

## **The need to improve social work students' skills as future social policy actors: experiences and prospects in undergraduate training**

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### **1 Introduction**

Social workers are called on to engage in political action as a constituent aspect of their professional practice (Stuart, 1999). Being on the front lines in tackling the consequences of a society that tolerates high levels of poverty and inequality, social workers must be aware of the importance of policy, understood on one hand as the set of norms regulating the lives of service users (and social workers) and, on the other, as processes affecting the social mechanisms leading to poverty and social exclusion, such as health problems, disability, vulnerability, unemployment, ethnicity, geographical location, educational poverty, etc.

In the international definition formulated by the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), “Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work.” The discussion surrounding this definition has, moreover, given rise to widespread agreement that social workers’ mandate includes formulating and analyzing policies – tasks that are quite distant from the image of mere executors that some would like to attribute to these professionals (Ascoli & Sicora, 2017).

Perhaps the most characteristic aspect of this profession is social workers’ direct encounter with the very people receiving aid. These beneficiaries are the core of the social service perspective and its main actors. It is precisely at the point where the social service discipline intersects with the design and implementation of social policies so that scholars have insisted on recognizing service users as resources to be valorized and as the bearers of important rights. Service users and their communities are not merely recipients of social services; rather, they are part of service planning (Carr, 2007; Bovaird et al., 2015).

To pursue this objective, we must train professionals capable of welcoming, listening to, building trust with, respecting and engaging with users’ individual perspectives in interpreting and evaluating their problems. Clients’ needs must be assessed considering the social contexts in which they arise, and this calls for “adopting a perspective that means first of all investing in problems, necessarily grasping and representing [such problems] through new and composite gazes” (Olivetti Manoukian 2017, translation mine).

The professional code of ethics, last revised in Italy in 2020, captures these values: the professional profile of social workers is inspired by an idea of society based on social justice. According to Barker's definition, social justice is the idea that, in a perfect world, all citizens would have “the same basic rights, protection, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits” (1999). One of the foci of the ethical code is professionals’ responsibility toward society,

specifically their contribution to formulating social policies. Indeed, article 39 states that “the social worker contributes to promoting, developing and supporting integrated social policies, aimed at improving the social well-being and quality of life of community members, with particular reference to those who are most exposed to situations of fragility, vulnerability or risk of marginalization, taking into account the level of responsibility that he or she holds and according to the effects that his or her activity may produce” (CNOAS, 2020).

Social workers' responsibilities include the need to appropriately interpret the position they are called on to occupy in organizational and local contexts in synergy with other professionals working to implement social programs. They must collaborate with these other actors to map the different yet not opposing facets of the work landscape, cultivating relationships with and legitimizing new professional allies – the users themselves. Without an approach of this kind conceptualizing social intervention as empowerment, projects too often resort to a logic of directing users rather than empowering them, falling into the trap of routine and welfarism.

Social workers may be considered "activists" insofar as their main objective is to foster change through interventions that respond to the needs of society and the people comprising it, closely intertwined with and connected to transformations in life as a whole. However, the term "change" encompasses multiple meanings unfolding on different levels: change in the self, professional change, and change in context, tools, methods and social policies (Pieroni and Dal Pra Ponticelli 2005). Which changes should be taken into account, then? Which ones must services take into account if their goal is to reorient and reposition themselves so as to effectively intervene and generate new possibilities and forms of autonomy? In this historical moment characterized by a pandemic with its profound and sometimes uncertain social and political shifts, the profession continues to reflect on the nature of the changes we are currently witnessing. The challenge facing social work profession is that of meeting its social mandate while staying constantly attentive to the specificities and needs of the people with whom it works, yet at the same time looking beyond states of emergency to envisage interventions that increasingly enhance citizens' and social actors' participation and, by extension, community-level development and prevention (Luppi, 2019).

Such an approach requires social workers to develop a thorough knowledge of the contexts in which they operate and to consider larger historical and cultural setting as well. They must try to foster collaboration with other actors in the social field, responding in an integrated way to the needs of the community. Their focus should be to achieve a holistic reading of people's needs and their living contexts so as to vitalize the community and ensure users a position of responsibility and decision-making power (Olivetti Manukian, 2012).

