

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PREPARING SOCIAL WORK PRACTITIONERS IN THREE EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

EASSW Project – final report

Rationale and purpose of the project

The aim of this project was to undertake an initial comparative exploration of whether the education of contemporary social workers in Northern, Western and Southern Europe usefully supports their practice, the extent to which this education sustained their initial first year in practice, and also their faith, at this point in time, in the continuing viability of their professional social work engagement. The question of readiness for practice, an important question in many different professions, has been tackled by different authors in relation to the ability to meet the clients and employers need, but also in relation to the professionalization process. This topic is also closely associated with the work in relation to the Bologna process, where core competences in different disciplines are defined, and the problem of balancing expectations of core European social work values and the demands of specific cultural and ethnic contexts must be addressed. Expectations across Europe show some basic similarities and differences and the whole picture of 'readiness to practice' is framed by the different welfare regimes in the context of national political variations in which social work is formulated and performed.

The project team choose to consider three different countries (England, Italy and Sweden) that represent different welfare regimes and different models of social work education.

Our aims were to see to what extent social work education provides effective professional knowledge and skills, and facilitates the development of personal attitudes and qualities. We wanted to explore whether the students feel ready to practice after completing their initial social work education to degree level. Specifically, how useful they perceive their theoretical and practical sources of knowledge, their personal development, their ability to evaluate their future achievements. Importantly we then wanted to interview the students after 1 year in practice, to see whether their 'preparedness' for practice had been realised.

Two further aims of the project were to give some consideration to the appropriateness and viability of building a research bid on aspects of this topic, and to disseminate the results of the project on an International and European platform, which would allow us to seek additional views from other European social work educators.

Description of the process of implementation

Two undertook a longitudinal pilot study in three Universities (Bristol UWE, Goteborg and Milano

Bicocca) representatives of social work education in England, Sweden and Italy.

Initially a literature review was undertaken in all 3 countries, from which the pilot was planned. After preparing an interview guide, for semi-structured discussions, we met 5 self-selecting, English speaking, social work students in each country at the end of their initial training in the Summer 2009 for interviews and again of the same people after 1 year into practice (Autumn 2010).

We used semi-structured interview to both maintain homogeneity between the interviewers and allow students some space to reflect and comment on their own issues. The core themes were: theories studied and their relevance to practice, personal development, professional development, evaluation skills and knowledge, perceived gaps and strengths in their training.

The strategy we adopted was to cross-interview, so the English researcher interviewed Italian students, the Italian the Swedish and finally the Swedish the English to allow students, as respondents, not to be inhibited from expressing e.g. critical views, and be minimally influenced by existing relationships with the course or its staff.

The limitations of this strategy were particularly that of language differences. Although English was a common language, it was not equally easy for everyone to express their ideas and thoughts. The interviewers were very conscious of the need to double check meaning regularly with the interviewee.

The data analysis was conducted transcribing all the interviews, reading and commenting all the materials, first individually, then with the project team together with the aim of considering commonalities and differences in relation to topic questions that arose from the answers of the interviewees.

As a group the research team met up to generate material for dissemination and to gain additional feedback on the material and knowledge base developing from this.

Conference papers, for dissemination and discussion, were presented at the International Social Work conferences in Durban South Africa ('Educating Social Workers in Europe. Challenges and Innovative Perspectives', July 2009) and Hong Kong (June 2010), at the first European Social Work Research Conference in Oxford ('Fit for practice : Are European social work students properly prepared? March 2011) at the ENSACT/European conference of social work in Bruxelles ('Resilience, commitment and hope: educating social workers for sustainable practice in 3 European countries' April 2011) –All authored by A. Camanini, E. Frost and S Hojer.

The project team have also disseminated the tentative findings by publication, and have submitted one article to the European Journal of Social Work (The making of social work practitioners: a comparative pilot study from England, Italy and Sweden).

(currently under review) and a 2nd ('Educating the new practitioner: the building of professional identities in European social work') on the point of being submitted.

Suggested by the emergent themes, a substantial comparative research proposal looking at how resilient professional identities can be developed via social work education is at the planning stage.

Outcomes and/or feedback on the project

The student orientated project provided some interesting findings, presented below thematically and country by country.

