occasions during the school video lessons, they took an interest in the path. The teachers were satisfied with and appreciative of the project and decided to show the manual also to the headmaster. The latter decided to introduce it as a discussion tool in the optional

activities of the next school year. The headmaster contacted the educator, who requested the group that accepted with enthusiasm.

The student's reflections

What Hillary underlines in her report is the absolute key role played by the group members and their participation in every step: from the choice of contents to the drafting and graphic organisation of the manual. She even says that, when the time came to write the introduction explaining what a UPP is, the group collaborated by writing what they had learned about the path.

Another aspect highlighted by Hillary is the opening of the project to other participants. In addition to some classmates of the teenagers initially involved, also her grandmother who had recently became a widow, joined the group. She was going through the lockdown with difficulty and asked to be able to join the group to help teenagers in isolation.

Hillary reports that, at the end of the path, she had a moment of reflection with the group on the achievement of the goals they had set. Help was the topic of their reflection. In this regard, the following excerpt from her report is quite significant.

> While reasoning with the group, they make clear that this project achieved a dual purpose. Initially, it [the manual] was designed as a tool to fight boredom and help anyone who read it to find solutions to cope with the quarantine period. In reality, however, even our «Avengers» — like those whom they wanted to help — were fed up and bored because of the ongoing situation. Therefore, when we were thinking together to help future readers, in those moments, we were acting directly to address what was also a problem for our group. In practice, in wanting to help others, the members of the group unintentionally helped themselves too.

Fighting routine and monotony can be defined, according to the student, as a project sub-purpose, achieved during every group meeting. In other words, striving to achieve the first shared project aim (helping young people to cope with quarantine), led to an awareness on the part of the members of the group of «being all in the same boat». The teenagers in the group realised that they had the same needs of their peers and the process of creating the manual helped them to overcome the difficulties of the quarantine period.

Methodological notes

UPPs are essentially learning experiences, as students are called to apply the methodological principles of RSW within their practice placement experiences. The health emergency put a strain on these paths because the request to carry out a project based on

the relationship between all the stakeholders clashed with the impossibility of physically meeting people, being able to listen to them directly, and to communicate at group level. Despite this situation, the students tried to identify and experiment with new meeting modalities, which also allow them to carry out projects based on a relational approach. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Hillary managed to redefine the project together with a group of teenagers, more accustomed to using online modalities and with good technological skills. This allowed her to experience a path that shows how the application of RSW principles can lead to a positive outcome.

The following is an analysis of Hillary's UPP experience based on RSW principles and key ideas (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2017) that highlights its crucial points. The student assumed the role of the professional who guided the coping process in a relational way.

Respecting humanity

According to this principle, people's self-determination, respect and acceptance of their points of view and the enhancement of experiential skills are essential and should be placed at the same level of those of professional experts.

This UPP project shows how the experience and the opinions of the group guided the entire process, starting with the choice of its purposes and tools. The professionals, while present, neither provided an external reading of the situation nor offered predefined solutions. On the contrary, they gave open stimuli, aimed at activating reflection and dialogue, thus applying a non-directive style.

Reciprocity

According to the principle of reciprocity, aid should essentially result from the relationship between all the people involved in a given situation. While professionals help those who are in difficulty, at the same time, they are helped to build truly effective projects. This generates what Folgheraiter and Raineri define as «relational empowerment», i.e. «a re-balancing 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 a specific situation» (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2017, p. 17).

In this project, the professionals (the student and the educators) helped the teenagers in the group to cope with the period of isolation positively, but, at the same time, they were also helped by them in identifying the best ways to do it. This was possible because they assumed a listening and learning attitude towards the other group members. In this regard, an example reported by the student on the language topic is quite

significant. Hillary claims that she had to «learn the language used by the teenagers of the group», who express themselves in their own slang. Instead of asking them to speak in the current language, the student asked them to give her a brief «training course» on the terminology they use most frequently so that she could understand them better.

The helper therapy principle

According to the mutual support principle, everyone receives and gives help at the same time, as it is based on the idea that while helping others, one also helps oneself too.