This vision invites social workers in general to become active members of society and in the specific to take concrete action in developing social policies. Such involvement in policy-making entails at least three aspects that are unique to social work. The first is a focus on maintaining an anti-oppressive approach. Lena Dominelli (2002) defines oppression as “relations dividing people into dominant or superior and subordinate or inferior groups”. These relations of domination consist of systematically devaluing the attributes and input of those who are deemed inferior and excluding them from the social sphere. The exclusion resulting from oppression may greatly influence an individual or a system. This process is often evaluative and individuals end up measuring themselves against others in a hierarchy based on the personal values they hold. The tendency to engage in this kind of comparison

frames one person's identity or traits as superior to another's, thus giving rise to an "us-them" dynamic that leads to division and increases the risk of oppression (Walker & Walker, 2009).

Second, social service performs a function of advocacy, understood as "the process of working with and/or on behalf of clients to obtain services or resources for clients that would not otherwise be provided, to modify existent (currently operating) policies, procedures, or practices that adversely affect clients. Or to promote new legislation or policies that will result in the provisioned or needed resources or services" (Hepworth et al, 1997).

Finally, the third aspect, which partly encompasses the previous two, has to do with social workers' role as 'policy actors'. Social work professionals engage in policy through a wide range of tools, strategies and modalities that allow them to assess agenda-shaping as well as policy development and implementation. This takes place as part of a specific political process, an acting-out of democracy – in the sense asserted by Dewey (1919) - in which social workers raise issues of justice and (in)equality in the public debate (Weiss-Gal & Gal, 2020; De Corte & Roose, 2020; Klammer et al. 2020) as part of the work of defining problems, setting the agenda, making policy proposals and implementing the resulting measures (Stasio & Solga 2017).

To train future social workers in this context, it is necessary to focus on developing these skills in the field during the students' university education. Believing in students' potential is a precondition for taking the risk of sending them into settings for which there are no preconceived formulas. We must have faith in their ability to make the most of their own professional resources in the face of ever-new stimuli that put their skills to the test. If students are afraid of making mistakes, they will fall back on a controlling and an imitative stance rather than taking a proactive and self-challenging approach (Sicora, 2010). It makes sense to expose students to 'storms' so they can see for themselves that human suffering cannot be disregarded or dealt with exclusively in an individual way or through caregiving. This exposure helps them to see that collective thinking and action involving intersecting and coordinated interventions are required. In this way students, freed from the comfortable grounds of training understood as a purely intellectual endeavor, are invited to experience first-hand today's social service in the field, a terrain that is more entrenched in complexity than ever before.

The present moment with its global health crisis and associated massive economic and social consequences is the right time to take preemptive and preventative steps. Even while collecting and analyzing the multitude of data arriving at services, now is the perfect time for social work professionals to think about "what may happen" and engage in a transversal reading of the phenomena looming on the horizon, opening their eyes to consider not only own areas of reference but also larger occurrences and hypotheses. Students offer a different perspective from the one of expert professionals, a perspective which is able to anticipate, see beyond and renew the vision of the profession. The challenge is to anticipate in order to mobilize and prepare, passing from continuous states of emergency (in terms of quality and quantity) to programs that are well-thought-out, connected, consequential and finalized. Social services thus need to comprehend, analyze and represent the changes that are taking place so as to face them by innovating and re-designing.

It is useful to encourage students to bring their own skills into play because activating their personal backgrounds allows them to assess their personal contribution in a professional context and trains them to make creative use of opportunities for professional discretion in

their work. It is worth noting, for example, that many students have demonstrated new areas of competence in the face of new challenges: following the impact of Covid 19 and the subsequent lockdown, they have been more dynamic in supporting the transition to social services delivered through new media.

## **2 Theoretical framework, research questions, and methodology.**

The theoretical approach employed in this article is the Policy Practice Engagement (PPE) conceptual framework, an approach that seeks to explain social workers' levels of involvement in policy practice (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2013; Fargion, 2018). This model hypothesizes that there are at least three types of factors influencing social workers' involvement levels in policy practice: motivation, facilitation, and opportunity.

