

## **SW Education in Italy**

To understand the situation of social work education and profession in Italy, it would be necessary to explain some historical premises which it is not possible to afford in this paper. However a short overview is required.

Social work was introduced in Italy at the end of the Second World War. However it only received its legitimacy and juridical recognition in the second half of the Eighties when, for the first time, academic courses were acknowledged as the only educational path for social work in all Italian Universities, the professional register was established and the deontological code was drawn up (Campanini, in Campanini A. Frost E., 2004).

### **Social work education and discipline**

In accordance with the principles of the Bologna Declaration, Italy has introduced a national reform of higher education, which establishes two levels of degree in all university faculties. With regards to social work, there is a degree entitled “Sciences of Social Work” and a Master’s Degree in “Planning and Management of Politics and Social Services”. In the academic year 2008/2009 there were: forty-one B.A. (first level degree courses); thirty-seven M.A. (second level degree courses); and only five doctorates that have special paths for social work. (Trieste, Rome, Milano Bicocca, Sassari and Trento ). An existing problem with social work lecturers and professors is that, until now, very few appointments have been instituted for professors in social work. At the moment in different Italian Universities positions have been filled for: one full professor (Walter Lorenz); three professors; and eight researchers, coming from the profession as the general standard in education approved by IASSW and IFSW required. It is clear that part-time teachers with poor salaries cannot fully dedicate themselves to developing professional knowledge and engaging themselves in research activities.

As everyone knows the first document on Higher education in Europe was signed in Bologna in 1999 by the European ministers of education. Italian Parliament acted immediately (2000) to change the structure, adopting the three levels (BA/MA/PhD) required, but the philosophy and the methodology of the education has not at all changed.

The structure of the curricula in social work has been defined, as well as all the other disciplines, at national level, but with a strong influence of academic lobbies. Despite the orientation offered by the professional register, the association of Italian teachers in social work, and also a strong intervention of the EASSW, the result for the social work curricula is very unsatisfactory.

Out of 180 credits for the BA, the ministerial regulation foresees a minimum of 15 credits for social work disciplines and 18 credits for field placement! Many Universities stay on this minimum because they don't have professors in social work due to the fact that in line with academic policy they prefer

to create posts for sociologists instead of social workers. Despite the orientation foreseen by the Bologna process, as competence based curricula, the link between degrees and occupability in the sector are totally eluded: too many students are accepted in the courses without the possibility of organizing groups and following them in a more individual learning process.

In this very discomfoting panorama there are some good experiences but with the economic crisis affecting also the Universities, it is more and more difficult to maintain these rare excellences.

From the disciplinary point of view, moves towards the recognition of a specific scientific discipline can be achieved through the analysis of some significant collaborative work amongst the teachers who created the association, AIDOSS (Italian association of teachers of social work). Issues include work stemming from the processes of help to the unity of methods (Siena 83); the use of other disciplines to build up theoretical models (Verona 85); the concept of training as a part of the educational process and a representation of the theory-praxis relation (Trieste-1985 et Venezia 1987); and themes concerning social work as a profession and discipline, as well as education in a university context (Roma 1996). This theoretical elaboration encouraged more significant contributions that, once published, became a point of reference for the evolution of social work in Italy. The comparison with other disciplines has become closer and closer (Bianchi et al.1983), particularly with sociology. This relationship, once the mutual diffidence and the fear of colonisation have been overcome, could well consolidate the autonomy of social work as a credible discipline (Campanini, 1999; Gui 1999). The last step in this direction has been the publication of a dictionary (2005) that collects 141 terms, written by 130 authors and that now is in a revision and updating process.

The dictionary, edited by Maria Dal Pra Ponticelli, has been the result of a joint effort made by professors, experts and professionals belonging to different generations and different regions in Italy. It is a dedicated work, but open to authors from other disciplines (as sociology, psychology, political science) which contribute to enriching and better defining the social work discipline itself, where events, ideas and scenarios are deployed to illustrate the past, the present and the future of social work.

At this point, we can affirm that social work has a specific theoretical background and it is of primary importance that this be recognised within the academia as an autonomous discipline, and that posts are created for full time professors and researchers to reinforce the structure and the specificity of education in social work.

This aspect is also strictly tied to the need of developing research in social work that requires time and funds to be conducted: such an activity cannot be fulfilled by using spare time and occasional means. Here, we are experiencing a condition of absolute delay in respect for example of

North European standards, where publicity and debate about research within and for social work are at a particular advanced state and have been present for long time in the academia.