The analysis of the material of the first round of interviews was undertaken thematically in the following sections.

a) Theory and theory for practice understanding

One of the first finding was that there were some uncertainties in relation to what theory is, and what to do with.

All three groups of students demonstrated ambivalence about theory in their education. In relation to macro theory for practice – social science theory from e.g. sociology, politics and psychology: theory for knowledge and understanding of the world - all three groups of students contained people who realize its actual and potential importance and application, and those who did not. What came over from all the students is that the issue of ‘what can you do with it’ is crucial in relation to theory. Differences in the value placed on social theory generally may also connect to how well the student can apply the topic because of their own knowledge and skills, the teaching of such subjects in ways where application to social work is facilitated or not, and perhaps, though we have not researched this, the quality of teaching itself and of practice teaching. Moving to look more closely at theory specifically for practice (methods etc.) again there is little in the way of distinct national differences in what is taught and how it is perceived. An exception to this seemed to be system’s theory, (the ‘systemic method’) in Italy and Sweden which students thought was both useful and applicable. Solution focused theory and attachment theory, tended to be the identified areas for UK social worker students as of use to their practice.

As much as we can talk of a general pattern in all three countries it was the somewhat contradictory position of a high value being placed on the integration of theory with practice, along side the students finding it difficult to articulate specific theories, and indeed their tending to decry the need for this. The point about who is responsible for putting theory into practice is interesting, with an Italian student firmly locating this as a social work practice responsibility, but a far higher expectation that this should be down to the course coming from England and Sweden.

b) The position of practice in education

There are different ways of organizing field placements in the different countries. In Italy and England field placements are integrated in some of the courses, and students have some say in three places where they will practice during the education, albeit within some parameters (e.g. balance

between statutory and voluntary settings in England, basic and specialised services in Italy). In Sweden there is one full term when students are at one field placement. In addition to that there is an eight week course where some theoretical studies are done in relation to a practice field. Practice placements are believed to be very important by the students from all three countries. There was considerable discussion between the students about their relevance for social work education and the students' feeling of readiness to practice. The placement seems to fulfill different needs and roles for the students: (i) to understand what social work is about; (ii) to get a chance to test themselves and their future capabilities in social work; (iii) a kind of socialisation into a professional group; (iv) getting a sense of a professional identity and self image as a social worker; (v) to get personal feedback on personal and professional development.

But there were also worries connected with the practice placements. The Swedish system, where students only get one real chance to practice can lead to uncompensated dissatisfaction. Some students, from all countries, always want more time for field placements, while two English students were quite upset about their field experience of current practitioners.

c) The position of evaluation

The evaluation of social services is a very significant topic all over Europe and in many countries these evaluations are more targeted towards the analysis of the impact of social policies or social programmes, as well as to finding evidence based good practices.

However, during the interviews the students had little to say on the topic of evaluation per se. Mainly Italian and Swedish students though this topic would be shoe-horned in at the very end of the programme (telling in itself in terms of priority). However almost all the students linked the notion of evaluation with processes of personal reflexivity, discussed below, and supervision. Certainly they valued those parts of their training which facilitated this.

d) Personal growth and development

Our samples of social workers varied in the extent to which they felt such a focus on personal growth had been available to them of their courses. For example the Swedish students and the Italian students used the language of 'reflection', 'self-reflection' etc. at various points in their interviews, but differed in their responses about how much their social work educations had facilitated this process. Not all the social work programmes include personal development groups, as an organized activity. The Italian students seemed the most positive about the personal growth and development and perceived that the course helped them personally to grow and to confront prejudices. The Italian students were not specifically organized into classes to look at their personal development, but feel they should themselves apply the opportunities presented by the course- a different set of expectations.

The English students also reported little focus in groups on their personality and how it might/had

developed, though such areas as ‘de-stressing’, were reported as being taught. Some ideas in relation to how not to ‘burn out’ were expressed by this group of mostly mature students, but the course’s role in helping them personally develop was hard to perceive.