Motivation focuses on what motivates individual social workers' policy engagement and assumes that their commitment is linked to personal factors, including skills, knowledge, and perceptions. The "Civic Voluntarism Model" (Verba et al., 1995) designed to predict the extent of citizen participation in politics is a useful source of specific factors in this context and, with some adjustments, may contribute to understanding social workers' engagement in policy practice (Ritter, 2008; Gewirtz-Meydan, 2016). According to this model, the three main types of factors influencing individual policy participation are linked to personal resources (various analyses, the political and interactional skills needed to engage in policy practice), psychological engagement (the degree to which people are interested in policy and believe they have a say, as an additional motivational factor), and recruitment networks (various adult-life institutions such as volunteer associations that nurture political engagement and develop civic skills, thereby motivating political participation).

Facilitation refers to the influence of institutional mandates and related factors associated with social workers' workplace, factors that enable, encourage, or hinder their engagement in policy practice (Gui, 2008) such as organizational rules, structures, and norms. Social services that encourage social workers to engage in policy practice build organizational cultures that nurture and facilitate actual engagement in policy practice.

Opportunity refers to how accessible political institutions are to social workers. Because this category assumes that differences in accessing the political process explain levels of involvement in policy practice, the opportunity factors are best examined through international studies.

This research was designed with the aim of analyzing emerging social work practices for students at the community level based on advocacy, awareness (Moreau, 1990; Ward & Mullender, 1991; Bifulco 2020), and engagement in social innovation projects with social policy actors, both public and private (Fook, 1996, Ife, 1997 Healy & Mulholland, 1998). The research questions explore how the specific organization of a degree program<sup>1</sup> helps to develop and integrate social policy construction as part of social workers' specific mandate. What curricular elements can be created to reinforce and innovate social policy learning, also taking into account the different students' backgrounds and experiences? The research begins by analyzing the relative weight of certain values at the beginning of the training process and

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<sup>1</sup> Training for social workers in Italy takes place in dedicated social work undergraduate degree programs, involving three years of specific professional training plus another two years of specialization for a total of five years. After the first cycle of three years, social workers are allowed to begin practicing their profession.

the way they evolve during training: what influences students to choose a social service training course? What role do students' experiences of participation and mobilization through social institutions and resources play? How do the course's educational experiences train students to participate actively in developing social policies?

The research considers training methodologies involving experiences in which students participate in an organized service activity out in the community as a way of gaining a greater understanding of course content and broader appreciation of the discipline and of stimulating their personal values and sense of civic responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999).

The research, conducted between September 2015 and June 2020, employed multiple instruments: between 2016 and 2020 707 anonymous questionnaires were distributed among first-year Bachelor's degree students in the STESS (Science and Techniques of Social Work) course at La Sapienza University of Rome, Italy's largest university. The number of respondents corresponds to approximately 96% of the first-year students in this degree program. The questionnaire was wide-ranging, addressing cases of students participating as volunteers or as members of associations, and exploring their prior knowledge of services, personal experiences determining professional choices, prior practices of solidarity with disadvantaged people and their vision of social policies. Of the total responses, 515 met the validity criteria for statistical processing. The questionnaire also included a set of qualitative, open-ended questions asking respondents to subjectively describe their individual experiences. In addition, the survey included an assessment of the influence these experiences may have had on their motivations to pursue social work as a profession. In parallel, 23 focus groups were held with students to assess their participation in three different activities: project-based learning, volunteer work, and internships. Finally, a discussion was conducted with a total of 7 social service professionals in charge of evaluating student applications (internship supervisors) and 1 focus group was held with faculty to better evaluate the outcomes of the research.

