

Learning Social Work, between classroom and professional practices: A relational based social work with undergraduate students

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Abstract

Theoretical, methodological, and ethical standards postulate that social work education requires a student-oriented process that encourages learners to deeply reflect on professional practice. It is recommended that professional practice is integrated into social work education in order to prepare learners holistically and adequately to respond to contemporary social problems. This paper draws to advance empirically based outcomes stemming from a reflective process of a student-oriented pedagogical approach that incorporates professional practice in the training of social work undergraduate students in Portugal. The pedagogical processes are based on relational social work, participation and reflection on practice as essential for engaging students with the profession and transforming practice. In this pedagogical process, we demonstrate how important it is for students to reflect on what they observe in the fieldwork; in the sense of self-knowledge, ability to adapt to new challenges, and understanding and reflection on significant events of practice. The above deliberations are a result of a survey carried out among fifty-one students in a social work degree in Portugal, in the laboratory social work unit that socialised students with the profession. In the unit, for the first-time students were confronted with the professional reality through direct observation of social work practices. From the survey, it was realised that relational experiences of socialisation with the profession and the observation of relevant social situations aid the development of personal and interpersonal skills and as well strengthen the vocation of students. We conclude that this learning and relational process is essential for students to transform themselves as individuals and reinforce their professional vocation.

Keywords

Social Work, students, fieldwork, relational, learning.

Introduction

Social work is not a new profession; it has been existing for more than 100 years in the world (Mouro, 2001). The profession was developed from voluntarism to practicism, from technicalism to science, from moralism to an ethical field associated with care, rights and social justice. Also the social work multidisciplinary character are not always consensual of what this profession is and what it can be (LeCroy & Stinson, 2004). This is evident when teachers ask first year undergraduate students what social work is, and in response, some of them identify the profession with social change and the principles of human rights and social justice, others associate it with helping and caring particularly supporting vulnerable groups, and lastly others do not know what to answer.

The evolution of social work training are related with the foundational phase based on methods (1920-1961); the phase of technical and scientific consolidation (1966-1990); and the phase based on scientific and ethical issues (1991-present) (Askeland & Payne, 2017). Teaching social work faces challenges of reinforcing the dimension of social change, transforming common-sense to expertism and the prejudices that students bring to the classroom. Teachers must be able to change these perceptions by developing critical and reflective skills, using participatory methodologies so that students identify with the theoretical, methodological and ethical foundations and become future professionals who are attentive and critical of social reality (Hendricks, Finch, & Franks, 2013; Tilling, 2009).

The literature on pedagogical processes in teaching and learning social work has been harmonised by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) (Sewpaul & Jones, 2004; IASSW & IFSW, 2020). These are inform of international guidelines for social work education that provide a creative and practical guide of teaching social work. Doel & Shardlow (2016; 2005) and Walker et al. (2008) also outline contemporary theories and knowledge related to social work teaching and education that emphasises skills development and professional practice, where on-the-job learning is crucial. Additionally, Beverley & Worsley (2007) argue that people learn better, when they have been connected and have a relational based process with workplaces; that translates into a core practice in teaching and assessing learning. They also point out the contributions of other disciplines to the social work learning process, especially in the field of pedagogy.

Nevertheless, teaching social work cannot be taken out of the social and political context of the country where it is taught and practiced. It is important to set specific standards for learning the social work profession. In some countries, the profession is regulated by an official council or association, as specific standards are developed for teaching social work, such as in Brazil, the US, Canada, England, and Australia. This line of thought strengthens Williams & Rutter's (2015) analysis that emphasised the setting up of professional educational standards for the practice of social work in England and creation of guidelines to help professional social workers and their supervisors to oversee, empower and assess students. Although these authors concern themselves with theo-

retical, methodological, and ethical teaching standards for the profession, there's less or no attention in reference to the type of methodologies that can be used to teach the profession to young people and/or adults. These methodologies must consider the type of structure and aims of social work degrees, the settings in which the profession is exercised, where students learn to be social workers, and duly considering students' profiles.

Teaching of practices is an indispensable component of the profession (Parker, 2010; Lee & Fortune, 2013), reason being that students experience anxieties when confronted with the professional field, and notwithstanding the fact that practice offers unique learning opportunities (Parker, 2010). Also, Lee & Fortune (2013) argue that it is in these practical learning units that students have the chance not just to connect theory to practice (those which are operationalised in the classroom), but also to learn new skills. However, the authors contend that there appears to be a discontinuity in that relationship when students are increasingly not involved in practice. This is one of the major challenges facing professors, that is, to get students to use the theories, methods and techniques taught in the classroom in their placements and in their future professional practices.

