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INCLUSION OF A THIRD (INDISPENSABLE?) PERSPECTIVE IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

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Introduction

Social work is a university discipline in Sweden. Universities are responsible for the qualified education of social workers. Being a part of the universities is an important reason why the education in social work, besides the connection to the practical work, has an explicit base in research and science. The two perspectives of practice and research are combined continuously.

Social work programmes have been criticized for the shortage of perspectives that include the voices and experiences of the people who are objects of interventions in social work, for example poor people, addicts, homeless people and disabled people.

At the School of Social Work at Lund University in Sweden, we have developed ways of including this third perspective in our education. Among other things we have extensive cooperation with different service-user organizations and we consult people with personal experience of drug abuse or disability, for example, asking them to act as lecturers and supervisors.

An important reason for including this perspective is that we believe that the voices and experiences of the clients and service users are an essential source of knowledge in social work. Alongside research and practical expertise, this is necessary in an evidence-based practice. We also think that it gives students an opportunity to broaden their understanding not only of the complexity, but also of the possibilities, in social work.

This paper gives a description of how we at the School of Social Work at Lund University work in different courses to integrate the three perspectives and to give space in the education as well as in the students' consciousness for this third perspective.

The first perspective: Social science and research in social work

As the social work education is a university programme it goes without saying that it is based on scientific knowledge. Results of research in relevant areas have an obvious place in the literature. The vast majority of the teachers work, or have worked, with research. About half of the teachers on the programme have at least a PhD; the other half have a degree of Master of Social Sciences. Many of the teachers have ongoing research parallel to their teaching.

The social work programme is three and a half years, divided into seven semesters, two per year. The first semester is divided into three parts: Human Living Conditions, Needs and Rights; Social Work as a Research Area; and Social Work as a Profession. These three courses give a basis for what will come during the following years. In the second semester, the course is called Social Science and Social Work, and the students have to reflect on how to understand society and individuals from different scholarly perspectives: sociology, psychology, economics, social policy and more. The third se-

mester focuses on legislation, the fourth semester concerns perspectives on social problems, while the fifth semester is based on field practice. After that the students learn to work actively with the application of social science theories, to develop their knowledge of scientific methods and to write their Bachelor's thesis at the end of the sixth semester. Finally, in the seventh semester, the students can choose a course depending on their own interest.

These elective courses in the seventh semester are mainly given to students in the social work programme, but are also open for students in the Master's programme, or students who just want to take one course. They are about Disabilities and Rehabilitation, Children and Young People, Family Work, Substance Abuse, Elderly, and Mobilization and Entrepreneurship. The programme is given in Swedish, but in 2010 we will start giving one elective course in English, Welfare policies, also open for students outside the programme and also coming from other universities. Finally, as the concluding course in the programme, there is a course in Professional Social Work that ties the different aspects of the programme together.

Social work as a research area is introduced in the very first semester, and during the programme the students increasingly use scholarly methods themselves in their work. Parallel to this, the literature they use consists of more general textbooks at the beginning of the programme; and more specific research publications, books and articles at the end of the programme. The perspective of social science and knowledge of social work research is thus well integrated and well provided for, which gives a solid base for this academic education.

The second perspective: Professional social work practice

Solely having a solid base in social sciences does not make the student a good social worker. As a second perspective, professional social work practice has to be included. After the education the students are social workers entering a field of practice where they are expected to match the demands of the employing organizations. Then they need the theoretical skills, but they also need to know how to put them into practice and how to adjust them to the organizations in which they are working. Further, social work skills are more than explicit knowledge. They also concern ethics, feelings, norms and other intangible aspects; and these aspects can only be highlighted and discussed during the education if there is a close connection to social work practice.