### **3 Outcomes**

The research shows that social service students are mostly active, resourceful and restless individuals who have prior experience in the social field. Volunteer activities: of the 515 respondents, 48.35% out stated that they took part in volunteer activities. These experiences encompass multiple areas, with a prevalence of activities taking place in the field of immigration and in assisting disabled people and individuals with limited economic resources and/or the homeless. Approximately half of the activities described were carried out on a stable and weekly basis, while the other half involved occasional activities pursued during the summer or as part of planned campaigns organized for particular events: earthquakes, targeted awareness-raising campaigns, emergencies due to natural disasters, etc. Most students reported that the experience in question strongly impacted the way they look at society and led them to reconsider their views on social relations and human rights. For 44.18% of those carrying out volunteer activities, the service experience also led them to take an active part in the association that had organized it. In these cases, students had the opportunity to actively contribute to developing programming and, in many cases, were also involved in awareness-raising initiatives. Regarding this participation, the research found that small-scale contexts with a very limited social base were the sites in which students felt they took on a leading role. The same is also true of cases in which students' involvement with large NGOs led them to participate in local chapters or specific sectors of engagement.

Students became involved in these experiences, in most cases, after being invited by key figures in already established groups such as parishes, scout groups, local village associations, school groups, etc. In some cases, the students' involvement came about thanks to members of their own families who were already engaged in volunteer activities.

Integrating special-needs students into school peer groups: the questionnaire also asked students to report other personal experiences that led to greater social awareness and interest in the social work profession and social policies. Of respondents, 42.14% mentioned integrating students with special needs, disabilities, or serious illness into the school groups to which they belonged as an experience that triggered their interest in social integration and struck a chord with them. In the space given them to comment on this experience, the point that stands out is that such experiences were not always easy or taken for granted, and for this reason they had greater relevance. Indeed, one out of four students emphasized that conflicts arose with their peers in these situations and that, in ensuing discussions, they felt the need to take the side of the most vulnerable subjects and take on an advocacy role on occasions in which the other person's condition of vulnerability or diversity was the target of hostility.

Caring for family members: a total of 22.33% of the students reported they had first-hand experience providing direct assistance to a family member or close non-relative because the person in question required special care. The reported experiences varied in these cases as well, but what they had in common was the fact that they were decisive in pushing the respondent to choose the social work profession. In the open-ended answer section, respondents recounted particularly difficult and touching experiences of assisting people with serious illnesses and loss of loved ones. Experiences of this kind left an indelible mark on the lives of a substantial portion of the young people enrolled in the degree course and, according to their accounts, contributed to their desire to grow in an aid-giving profession such as that of social service technician.

First-hand experiences: another significant element involved respondents who stated that they had first-hand experiences with having needed – or still needing - some kind of help, having received institutional care or, in some cases, of having been followed by a social worker. The sum of such direct experiences appears to play a prominent role in students' choice to enrol in social service studies and their displaying an interest in social policies.

Personal political convictions: The questionnaire focused in particular on the extent to which motivations linked to political ideology and/or ideal visions of society influenced the students' choice of study path: the results show that this was the decisive factor for 15.53%. 24.27% indicated that it was very influential and 28.74% that it was quite influential. Consequently, around 70% of the students reported having social ideals to a greater or lesser degree.

The questionnaire allowed respondents to describe the extent to which they saw engaging in social work as linked to implementing social policies, and in particular, the extent to which they connected their future professional context "to the choices made by governmental and local authorities to invest in social policies". The results show that students are aware of the link between social work and social policy design: 9.13% perceived a thorough connection, 29.13% saw them as two highly connected spheres, and 36.89% saw them as being "fairly" connected. 17.67% responded that social work is not very influential in relation to policy, and only 5.44% perceived no link between these two spheres.

Students who participated in the focus groups shared their thoughts about the social policy training they had received as part of their degree program, particularly in reference to the course's field-based curricular tools: internship activities and field research.

Visions of public policy: respondents emphasized that, before enrolling in the course, they had a very rough idea of the scope of social policies. It was only through their studies that they gained a more refined understanding of the contours of policies and how social service policy relates to social policy other areas such as health, education, labor, etc. They identified social policies as being fundamentally a tool for equality based in social rights, a view that replaced the residual and/or welfarist view of social service that some of them acknowledged having at the beginning of their studies. The areas of reform most interesting to students in recent years are immigration law, minimum income measures and provisions impacting the youth. This year's health care crisis has kindled particular interest.