To achieve that, it is important to support students in their reflections on activities, thereby availing possibilities of integrating theories as an attempt to solve new challenges. In addition, Fook, Ryan & Hawkins (2000) published a longitudinal study that maps a number of learning methodologies, drawing attention to reflection on critical incidents observed and experienced in these contexts. This reflection is crucial to understanding the rules of practice, the values in play, skills and engagement in the situations identified as relevant. Certain authors have advanced various types of methodologies for this reflection, that is, reflection in and about the action (Schön, 1983), structural and post-structural reflection (Freire, 1970), critical and narrative reflection (Fook, Ryan, & Hawkins, 2000).

Tsien & Tsui (2007) contend that reflective learning requires a student-centred participatory approach. They assert that participatory teaching experience in social work changes the relationship between students and professors and consequently learning. This type of methodology is significant because; it narrows the power gap between the professor and the student, makes students more independent and interdependent, students possess greater control over learning, students take part in the planning and implementation of projects in which they have a greater say, and at the same time benefit from the modelling provided by their professors.

From a theoretical, methodological and ethical point of view, universities in Portugal are responsible for social work content as guided by international standards (Sewpaul & Jones, 2004; IASSW & IFSW, 2020). Likewise, universities are also subjected to supervision by the higher education assessment agency, an entity that regulates the educational system. Unfortunately, social work supervision in the field of education has not received prominence in either research or publications. In Portuguese language, only doctoral theses were accessible, which revealed that the organisational model of practice centred on the link between the university, the organisations, and the process of pedagogical supervi-

sion (Freitas, 2013). There are several publications in Brazilian language on supervised placements, for instance, Buriola (1995; 1996), Lewgoy et al. (2010), Santos et al. (2016) and Vieira (1989) highlight the importance of a supervised placement as a condition that enables students to learn the profession.

Teaching must be grounded on participatory, reflective and critical and relational process. It is from the active participation of students that narratives and meaningful experiences can be reflected and transformed into essential personal and professional skills. In this article, we intend to demonstrate the importance of developing participatory methodologies by students, especially those who observe professional practice outside the classroom. We focused on the pedagogical learning theories and present a learning process for the internship practices in the social work laboratory unit. This is developed in the second year of study in a social work degree taught in a Portuguese university. We reveal the result of this process through the voices of the students and by highlighting the significant experiences when students observe professional practices. These processes are the most suitable for transforming students' vision of social work, building identity with the profession, and reinforcing their vocations.

Teaching as a learning and relational based process

Relational based is a learning process centred on participation and engagement with the social work profession in order to increase the personal and interrelational capabilities and skills that are fundamental to the profession in the future. This methodology is said to increase resilience and the ability to resolve difficulties (Folgheraiter, 2007). Several authors (Reynolds, 1942; Towle, 1954, 1955; Freire, 1970; Schön, 1983; Kolb, 1984; Fook, Ryan, & Hawkins, 2000; Sicora, 2010, 2017) have contributed to constructing teaching/learning models based on relational and participatory process.

First, Reynolds (1942) argued that if professors fail to pay attention to the type of students before them, and focuses only on the teaching aims, he/she will not achieve the purpose of education; to teach the «art» and to train professionals. Attaining that purpose is a process that requires conscious intelligence, which involves several stages of learning (Reynolds, 1942), namely: i) self-awareness (a stage where the professor provides and develops a process of learning that offers security and help, is centred on the self, is based on the student's characteristics and the difficulties that appear when faced with new experiences during practice); ii) sink or swim (here, the professor encourages the student to use their capacities and to trust in their own «spontaneous» responses); iii) understanding the situation, but still without controlling the activity itself (here, the student replicates routine activities and gradually understands with time and in the routines what they do well and what they do less well); iv) relative mastery of the art being learned (in which a student can understand the activity with the new skills acquired and for which

he/she can control); v) learning to teach what they have learned (a final stage of learning, when learners are confident of what they have learned and are ready to teach others).

This model shows that learning is not a linear but a stages process. The «art» and science of social work is acquired by integrating theory and practice in the classroom and in the organisation where the profession is exercised in processes, processes that appears parallel and intersecting at the same time. In this process, emotional intelligence is very important in handling our own and others' emotions (Towle, 1954, 1955). The learning experience enables growth, where the student and supervisor are mentors and the prime vehicle for learning the theoretical, methodological, ethical, and cultural standards of the profession.