This was perhaps the aspect most evident to the group members themselves. In fact, they also benefited from an experience that, in their intentions, was aimed at bringing relief to many of their peers forced to remain at home. This unexpected benefit, combined with the achievement of their goal (the manual was read and appreciated by many of their peers), helped to strengthen their self-esteem and sense of self-efficacy, making them evaluate this experience in a very positive way. The appreciation of the teachers and headmaster is certainly another element that increased the value of the path taken, both as individuals and as a group.

Not individual action, but a network's action

In this regard, Folgheraiter and Raineri (2017, p. 17) claim: «In RSW view, well-being and solutions to social life problems can arise not from individuals, but from coping network's reflexivity and action. As mentioned, a "coping network" is a set of relationships between people concerned about a shared aim [...]».

The design process was described as a real collective action, in which all the participants actually acted as a coping network. Great attention was paid to keeping ties alive and not excluding anyone, not even those who could not participate in video calls. The group sought alternative strategies to ensure that everyone could express their point of view and provide their contribution. Mutual trust is a central element that makes possible to act as a network in coping processes. When the student had to interrupt the project she had started in November, she found herself disoriented, without a direction to follow. She claims that, without the contribution of the other group members, both the professionals and the teenagers, she would not have been able to even think of an alternative path. Her trust in the collective ability to act allowed her (and the whole group) not to stop in front of the obstacle created by the closure of the centre and schools. Being able to share her reflections with others opened up new possibilities for action.

Freedom of action and creativity

Freedom of action and the importance of creative thinking are the basis of RSW. When faced with a life problem, no one knows what the best solution is to deal with it. However, even in this condition of «ignorance», there is the awareness that countless paths are available to be discovered along the way. Flexibility is a fundamental characteristic of a project developed according to the relational approach.

In the UPP project described, flexibility, openness to dialogue, and the ability to adapt to changed environmental conditions were fundamental to redefine the project aims and re-direct its path. In several passages of her report, Hillary stresses the importance of freedom of expression, especially for the teenagers in the group. A welcoming attitude towards all opinions and an extremely democratic and participatory attitude in making any decision help everybody to express themselves. It was often pointed out that the teenagers in the group contributed through numerous ideas and proposals, without being intimidated by the adults' presence.

Social workers as relational guides

The social worker who acts as a relational guide does not act directly but supports and facilitates the reflection and action of the other members of the group. It is an «underground» action, which, however, is fundamental for a positive outcome of a coping process.

The student certainly acted as a relational guide, supporting the whole process and putting in play her facilitation skills. It could be stated that, without her presence in the role of relational guide, the whole process would not have been possible. Her function was also to guide the process, taking care that everyone assumed a relational approach, i.e. no one had to propose solutions or provide advice, but rather engage in an attitude of dialogue. Learning group facilitation skills is fundamental in RSW training; therefore, all UPPs have the aim of putting this skill into practice. Hillary (and all her course colleagues) had to face the difficulty of learning to facilitate a coping process online, considering all the limits that the use of internet tools entails in facilitating groups (McKechnie et al., 2014). However, she proved that it is still possible to carry out shared planning, even with the limits imposed by the ongoing situation. The application of the RSW principles favoured the co-implementation of a project, in which all acted in common agreement to overcome current limitations.

Conclusion

In concluding the analysis of this experience, it appears useful to include what Hillary says at the end of her report. The student highlights how mutual trust and a bit of «casualness» were fundamental to achieve a positive outcome.

To be honest, I also had fun on this journey, especially during the meetings with the teenagers of the group. We laughed and joked when it was the right time to do it, and we assumed a more serious attitude when we had to focus and work. Working at the creation of the manual made the group strong and united. At the beginning of this experience, I could have never imagined that we could build something so useful and beautiful and that, despite the distance, we strived and succeeded in building solid trust relationships. It was a satisfying and fulfilling experience and, despite the difficulties and fears I had initially, I changed my mind and was more than satisfied with what we accomplished, all together, through mutual help and support.

The element of trust is at the base of the relational approach. This experience proved that it is possible to develop meaningful ties even through virtual modalities. It allowed the group members to experience a path that, besides helping them to overcome the isolation and difficulties caused by the lockdown, led them to open up to the outside and assume the role of helpers towards others, thus developing skills and empowerment.

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