In general, students reported finding some differences between the ideal of social service they had been taught in theoretical training and the reality they found in their professional internship experiences. They mentioned, for instance, that the bureaucratic aspects of services prevail over a more political and "activist" vision of the social worker. This finding was mostly specific to participants who carried out their internships in public administration contexts: these respondents described being only marginally involved in community care and advocacy activities. They identified social work professionals as being more closely connected to institutions and their needs rather than identifying with users. This view was less common among those who carried out internships in third-sector institutions such as social cooperatives and non-profit associations. In general, students saw case work as predominating and, with some exceptions, preventing professionals from dedicating themselves more fully to community or group work.

With regard to their impact with users, students stated that in some cases the clients had complex problems and requests that they found very difficult to decode and respond to. They often witnessed criticism and attacks on the part of users, aggressive reactions that substantially delegitimized the work of the services in question and their mandate as public and private organizations.

Almost all of the students critically noted a lack of investment in upgrading social services and ensuring adequate staffing. In third-sector organizations, local administrations, health care companies and cooperatives alike, the students experienced personnel and budget cuts and felt pressured by directives and stringent professional assessment procedures. They reported a tendency to take refuge in simply applying rules, avoiding responsibility for the micro-decisions that actually improve the quality of services on the ground. The students developed a vision of the social service professional as burdened with an amount of work that is practically impossible to manage while maintaining sufficient quality standards.

In the view of students who were close to graduating, social workers' input on social policies consists first and foremost in planning local interventions. In facing this task, students valued the training tools the degree course had provided them, stating that such tools prepared them to draft local-level policies by planning interventions to be carried out by local social services.

With regard to community work, students were able to visualize such work better in small and medium-sized town settings than in the metropolitan context. A sense of belonging, closeness

and making the most of informal resources was more evident in the accounts of out-of-town or commuting students whose training took place in rural contexts.

The role of the professional community: during the training period, students had the opportunity to learn about and appreciate the role played by the Consiglio Regionale degli Assistenti Sociali - CROAS (Regional Board of Social Workers) and Consiglio Nazionale degli Assistenti Sociali-CNOAS (Italy-wide National Council of Social Workers) in developing professional proposals for social agencies. As part of the course, students studied how the professional social workers board acted as a social party in drafting laws. Due to the celebration of "Social work day", they felt involved with and connected to other university programs and the professional community as a whole in analyzing current social issues and trying to suggest solutions through social policies.

The students provided two examples in which they perceived this involvement most clearly. The first was the case of various immigration laws, and in particular critiques of the "pacchetto sicurezza" (security decree) requiring social workers to report foreign individuals living in Italy without regular residency permits. The National Council opposed this requirement through its national communication campaign "Io non segnalo" ("I don't report"), a professional objection to a law considered contrary to the principles of social work. The second case was the lengthy discussion on implementing national minimum income measures and associated policy changes and modifications (particularly regarding the role of social services) in Italy's transition from Reddito di Inclusione (Inclusion Income) to Reddito di Cittadinanza (Citizenship Income).

Over the last year, the pandemic crisis and resultant closure of social services shocked students as many of them saw their internships abruptly interrupted. The professional board played a significant role in this situation as well, acting quickly to analyze the impact of the pandemic and support collective thinking about the best way to deal with it. The students reported that they saw this unforeseen event as providing a unique opportunity to discuss the orientation of social policies and potentially recenter them along three axes: the priority to protect people and their health over any other policy goals, the necessity for public services to be sustainable and their essential role in the face of an emergency as the current one, and the need to focus on the most vulnerable citizens through proactive policies that anticipate and not simply react to people's needs.

Civil rights movements: additionally, the students expressed their support for policies promoting non-discrimination and emphasized the need to exert social pressure in order to achieve full recognition of various civil rights. Their responses framed effective gender equality and the protection of women's rights as the most important of these rights and a strong feminist stance as crucial to the mission of empowerment that should be at the core of social policies. Social intervention ought to play a fundamental role in ensuring women's rights, in their view, particularly in preventing male violence. Furthermore, they expressed interest in the development of policies initiatives to ensure the full recognition of LGTB rights and believed social policies are needed to prevent any kind of active or passive discrimination.