Secondly, Freire (1970) argues that in adult education methodologies, the liberation pedagogy should not be overlooked. He centres on awareness raising, a process of critical reflection where the participant moves from a position of guilt to one of understanding the structural origins of the problem-transformative action. The process of critical reflection is essential and is related to the life experience of the participant. This process allows participants to understand that the being oppressed is result of belonging to a given group; the oppressed. However, this process is not limited to rational reflection but also extends to changing personal relationships and broader social contexts. When learning how to practice social work, the participants (students) must acknowledge first of all what dominant interests are, and it is from this starting point that it is possible to promote social change and engage in an activist practice of empowerment.

Thirdly, authors Schön (1983) and Kolb (1984) significantly cover this subject. Schön (1983), a disciple of Dewey (philosopher and professor) introduced the concept of «reflective practitioner» and defined the qualities needed to teach reflective practice. He indicated that reflection occurs when we are confronted with a question or issue that makes us think (a problem), and that is exactly what the experience of a placement offers. Reflection starts: i) when a routine form of behaviour reveals something new or problem (surprise!); ii) when we think about that reality; iii) when restructuring thought and alternatives for resolution; iv) when we define a new action and try it out; and v) when we observe the effects of the new action scientifically and using a coherent method (Schön, 1983, 2018).

Kolb (1984) based on the contributions of Dewey, Lewin and Piaget to explain how experiential learning and concrete experience require an internal cognitive process. Learning requires active experimentation and reflective observation, where knowledge as a process is created from transforming experience (Kolb, 1984). Her reflective cycle involves: i) a concrete experience; ii) a reflection on the observation; iii) a conceptualisation/abstraction, and iv) active experimentation. Concrete experience is taken to mean a critical incident, understood as an observed human activity which allows for inferences and predictions concerning the person experiencing the act, regarding the causes and consequences (Flanagan, 1954). Learning by reflecting on critical incidents is fundamental.

Sicora (2010, 2017) contends that professionals can learn from decisions regarded as wrong, and that often the causes of errors in professional decisions is related to the lack of time and training, the absence of intervention plans, burnout and a hostile relationship with users. Reflective learning can also occur when social workers reflect deeply on mistakes and seek to change their circumstances. This process can also be adopted to student-learning. Learning from things that happened and/or regarded as bad experiences allows us to reflect on what went wrong and what should have been corrected for it to be considered a good experience and good practice.

Lastly, Fook, Ryan, & Hawkins (2000) point to narratives as a methodology for reflective learning. Narrative deals with a significant incident, for example, an account of a case, and entails: i) restating the case or incident; ii) identifying terms which are not appropriate (common-sense); iii) and rewriting the case in terms appropriate to the more theoretical frames of reference in social work. These authors offer suggestions on how adults learn and point out the importance of reflection on experience to their own personal and professional development.

Social work education in Portugal

Though Portugal has a long history of social work, the profession only emerged tremendously in university education in the mid 1990's (Carvalho et al., 2019). From 1953 to 1996, social workers in Portugal received training from social work schools only, outside the public university and higher education system. Author such (Branco, 2018; Carvalho et al., 2019; Carvalho, 2020) in their analysis of social work in Portugal identified several development phases: i) medical, social and moral phase (1930 to 1950); (ii) phase of progressive linkage of social work to social sciences and community development (1960's to 1974); iii) revolutionary, radical and democratic phase that involved recreation of social work (1974-1989); iv) recognition of the degree in social work and transition from teaching in schools to universities and polytechnics (1990-2005); and v) post-Bologna phase that is competency-centered and involves lifelong learning (Bachelors, Masters and Doctorates) (2006 to present).

In the first phase, there were only three social work schools that taught the Francophone tradition «Serviço Social» (Martins, 1999). Teaching was oriented towards moral practice guided by women of the bourgeois class. The purpose of teaching was to shape these women as «good housewives» models for the working classes. However, in this period of dictatorship, only few exercised the profession because they were hostages of the husbands', and also required authorisation from women to exercise. These potential social workers were demanded to be single, catholic and exhibit high moral standards (Martins, 1999). Social work incorporated philanthropic and «assistentialist» practices to support and control the populations then. The disciplines of internship (social work place-

ment) emphasised the daily routines of practices. For example, it was not until late in the 1950's that Richmond's social diagnosis book was translated into Portuguese language, eventually blending intervention with the case method (Richmond, 1917).

In the second phase, social work education was progressively aligned with the social sciences, focusing on community development projects (1960's to 1974), but without neglecting case and group methods. Training was open to men, and new graduates were integrated into newly created state organisations such as health and social security ministries. Concomitantly, social issues began to worry social workers and started being reverts in the end-of-course monographs (Carvalho, 2014). During this period, internships (social work placement) included the accomplishment of an end-of-course work, which helped systematise the practices. Some social workers actively participated in groups that condemned dictatorship in favor of human rights and democracy, hence were arrested and tortured (Martins & Henriquez, 1995).