A further aspect of primary importance is the development of a broader, deeper and systematic confrontation at European level. The several initiatives undertaken within the Socrates/Erasmus Programme led to the awareness of the importance of a disciplinary consolidation of social work at European level. Of course, each Country has its own elaborate peculiarities, but a common basis can be identified. Discovering the common aspects, the basic dimensions, setting up a common theory of social work (at least in its nucleus) at European level, could bring a higher visibility of the discipline and a more articulated structure, where even differences may find a common point of reference.

Italian social work is now ready to get out of its shell, letting over provincialism and self-reference, arisen in Italy during these last years and partly justified by the need to set up an Italian means of social work, move aside and give new territories experience of a trans-national point of view.

### **Social work as a profession**

The profession, starting after the second world war, crossed very different stages: from an initial period characterized by interventions essentially of a repairing and charitable character; to the seventies, during which the case work has been strongly criticized for developing on a level of intervention centred on the collective dimension, with the aim to change an unjust society and develop new services.

After a first phase of consolidation of the services, which were by now almost entirely organized on a territorial basis, and a strong push toward the integration of social and health services, a new law in 2000 defined the general framework for the integrated system of intervention and social services (L. 328/2000 "*Legge quadro per la realizzazione del sistema integrato di interventi e servizi sociali*"). This law, anticipated for more than 100 years, recognises the social worker's figure as a sort of 'key role' for the construction of a integrated network system of social services.

The formulation that derived from the new legislative framework focused heavily on family appreciation and support, and on individualized projects to help people in need, but also underlines the importance of a preventive function, that leads one to work no longer and not only on disadvantages, but on the activation of pathways of well-being, of ease, of quality of life, on participation of social actors in determining the organization of social services and in the evaluation of the activities.

Unfortunately, immediately after this law the political climate changed and this reform was not implemented in many Italian regions. Furthermore, the constitutional reform of "titolo V" (L.C. 3/2001), which gave regional governments greater autonomy to meet citizen's needs, put in

discussion the national minimum standard for the provision of services, introducing the possibility of different treatments in relation to the place of residence.

Nonetheless this law created a new balance and, as Ascoli pointed out, overcame “the duality between the state and the market, and the evaluation of action fields rescued both from market processes and the public authority’s field. These action fields are based on charity services, reciprocity, solidarity, un-marketed ‘production’ of relationship and sociability” (1999, p.14).

The outcome of this process of change was the significant increase of those collective subjects (e.g. charity groups, social co-operatives, foundations, non-profit organizations of social utility (Onlus), self-help groups, and social associations) which fall within that category known as the third sector (Donati, 1998; Colozzi and Bassi, 2003). In some areas of the country (e. g. Lombardia) there are more and more attempts to have trials based on market criteria such as *vouchers* (Fazzi, 1999) for delivering social services, and also quite spread all over the country is the phenomenon of eastern European women (called *badanti*) who look after elderly or disabled people, directly paid by families without any contribution from the state. Nevertheless, this kind of “care market” is not yet regulated by the law and it falls within the area of *black economy*.

The growth of the third sector, and also non-profit organisations, was accompanied by an increasing process of relations between these organisations and the public sector, and consequently by a gradual decrease in state intervention and a significant increase in the quantity of tasks allocated to the private social field. There are measures called externalization that allow municipalities to delegate many services to the third sector or market organization under specific contracts or accreditation processes

In further analysis this model has also been defined as a *negotiation model* (Pavolini, 2003) or even *social market of services*, “based on a reduced financial effort of the state and on its capacity/ability of identifying families’ needs of services in order to orient them towards a private offer coming from accredited organizations, always more and more structured and formalised, in competition with each others” (Paci, 2005: p.140).

This liberalization process of social services, (that has been) common to many European countries with the introduction of managerial criteria in organizing social services, assumes some distinctive features in Italy which are related to the historic and cultural characteristics of the third sector in our country. First of all Italian culture is deeply oriented towards social solidarity (typical of the so-called ‘caring societies’), plus families in Italy play a key role as the main care givers (Naldini, 2003; Ferrera, 2006). Secondly, the specific nature of social services (low productivity and labour intensive) made them not profitable enough for private entrepreneurs (Ruffolo, 1995). As Ferrera (1998) argued the spread of particularism also played a central role in the transformation process

stressing the peculiarity of the Italian case even further when compared to other European countries

**Starting from this preliminary analysis, what are the effects in terms of opportunities and challenges for social work ?**

The problems that social workers have to deal with are more and more complex with arising issues such as the new poor; social exclusion due to transformations within family models and labour organisations; new forms of juvenile discomfort; new characteristics and problems due to emigration, new social risks, ageing population, long term and degenerative illness. Paci (2005) also stressed the importance of what he called the “individualization process”, defined as an increase of people awareness and the search of individuals for a greater freedom and self realization.