Internationalization: the students who participated in the focus groups expressed interest in social policies not only as a national issue, but also in a logic of international solidarity. In other words, they saw social rights guarantees as requiring a cross-border international or transnational scope. A number of students in the focus group were themselves second-



generation migrants, with a two-fold belonging to both their countries of origin and Italy, and these participants were the first to note this aspect. In addition, some students said they had participated in international cooperation activities or were members of NGOs operating at the international level.

In terms of the university experience of social policy teaching, the survey shows that the students' training not familiarized them with the fundamental concepts, but also prepared them for a critical reading of reality oriented towards change and innovation. They viewed their relationships with teachers and the way training was conducted to be adequate. They appreciated the methodologies they had been given for comparing multiple European contexts to identify different social policy traditions and welfare models.

As one might expect, this perspective was also shared by students who had engaged in educational experiences abroad, the majority through the Erasmus Program. Practically all the respondents considered studying abroad an optimal opportunity for re-interpreting the Italian context through immersion in other countries' welfare traditions.

Students proved to be more critical of the university as a space for participation: in this case, they felt their experience had been fundamentally focused on achieving an objective (a degree), with fewer opportunities for engaging in cultural, participatory and student awareness-raising activities.

Supervisors' experiences: discussion groups were also held with the social service professionals responsible for supervising students in training internships or helping them with their thesis research. For these professionals, the experience of passing on social work skills to students helped them refine and enhance a vision of social work more focused on playing an active role in social policy development. It was almost as if the students themselves represented a source of nourishment for these professionals, an aid in recovering their connection to some of the profession's defining aspects (namely the construction of social policy) that had been undercut by various circumstances over the course of their careers.

In many cases students developed their thesis projects while working as social service trainees. As students often focused on assessing needed reform and innovation in the services where they trained, these theses offered insights for supervisors as well. The supervisors' involvement in the students' research led to their developing ideas for improvement.

#### **4 Discussion**

The research confirms the need for future social workers to carry out learning activities in which they are able to interact with professional and social contexts through practices rooted in experientially based pedagogical approaches (Furco & Norvell, 2019). The research identified three fundamental elements: the first is volunteer activities spurred by the students' own initiative. The other two are elements promoted and recognized in the educational curriculum of the social work degree: field research projects and professional internships (Butin, 2010; Jacoby, 2015).

Field research projects develop both personal and professional skills. They teach students time management for project activities, decision-making skills, personal and team responsibility, self-managed and self-regulated learning, and self-assessment and self-verification. Project-based learning consists of multiple distinct steps, including activities, labs, and research, with multiple interim evaluations and a final assessment to ensure teachers

are more objective and lead students to better learning outcomes. The weakness of such training is that not all students learn in the same way, making the teacher's role in applying this method crucial. The method itself may thus be limited by individual teachers' ability to provide help and support.

Internships are temporary work assignments that provide students the opportunity to gain experience in conditions as close as possible to real-life work situations. This method is not normally aimed at promoting social impact at the community level. The goal of the internships is for students to acquire certain professional skills and to apply the knowledge and skills they learned in university. The skills in question are highly academic, focused on the interests and learning objectives established by the university. As such, the subject matter and learning modes of internships are most often determined by the university. Typically, internships enable students to acquire the practical abilities through which social workers put their training into practice. This learning method has some advantages, such as increasing professional opportunities upon completion of the degree. It also seems useful in bridging the gap between theory and practice, as pointed out by the students involved in this research (Neve, 2013).

Volunteering is considered an altruistic activity in which an individual or group provides services without financial or social gain "for the benefit of another person, group, or organization." There are many types of volunteering: skills-based, virtual, environmental, emergency response, school-based, corporate, community work, social or socially useful work, volunteering during major sporting events, or volunteering in developing countries. The degree of student involvement in volunteering is high because such activity implies a strong desire to bring about improvements for the cause in question. The impact of volunteering is generally broken down into three categories: the impact of volunteers on the organization, the impact of volunteers on the community (end beneficiaries), and the impact of volunteering on the volunteers themselves.