After the eventual fall of the dictatorship by a democratic revolution in 1974, teaching social work changed radically. During that revolutionary, radical and democratic phase, social work was recreated in the light of the reconceptualisation movement of Latin America (Silva, 2016a). The schools altered their curriculum, making it more scientific, appeared permeable to the social sciences and ideologically oriented to the structuralist (Marxist) (Silva, 2016b). Social work committed itself to society and to the struggle for civic, political, social, and cultural rights by building a system of welfare which tended to be universal in terms of education, health and social security. The teaching of practice valued social participation in groups and social movements, and that was highly demanded in monographs and internship reports.

The period 1990's was significant for social work education and the profession. The social work undergraduate degree was recognised and the transition of teaching from schools to universities and polytechnics took place (1990-2005) (Carvalho et al., 2019). This increased the number of courses and students, hence leading to the massification of teaching (Carvalho et al., 2019). Having been adopted in universities, the training was in contact with other sciences and disciplines, which paved way for more or other requirements. The undergraduate years were increased to 5 and the first master's and doctorates were introduced by Portuguese universities in 1995 and 2004 respectively. The then first graduates were integrated into programs and projects that had major impacts on the Portuguese society, such as social insertion income, protection of children in danger, integrated health and social care, social network, among others.

The final phase is the reconfiguration of higher education, resulting from the Bologna Declaration of 1999 on European Higher Education. From that, social work degrees adopted the rules established for social sciences. Subsequently, the five-year and four-year courses were lowered to four and three and half years respectively and learning through practice focused on skills and doing rather than on thinking and doing (Martins & Tomé, 2008a, 2008b). This transformation made the degrees more operative, oriented towards

practice, centred on direct action, and less focused on research or design of social policies as was in the 1970's, 1980's and 1990's. However, this change enabled access to lifelong training through the offer of various master's and doctoral degrees that promoted the advancement of research (Carvalho et al., 2019).

Currently, Portugal has seventeen degrees in social work offered in various universities, public and private polytechnics and social work schools (Carvalho 2014). There's considerable variation in the structure, duration, and content of the social work degree delivered in the those learning institutions. For instance, the degree might have a duration of six semesters in public polytechnics and private universities while seven semesters in public universities. The degree comprises of core social work subjects and other complementary disciplines from the social sciences and humanities. Despite this, there exists differences in the degrees arising from their integration into various departments or colleges such as social policy, educational studies, psychology or sociology or other units, structures that eventually influence the training content (Carvalho, 2020).

Generally, the core social work subjects include introduction to the origin and institutionalisation of social work; traditional and contemporary theories and methodologies; intervention models; intervention methodologies in specific problem areas such as children and young people, ageing, multiculturalism, ethical and professional issues; and placement practices. Placement practices looks at theoretical, methodological, and ethical standards, specific intervention methodologies and techniques, applied research, all in accordance with the profession's identities and skills needed to exercise the profession. The option units are varied and can be related to social policy, psychology, education, anthropology and sociology, depending on the department in which social work is located in the education system.

Caires & Almeida (2000) assert that social work placement is important to personal growth. In social work degrees as per the international guidelines, this occurs as a process: preparing for practice – initial phase (level I); learning with practice – intermediate phase (level II); learning in practice and exercising practice – advanced phase (level III). Level III is further subdivided into different levels of learning: security for practice (place in the institution); empowerment for practice (learning through observation and assessment); and exercising practice (planning and carrying out professional work autonomously) (Tilling, 2009).

Placements can take different forms: i) a single long placement; (ii) multiple short-term placements; and (iii) part-time placements (Caires & Almeida, 2000). In social work, the most frequent placement types are the single along placement (placement taking up the final years of the course) and/or multiple short-term placements (placements in every semester of the degree).

Notably, during placements, the reflection on the impact of student life experiences on their professional practice and on case studies is crucial. And also, organisations where students can observe and learn the profession are influenced by the training model and by public and social policies in Portugal (Ferrera et al., 2000; Ferrera, 2005).

Methodology and data sources

The research aims to respond to the question if the pedagogical processes based on relational social work, participation and reflection on practice are essential to transform students into future professionals. The intention is to know if this type of learning processes reinforce the vocation and identity of students. The analysis was derived from the reflections and observation of professional practices. To achieve this objective, a set of methodological, pedagogical, quantitative, and qualitative was conducted.