During the programme this perspective is built up continuously. In the first semester students do field visits and reflect on them. The procedure with study visits or exchange/interchange with professionals continues in different forms practically every subsequent semester in the programme. Apart from hosting study visits, professionals contribute their knowledge at seminars and lectures. In the second and third semesters professionals provide authentic national and international cases that students work with individually and in groups and analyse and write papers on, whereupon the professionals discuss and comment on the papers. In some cases this takes place in a panel, in other cases the professionals contribute written assessments. The international cases during the second semester, for example, mainly come from the USA, Russia and Singapore, due to fruitful cooperation with professionals since the development of an exchange project with students and educators.

The fifth semester, consisting of the course Social Work Placement, fully combines theory and professional practice. After a two-week literature course on themes of immediate interest before entering “the practice field”, the students prepare not only to fulfil their practice period but also to reflect on what they learn during this period, supported by a theoretical framework. After this the students are individually placed as trainees for a period of 17 weeks in social work practice, closely assisted by supervisors from the professional field. Most students are placed in a Swedish environment, but a rising number of students wish to spend their practice period in an international context. So 20–25 out of 160 students go abroad every semester all over the world, from Denmark, France, Germany and Italy in Europe, to South Africa and Uganda in Africa, and to other parts of the world such as New Zealand, Australia, Argentina, the Cayman Islands, India and Canada.

During the practice period the students do assignments over the Internet and reflect on their experiences, comparing the wide range of different ways to perform social work. The assignments highlight the professional social work, but also focus on ethical challenges and users’ perspectives of social work that they come in contact with. The semester closes with a final paper where the students analyse their practical experiences and reflections once again using the theoretical frameworks.

During the sixth semester of the programme the students study the differing kinds of organizations of social work that they have met during their practice period using organizational theories. The semester continues with the writing of a Bachelor’s essay, often inspired by vital questions from the professional field. Finally, the seventh semester concludes by making an intervention plan aiming at different aspects of social work. The plans are then discussed and commented on by a mixed group of researchers, teachers, professionals and representatives of user organizations.

In this way, aspects of social work practice are recurrently intertwined in the education and students get the possibility to develop a professional role for themselves step by step.

The third, indispensable, perspective: Users’ perspectives on social work

Through academic knowledge and professional training a good professional can be created. But, as Sackett et al. (1997) put it, an evidence-based practice is based on knowledge from research, professional expertise and the users’ perspective. In order to be a good professional social worker, you also have to be open to the perspectives of the people you work with.

The users’ point of view is therefore a third perspective that we aim to involve throughout the programme. By users’ perspective we mean how social work is conceptualized by the persons the social work is aimed at. There are some important reasons why we believe that an advanced and knowledge-based education in social work must involve the users’ perspective. In recent years the users’ experiences has been emphasized as an important source of knowledge in social work (Beresford et al., 1999; Socialstyrelsen, 2003; Krummer-Nevo, 2005; Kristiansen, Denvall & Heule, 2007; SOU 2008:18). In the debate about evidence-based practice in social work the importance of the users’ perspective has been clarified (Sackett 1997, Oscarsson 2009).

Another important reason to involve the users' perspective is that it gives us a possibility to problematize the relationship between and the dichotomy of "social workers" and "clients", which has a great impact on social work practice, but also on social work education (Börjeson et al. 2009). Social work education is a particular form of academic education, because it is aimed at profession working with excluded groups, people who are dependent or in exposed living conditions. For that reason professional social work cannot ignore that power and subordination are aspects that always influence social work. If we can construct a less hierarchical setting at the university, learning and experiences from this may inspire students in their future work as social workers (Denvall, Heule & Kristiansen, 2006). According to Hasenfeld (1992:269) "reduction of the power imbalance between" social workers and users will make social work more successful.

We also believe that the users' perspective gives the students an opportunity to broaden their understanding of the complexity, but also the possibilities, in social work. By making room in the education for users' as well as users' organizations, students get many authentic examples of how people who have been dependent and exposed can change their lives.

There are different ways to involve the user's perspective in social work education. In broad outline we use four ways at the School of Social Work in Lund.