Together with this augmented complexity we assist now with the progressive withdrawal of the public engagement in the welfare state as an effect of neoliberalistic and managerial policies, but also of the economic crisis, that render it very difficult for public organizations to employ new social workers. All these factors facilitate the progressive involvement of both for-profit and non-profit sectors in the development of a new system of social services.

Nevertheless at this moment the majority of social workers are still employed in the public sector (53%), municipalities or consortia of municipalities, national health services, and the ministry. Yet there is an increasing number of social workers that are occupied in the third sector, very often with poor salaries or temporary contracts. The role of the independent professional is still largely untried (3%) and very often it entails work done for the public sector and not as liberal profession.

The possibility to operate as an independent professional is guaranteed by the law which instituted the Professional Register (1993) and it represents a significant change if we consider that, until then, the profession was conceived exclusively in relation to its allocation in public bodies and organisations.

One problem connected with temporary work or with under paid work is the high level of turnover and the fact that new professionals are engaged often in very delicate sectors, without being appropriately skilled to face the problems that they have to deal with. The result is a low quality intervention in the helping process.

This raises another question that is connected with the lack of supervision and professional support for new employed social workers.

Supervision is a request which is growing again after a period of silence if not of refusal. Its function may be seen both in relation to the quality of the offer of intervention to the client or as an element of burn-out prevention, a growing phenomenon due both to the complexity of the social problems, to the emotional commitment developing during the relationship with the client, and also to the

problems concerning the organizational dynamics (workload, political requests, turn over, low salaries).

### **Generalist approach vs specialization**

From the point of view of the organisation of municipal services, some elements concerning the debate on generalist approach and specialisation need to be revisited. Social work is seen as a profession that pays a global attention to the individual in his life context, in his territory, and to the community as environment in which to research and find new resources. The new law requires that attention be given to making plans together with different social actors to respond to the needs of the community. It must be recognised that the new problems arising require more and more competencies and diversified knowledge. Until now there have been different experiences: on the one hand we have organizations working with a generalist approach toward a specific community and taking care of all the problems; on the other hand there are organizations that divide social workers into specific sectors.

### **Case work vs group or community work**

The theorization of social work in Italy is oriented to speak about a tri-dimensional conception of social work: person/community/ organization always need to be linked in a process. In practice we can find more engagement in working with single clients that in trying to assess the problem and create projects involving groups or activating the community, or orienting the social policy.

### **Bureaucratic vs professional**

A sort of supermarket style of social services seems more and more common, with an apparent lack of thinking behind the work, and an active logic of giving an answer without analysing the situation. Case management and bureaucracy is increasingly replacing the actual case treatment, which involves accompanying and assisting people through their problems

Empowerment is sometimes considered as the possibility to choose a provider of care, but not as a learning process, starting from a comprehension of the problem, the enhancement of personal resources and not leaving people to deal with sometimes very difficult choices alone.

### **Passive attitude vs responsibility and political engagement**

In this critical moment it seems that social workers, in general, will accept the political constraints even if they bring the profession in a direction which is totally opposite to the principles and values of social work. They respond to the requests of the organizations, without discussions, with an individualistic attitude, claiming that the practice is something different from theory and that they have to respond to their institutions.

Particular attention must be paid to continuous education, whose task is to characterise the

profession during all its life cycle without limiting to basic education. This right is to be claimed at organisation level, but it also represents a personal duty of each individual working in the social work field. In our research we found that the 24.4% do not take part in seminars or congress, 7.1% do not spend even one hour per month reading professional literature and 50,9% read from 1 to 5 hours per month. This is not a very good performance for professionals!

The professional body has instated a regulation that will oblige social workers to follow courses for a certain amount of credits each year. The University reform, through the introduction of a credit system, could really make the building of personalised paths easier, where those returning to University with professional experience could enrich that experience with theoretical schemes and classes. Furthermore the teachers, by embracing the experience of these professionals, could enrich their own cultural background therefore ensuring their teaching is more relevant to the requirements of the profession.

The last reflection is related to the institution of two separate sections in the professional register connected with the levels of the degree (BA and MA) claiming the need to reflect on the different roles in social work, their use and their functions. Until now, the MA is not recognised in the social services as a title that allows one to work in different roles, only the possibility to apply for managerial positions.