This exploratory research or learning practices were carried out in a social work degree offered by a public university in Portugal. The socialisation with the profession is organised longitudinally throughout the social work degree; First year (social work observatory), second year (social work laboratory), third year (placement I), and fourth year (placement II). In the second year, students are expected to learn about the organisational field of social work in the laboratory unit. This unit aims to: contextualise the intervention domain of social work in a public or private facilities or in specific intervention projects; interact with target population and their specific problems; identify strategies, methods, and techniques in social work; use methods and observation techniques in social work; and communicate «actively listen to others»; and respect cultural differences while considering the principles of human rights.

The curricular unit has 3 hours per week for 14 weeks involving 27 students in daytime and 24 students in evening, all totalling to 51. This unit was structured as follows.

Firstly, social work placement observation and preparation contact and access to social work facilities and institutional protocols and placing students in social work organisations in line with their areas of interest. The institutions that hosted students consisted of 17 from the public sector and 23 from non-profit sector, making a total of 40. The public sector institutions included hospitals, schools, child protection boards and local authorities. The private non-profit sector entities included associations and Santa Casa da Misericórdia (Holy House of Mercy). These institutions provide services in health, education, disability, children at risk, social work, families, refugees, poverty, social integration, prostitution, and advocacy. All students were supervised by professional social workers who were responsible for integrating them into professional activities.

Secondly, the students introduced themselves to the organisation and held a meeting with professionals where they set placement objectives and decided on the activities to be undertaken. In this meeting, students presented the curricular unit regulation that comprised of objectives, competencies to develop, responsibilities expected and the evaluation criteria. The meeting further discussed the work plan to be followed by students depending on the type of organisation identified, objectives of observation, activities to be carried out, methodology to follow, observation techniques and evaluation.

Thirdly, in the classroom a pedagogical supervision process inception developed focusing on the teaching/learning methodologies. This process concerned with confron-

tation with reality, sensitisation, and reflection. This was necessary because it helped to getting to know the students, their motivations for pursuing social work, discussing social work vocation, while significantly considering their personal and social experiences. This reflection aimed to promote the ability to reflect on the realities and experiences observed in different institutional contexts; ability to learn from others and learn by doing, observing, describing, interpreting and structuring knowledge based on real situations; ability to engage with the target population and professionals in community institutions; and ability to understand the importance of ethics and professional duties and to respect diversity in relation to ethnicity, religion, culture, language, gender, sexual orientation and different potentials in the target population.

Fourthly, a questionnaire consisting of closed multiple choice and Likert scale questions and an open question was applied to the 51 students. The questionnaire included content relating to student profile (class, gender, age, marital status, nationality, place of birth, profession, means of subsistence/ livelihood, who they currently live with, family background) and together with a series of questions relating to personal, family, and social motivations for pursuing a degree in social work and choice of university. Also, included were open-ended questions about significant personal experiences that led students to choose a social work degree. The data was analysed using SPSS version 22 and that from open questions using categorical thematic content analysis.

Fifthly, we used tutorial guidance sessions to obtain responses for questions such as: How do you feel being in the organisation? How do you describe the learning process? What are the most significant aspects? How easy or difficult is it to follow the observation plan? How did it feel to observe the professional activities? What action or strategies can be undertaken? What main changes did you experience? These questions encouraged students to engage with learning and subsequently transform individually. Finally, students responded to two open questions: identifying a significant experience observed and how that experience transformed your social work perception. Afterwards, the reports and content were analysed. The open questions were coded from 1 to 51 (Q1 to Q51).

Ethical issues

Ethical principles of respect for the participants' self-determination and confidentiality and anonymity of sources and of the entities involved (university, students, community institutions, professionals) were observed. Important to note is that there was no conflict of interests between the parties involved, namely: students, professor, university, and social work organisations. This research on social work education was sponsored by Portuguese national funds through FCT (Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia), under project UID/CPO/00713/2019.

Results

Reynolds (1942) advised that it is important to understand and engage students deeply. From the data collection, the following results were obtained: in the curricular unit, social work laboratory, 52.9% students attended daytime while 47.5% evening-time arrangements; 98% were female whereas 2% were male. Clearly, women were the majority of this student group, which is a common phenomenon in Portugal (Martins, 1999). The number of male students were below the national average of 8.2% in social work courses (DGES, 2017). Ages were divided into ranges, and the main groups in the daytime class were 19 years and younger at 41.2% whereas between 20 and 25 years were 11.8%.

In the evening class, the age ranges were broader that students aged 19 and under were 13.7%, between 20 and 25 years were 27.5%, between 26 and 30 years were 3.9% and between 36 and 40 years were 2.0%. In general, the marital status comprised of 94% single and 3.9% married/non-marital partnership. When marital status is cross analysed with the daytime and evening classes, findings show that single students remain predominant in both, though slightly less in the evening class, 51.0% and 43.1% respectively.