One way, which probably is the most common, is to let people with experiences of exclusion tell their stories to social work students. We use this, for example, at the beginning of the first semester when the students are working with an exercise about human rights, ethics and users' perspective. Then we invite representatives from different user organizations to give lectures about their organizations and lives.

Another way is to emphasize that students should ask people they meet as clients about their view of social work. This is, for example, one task that students in the fifth semester, which consists of supervised vocational training practice, have to deal with.

In the seventh and last semester we apply a third way to involve the users' perspective in our education. Here we bring in people with experiences of exclusion as supervisors for the social work students and let them comment on the students' assignments from their point of view, parallel to the supervision and comments from a scientific perspective.

Finally, a fourth way is to create arenas where social work students and people with experiences of exclusion can meet and work together with mutual interests and on equal terms. We have done this in the first semester when students have worked with projects in a user organization together with the members. Once, our students developed an information brochure about a user organization together with members of the organization. Another time students and members of a user organization built up a library for the organization by begging for books from publishers, book stores and libraries.

The most advanced way to create arenas where students and people with experiences of exclusion can meet and work together has taken place in an elective course in the seventh semester where the students study together with people from different user organizations. Until now we have arranged this course for four years, i.e. eight semesters. The course comprises 7.5 ECTS and aims to focus on the knowledge that can be derived from a user perspective in social work education. Formally it is two courses with identical content.

For the social work students it is a part of the elective course on Mobilization and Entrepreneurship in their final semester of the programme. For the students from the user

organizations it is a type of commissioned education. This is the formal description. But when it is performed it is performed as one course with the same content and requirements for both groups of students.

In Sweden commissioned education makes it possible for universities to tailor and sell specific courses to organizations, companies and authorities. Within the scope of the commissioned education it is possible to grant exceptions from ordinary admission requirements. It is thereby possible to give a course at the university for persons that probably would not be able to be admitted in normal circumstances. In order to make this work there has to be active cooperation with organizations and funding bodies, since we, as a university department, are not able to sell it to ourselves. There has to be some external partner.

During the course, narrative presentations by the students are mixed with theoretical teaching on social inclusion, empowerment, and project development. Each semester about 15 students on the commissioned course and 30 students from the elective course in the programme are admitted. Until now 97 persons from 27 different user organizations and 286 social work students have completed the course.

No matter how the users' perspective is involved in a programme there is always a risk that it only turns out to be something sporadic – unless it is given a marked position in syllabuses and attracts attention in pedagogical discussions.

One factor which has facilitated our work of involving the users' perspective in the education is that our department has a long tradition of research based on users' perspectives. This research concerns social movements and users' organizations, but we have also a strong tradition in research of taking the perspective of the weak, in different settings. This concerns letting the voices of children be heard, as well as those of the elderly, of poor, homeless, sick people, drug abusers and many more; and it concerns understanding the clients' perspective on the social work organization as well as the employed social workers' perspective on the employer and manager.

Summing up

The three perspectives of research, practice and users are interlinked in our education, but also in our department as a whole. No aspect in education or research in social work can be free from any of these perspectives. The third perspective, the users' perspective, is though not always seen as obvious, however. When social work education is discussed in terms of academic professional education, the users' perspective is often forgotten. When researchers and social workers are regarded as experts knowing what is the best solution for people, people themselves are forgotten. Those who argue that an evidence-based practice, where professions base their work on research and just tell people what to do, they forget the main source of what evidence-based work is. Sackett et al. (1997), mention three aspects of evidence-based practice: research, professional expertise and the voice of the person in focus.

Social work concerns people's lived experiences; therefore it is not possible to be a skilled social worker without knowing how to reach people and how to understand life from their point of view. It is the same process whether it is about understanding an individual's reaction in a certain situation or whether it is about understanding overall developments in society. It is about taking the perspective of those whom it concerns. This

has to be practised during education, and it is just as obvious as that the education has to have the perspectives of scientific knowledge and professional practice.

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