The skills students develop during volunteering include teamwork, public speaking, time management, decision-making, communication and interpersonal skills, confidence, self-efficacy and a stronger sense of autonomous problem-solving and adaptability, along with the motivation to change or improve a particular area of life. Volunteering is considered a preparatory experience in the volunteers' field of study, offering young people the chance to access a greater range of professional opportunities. However, it is expensive in terms of time, effort and pressure in the same way it would be for someone working for a wage or salary.

The learning outcomes of these types of activities are used to specifically describe what is expected of a learner in terms of understanding and knowledge. These outcomes are correlated to cognition and skills. Cognition outcomes include content knowledge and understanding, while skills and expertise outcomes include transferable skills, basic skills, and other key skills.

Learning outcomes involving knowledge, skills, attitudes, feelings, and motivations are innovation skills, a skillset that is essential to ensure interactive dialogue among educational organizations, students, professional life, and the surrounding society. Indeed, Chalkley (2006) has argued that higher education's most valuable contribution to sustainability is providing large numbers of graduates with knowledge, skills, and values that empower services, government, communities, and society as a whole.

Through students' involvement and the reflections it generates among faculty, members of the teaching staff hypothesized that service learning allows students to grow by actively participating in services designed to meet community needs. Service learning is a course-based, credit-earning educational experience in which students a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility" (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999; Resch et al. 2020).

The educator and philosopher John Dewey associates service learning with the "democracy as a way of life" and "learning through experience" approach. "Democracy as a way of life" means that democracy is seen not only as a representation of the state and government, but also as "a form of living together that is dependent on participation, mutual responsibility and shared democratic values" (Dewey, 1916).

In this model, students' social service experiences are compatible with and incorporated into the academic learning objectives of the course. According to Kenworthy-U'Ren (2003), students in such a program are actively engaged in a discussion that comfortably encompasses both the content of academic readings and the insights they gain from experiences of working in the community.

Service learning experiences should not be confused with volunteering or internships. In volunteering, the focus of the experience is on the service, and the service provider is not the primary intended beneficiary. In internships, the focus mainly falls on the learning part and the providers are the primary intended beneficiaries. Service learning strikes up a balance between these approaches. Here the experiences deliberately focus on learning to ensure education for the provider and service for the recipient. An essential goal in service learning is that both the provider and the recipient benefit from the service (Furco & Norvell, 2019).

In this field-based pedagogical mode, the distinction between the student's role and the teacher's role becomes more flexible. Students are teachers and learners, and teachers are students and teachers. Participants rotate through the roles of student and teacher throughout the course. Kenworthy-U'Ren (2003) has also suggested that the integration of service learning provides a platform for discussing social responsibility and ethical considerations in the real world. These concepts become tangible to students through hands-on experience and observation.

Kuh et al. (2008) have stated that a culture of service learning may be a success factor for significantly improving student academic performance because it involves the practical use of classroom knowledge through community engagement. As an experiential form of education, service learning is highly important in that it contributes to building social skills, a work ethic, and practical competences (Eyler, 2009).

A well-planned course combining classroom content with service experience provides opportunities for students to engage in problem-solving and decision-making and may lead to a higher levels of satisfaction with their college experience (Moely & Ilustre, 2014). The use of structured thinking helps students to relate practice and theory in a way that contributes to their understanding and improves their ability to apply what they know.

## 5 Implications and Conclusion

This article has explored the relationship between social work training tools and the professional growth of social work students, taking experience as a key element in constructing social policies and focusing on the outcomes that can be achieved through field-based activities. These outcomes include connecting classrooms to the larger off-campus world while creating an ethical foundation for learning, emphasizing “how to” and reinforcing citizenship and service, giving students the chance to experience empathy in order to challenge existing stereotypes and personal values, supporting social work students' own development, and achieving socially desirable outcomes in the field of social policy.

Through these various methodologies, students are able to experience participation in an organized service activity designed to meet identified community needs, which allows them to gain a better understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and a greater sense of personal values and civic responsibility. In addition to project-based learning, professional internships, and volunteer work, service learning may represent a valuable new addition as a means of expanding and refining social workers' training in social policy construction.

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