In terms of nationalities, findings revealed 92.7% Portuguese, 4.3% Cape Verdean and 3% Spanish. Many students lived in (nuclear) family home (72.5%), followed by student halls or residences (7.8%), then with relatives (3.9%) while for rented accommodation, student houses and accommodation by a friend were in each at 2.0%. Students in the evening class mostly lived in the family home at 39.2% whereas those with relatives, in their own house, and/or with a partner were 2.0% in each case. They revealed that while applying for higher education they chose a university close to their area of residence. By attending a university near the family home, they were able to obtain family support for accommodation and financial expenses, this was in response to the financial and economic crises and the reductions in student grants in recent years. This form of support has been severely cut and ultimately propelled a drastic reduction in the number of students entitled to grants (Justino, 2018).

Asked about their occupation, 76.5% replied that they had none while 23.5% said they had occupation. Those that had occupation, 21.6% belonged to the evening class and 2.0% to the daytime class. They derived their living income from various sources, the principal one being family support at 51.0%. 29.4% was from student grants and 15.7% supported themselves by working. 2.0% obtained incomes from unemployment benefits and a similar 2.0% from survivor's pension (this is for students with special educational needs). Family support was mostly evidenced in the daytime class at 33.3% while 15.7% students working to support themselves were in the evening class.

Analytically, most students relied heavily on their families to be able to study, hence family occupying the space for state policies, in what Saraceno (2016) calls Southern European familism.

60.8% of the students revealed that they were the first to take a degree in their families, 13.7% had siblings in higher education, 9.8% had their parents with a university education and 3.9% had all their family members as university graduates. This data may be explained by the recent democratisation of education and increased investment in secondary education in terms of general and technical training, as well as by policy that guarantees special access to education for students aged 23 and over. Such opportunities never existed for parents of these students as the current children are able to access education and higher education amply.

Motivation for pursuing a social work degree

Regarding the motivation to attend university, the findings revealed; 80.4% students desired to become career professionals, 70.6% wanted to improve their professional life, 64.7% desired to obtain a degree, 60.8% wanted to become financially independent and 58.8% were there for their personal development. In other motivation reasons, slightly many students enjoyed studying and the learning process, at 54.9%, 45.1% wanted to acquire social status, 41.2% wanted to improve their family life and 31.4% were influenced by their family to attend university (31.4%). On the contrary, findings showed that the following number of students never chose university education based on the following reasons: 62.7% to have an occupation, 39.2% to leave their parents' home, 39.2% because they live near the university, 39.2% due to friends' influence, 39.2% to change their lives. They made their own personal choices

Reasons for students devoting to social work, it involves intervention and change was at 66.7%, respects people and human dignity at 54.9%, and the cultural differences at 54.9%. Students concurred that the social work profession was associated with; human rights at 54.9%, social justice at 52.9%, social sciences at 47.1% and solidarity at 35.3%. These students' responses indicate pragmatism in choosing the social work degree, highlighting it as a practical training. Additionally, they said they chose social work to: promote quality of life and wellbeing at 62.7%, make a difference in society at 56.9%, better understand people at 56.9%, work with and for people at 54.9%, better understand society at 52.9%, and advocate for vulnerable groups in society at 49.0%. Other motivations were associated with: changing the world, making it more humane at 56.9%, breaking down barriers that prevent people from fulfilling their potential in society at 49%, understanding politics and organisations better at 49%, working in multi-professional teams at 49%, helping the most vulnerable people at 47.5%, bringing order in society at 43.1%, exercising professional power at 37.3% and knowing themselves better at 27.5%.

The above findings underscore the generic motivations for undertaking a social work degree, that is; to promote social change and social justice, personal enthusiasm

to work with people, the desire to know people better, to improve self-knowledge, and to invest in personal development (Caires & Almeida, 2000).

Significant experiences: The student's personal choice

The questionnaire had an open question where students stated a significant experience in their personal life that motivated them to pursue social work. These were associated with collective experiences, personal and family experiences and personal desire for practice. The findings generated narratives that provided a better understanding of their personal motivations.

- *Personal and family experiences: Significant experiences.* «I have a disabled person in the family and thanks to a social worker, he can receive services that assist him, I found out that society still doesn't offer much help for these people, nor support for carers» (Q11). «Coming from a low-income family is the reason for my choice» (Q45). «I had a baby when I was very young, only 21. I was living in social housing with my son's father. I was working in the office of an association that worked with families with children at risk. I was told that I would never amount to anything in life because I was living in a council estate. But I managed to get away from that relationship and had to remake my life, without anyone's help. I went back to school and managed to get an admission at university. I learned that I should help people to improve their lives because of who they are and not just where they live» (Q37).
- *Personal standards: Motivation to help people.* «I want to have direct contact with people facing serious problems. It all started when I read a book that told the stories of children who were facing serious difficulties in their lives. I want to help people in some way and help make human rights and social justice a reality» (Q9). «I enjoy helping people reach their potential and helping people's lives by changing their situation with human rights in mind. During the course, there were several times when I realised that social work could have already been part of my personal life» (Q32).

Most of the students were young, female, living with their families in the area close to the university location. They were looking for personal and professional accomplishments from university education and chose a social work degree because of its practical sense. Their motivation was derived from the significant experiences that were associated with social inequality in macro and meso terms, their personal and family experiences of poverty and exclusion and their personal desire to work with people (Rompf & Royse, 1994).

The social work degree are related with significant events, further instigated by personal experiences (family problems and professional work) are voluntary in nature

(Dennison, Poole, & Qaqish, 2007; Rompf & Royse, 1994). The main factors that stimulated students' affinity to the social work identity were: the need to understand themselves better, the desire to tackle inequality and injustices, and their desire to promote change in society.

Critical incidents that prompted reflection and learning narratives

The students identified critical situations that they feel enhanced their social work expertise and assisted in rebuilding their personal skills to learn the social work profession. These were, specific fields of social work interventions, difficulties to meet needs, sensitive cases, learning from bad practices and reflecting on ethical issues and dilemmas.

Significant experiences from the field placement

- *Understanding specific fields of social work interventions.* «This experience allowed me to know more about the local authorities and the services they provide to the citizens. I understood social work in local authorities' policies. I also participated in the application of a questionnaire to the employees, indeed I felt valued» (Q22).
- *Understanding difficulties in meeting needs.* «In the hospital, I encountered difficulties in getting post-discharge responses from patients; there are more and more needs and less and less answers. This is a huge challenge for social workers in hospitals. On the other hand, I have learned that we can never give up just because we have obstacles» (Q13).
- *Observing sensitive cases.* «The most significant experience was participating in the removal of waste of an older person with syndrome of Diogenes. This experience made me contemplate on how social work can act in such cases, especially in the follow-up after the trash removal. Participating in that process has made me more sensitive to such cases» (Q5).
- *Understanding and learning from bad practices.* «I watched some "charity" practices like food support where families would fetch the food kettle once a month, and the intervention is accomplished. This has to change because if we do not empower the individuals and enable them to change, everything will remain the same. I realised that social work should have a more interventionist and critical role» (Q37).
- *Reflecting on ethical issues.* «...I met a young man who had just been released from prison. The first thing that came to my mind was, "What did he do to get arrested?" I asked myself that question at the trial, but I didn't ask him. Later on, his story and the contact with the neighborhood made me have a different view

of the people. I learned not to be prejudiced and not to judge people because first we must hear their version of events. The job of an Social Work is to help and not judge!» (Q47).

The classroom tutorial sessions provided opportunities for students to identify significant professional practices, reflect on the profession and develop capabilities, such as: personal reinforcement, resilience, sensitivity and being critical and non-judgemental (criticising discriminatory thoughts). When significant events (Flanagan, 1954; Kolb, 1984; Fook et al., 2000) occur and are reflected upon, there is a greater likelihood of them being incorporated into the person's experience, which stimulates further internal reflections.

Learning self-assessment

Students were asked to identify and think about significant events, and competences they had developed during this process. The students valued the expertise they had acquired in terms of professional skills: «doing» as a fundamental element of care; the link between theory and practice; and the methods and the values (human rights, empathy, and diversity).

- *The link between the field and social work values.* «This experience aided me to identify some areas of social work intervention and gain a broader view of the social problems. It made me realise that it is essential to consider the context of each person and never judge or impose anything. The individual must have his/her own autonomy, the SW is the facilitator» (Q6).
- *Linking theory to practice.* «This experience helped me to realise how the theories we learned in the class/university were being applied. Even though theories are always criticised, I realised that they are very important» (Q49).
- *The connection to specific methods and techniques.* «I understood the daily life of a social worker, their teamwork, how to make a social diagnosis, home visits and how to interact with the older people and families» (Q11).
- *The connection to human rights and empathy in helping relationship.* «...I learned to strengthen empathetic relationships as well as dealing with service users, and the importance of being attentive to the details and significance of formal networks and contacts. It is essential not to see everything as black and white but rather identify the various nuances. There's need to promote autonomy in individuals by offering a range of options for them, informing them of their rights and developing critical awareness in users» (Q21).
- *The connection to diversity and critical thinking.* «We are diverse, and policies do not follow this diversity. We are undervalued and that sometimes inhibits us to act in a dignified and effective manner. If they let us, we will change the world for the

better. Critical thinking and the ability to improvise are important in understanding the critical sense of politics» (Q17).

- *The connection to the profession.* «This experience was very important to better understand the profession. It was also important because it helped me understand the area I want to work in the future» (Q8).

Students conceive social work as a profession that empowers, facilitates, and promotes critical capacity. Furthermore, self-reflection as highlighted in the conversations is crucial because it fosters the creation of theoretically grounded opinion, facilitates individual and group routines and potentially steers communication with citizens and with formal and informal networks. Students value this process in order to realign and consolidate their personal choice and vocation.

Discussion of findings

From the findings, it is believed that unique social work units such as social work laboratory prepare students for learning social work and developing deeper personal and professional capabilities. It is essential for professors to understand students and how they conceive social work. This empirical research unearthed how the various students' experiences stimulate their capabilities and potential to develop their personal and professional journeys, including first-generation university students, who were the majority. Their personal lives are influenced by social problems they experience or observe.

The pedagogical process aids reflections on the knowledge acquired from organisations; a place where students observe practice, familiarise with challenges, engage in unprecedented routines and above all build relationships (Faustini, 2006). The relational and participatory experience encourages students to establish links and relationships both with the professionals in the field and the teacher. Conclusively, the teacher, the students, and the professionals become a resource for this learning relational process (Towle, 1954).

The outcomes of this learning process enable students to understand the profession as an interconnected field that combines theory, methodology, ethics and above all the significances of practitioners' or professionals' competencies as per the professional standards (Sewpaul & Jones, 2004; Doel & Shardlow, 2016; Walker et al., 2008). Although student's participation was exclusively through observation, students identified specific fields of professional intervention, expressed awareness of the intervention challenges in the policy field and highlighted the crucial role of theory, policies, and values in understanding the profession (Fook, Ryan, & Hawkins, 2000; Schön, 1983, 2018). We can infer that this process enabled them to reconstruct their initial perception of social work; as a theoretical and practical profession, to a complex profession where theory is essential for understanding practice (Sewpaul & Jones, 2004; IASSW & IFSW, 2020).

Additionally, students displayed the importance of gaining deep insight into social work, such as; confront real problems, build capacity, identify not only needs but also opportunities and essentially develop a more systematic, grounded and critical mindset. They adopted a critical view of social work «working with people and for people» which substantially creates a deeper identity within the profession. This experience demonstrated how «concrete» reflection based on reality (Kolb, 1984) is important in developing the professional (theoretically, methodically, technically, relationally and ethically) and personal (broadened view of problems, routines, beliefs, customs, empathy, critical thinking) competences and skills of a social worker.

Students were able to understand the complexity and «eclecticism» of social work in the different organisations where they carried out observations in the laboratory unit. But more than just understanding the profession, this laboratory experience and preparation for internships also enabled them to understand themselves as developing and transforming individuals.

Conclusion

Social work education is fundamentally supposed to transmit new knowledge, build and serve communities and respond to the increasing challenges of globalisation and internationalisation (Hendricks et al., 2013). It is pertinent for students as future professionals to transform their initial common-sense vision and change from being mere policy implementers in state and civil society institutions to actively contributing to solutions of contemporary challenges of society. It is in such practical curricular units that students are confronted with the realities of social work and discover significant experiences, that subsequently enables them to reflect and learn the profession.

Relational social work focused on collaboration and participation in order to improve individual capabilities (Folgheraiter, 2007), also in educational system. This process demands being confronted with reality, questioning that reality, systematising and rationalising thought and lastly fostering change. It is a reflexive and critical horizontal stance that demands professors to know their students, their expectations and their ideas about social reality. Relational and participatory methodologies constitute a process that becomes an output when objectified in the functions or aims of practice; the construction of critical and reflexive professionals (Schön, 1983, 2018).

Confrontation with reality and subsequent reflections on what learners observe crucially enables students to reconfigure the initial (practice-based) expectations of the profession and highlights the significances of theoretical and ethical dimensions. Relatedly, students being in a situation of «confrontation with reality» and further reflecting on the narratives under the guidance of the teacher, facilitated the processes of developing critical reflection which transformed them professionally and individually (also in Fook, Ryan,

& Hawkins, 2000). This exploratory experience enables learners to develop reflexive skills, cherish their profession, renew their vocation and continue learning being a social worker.

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