For the second round of interviews (after 1 year of practice) we report the findings in relation to the different countries:

England

All the interviewees were now working in social work jobs. There were some ambivalent feelings towards whether the education really had prepared them for practice. Several things were mentioned that the education did not prepare them enough for: going to court, direct work with children, knowledge about mental health, initial assessments in child *protection* cases, fundraising. Overall the English students appreciated their opportunities for genericism, both in theoretical and methodological terms, to cover a wide range of skills. In their work they did feel able to handle the difficulties and uncertainties that are part of the daily work in many social work jobs, including difficult, stressful cases with little managerial support and little supervision. Also evaluative opportunities seem to be very absent. Despite stories of bad teachers during their social work education, and things that could have been handled differently (smaller classes, more people from practice in the education) the former students ended up saying that you really need the education to handle the work, and to have the confidence to perform as a professional social worker.

Italy

The interviewees all had gone through the Italian state social work exam, which converts their degree to a professional registration and therefore the capacity to work as a professional social worker, but available jobs were short term contracts, covering for absences (maternity/sickness). One of the core areas of discussion of ‘readiness to practice’ in these second interviews was the lack of ‘fit’ between the conditions of work and the training. The nature of working to short contracts in different organisations with a rapid turn-over exacerbates this for the newly qualified Italians. The social work deontological code (ethics) which underpins their professional identity and was much valued as core learning by the students, brings them into regular conflict with policy- particularly economic- constraints circumscribing their practice in the municipalities particularly. The need for engagement with policy and politics was clearly understood by these young workers, who perceived as useful the policy teaching they had in college. One social worker who had work experience in Africa, argued that Italian Social Work training is not teaching the right things – it needs to look at, for example, strengthening communities, and ‘the solidarity of humanity’.

They also felt their training had assisted and sustained them with a range of skills in their current work– e.g communication, interviewing and engagement - as well as systematic thinking. The

most notable area however which college was seen as developing and which the students all valued highly was the development of a professional identity which could offer some resilience to the pressures, demands and anxieties of the work. What was evident, and surprising, was their optimism about the work and their expressed commitment even in what by English and Swedish standards are under-resourced and temporary work positions.

Sweden

After one year all the students interviewed in the previous step of the research were in job, and they were quite satisfied and enthusiastic about their work. To be a social worker in the real context of their job with personal responsibilities had lead them to consider their preparation differently. What they realized was that they were actually quite well prepared for their profession. They knew theories, they had skills, they were trained to reflect upon their way of doing, but at the same time they had the consciousness that 'it is impossible to be fully prepared'. They recognized the importance of having a good theoretical background as a tool to understand situations at macro and micro level: e.g. communication theory, law and social policy. Interestingly they commented on not only the content of the theories, but also teaching methodologies and the attitude of the teachers in presenting the lectures, and also groupwork with their classmates.

There was all these new workers' consciousness the idea that 'preparedness' is ongoing, needing reflexivity on their practice, of going back to the theories, of being supported by supervision and discussions between colleagues in a long life learning process.

Conclusions.

The above represent some of the findings from our conversations with students in three different countries. It seemed like degree level, academically located, social work education in all three countries is an unchallenged arena for educating new practitioners. It is taken for granted as the best way to be educated to work as a social worker and nobody in the study questioned the education as such, even if many questions were raised in relation to special subjects, relation between theory and practice etc.

The conclusions are of course, given the small sample, tentative and discursive.

The opportunity to present the project at a range of conferences (see above) has elicited a great deal of interest from other European and International schools of social work in relation to what prepares their students, and how this is specific or general in relation to different welfare regimes and cultural expectations. Colleagues discussed with us how best such evaluation of their own courses might be undertaken, and we believe that the project offered opportunities for colleagues to think through how practice can be prepared for in different ways.

From the levels of interest and encouragement we received we felt that the project was worthwhile, but could usefully be extended. One of our aims was to use the project as a pilot, to test whether this area would produce fruitful research.

The reflections elicited by the research –the students, our thinking, and speculation from other academics when we presented the work - have been particularly interesting in relation to the way in which professional identity is built and what role education plays in this. What has emerged particularly is, for all students, how much the building of professional identities – taking on social work attitudes and beliefs – is a part of what they become. What is not so clear is how social work education can best facilitate this and help these identities develop and, importantly, develop resiliently. So then not just *becoming* a social worker but *lasting* in this demanding profession. This project has helped us to not just consider the comparative issue of how, differentially, students are prepared to practice now, but also the methodological context of asking about professional development. It has also given us a great deal of material to take forward to address the issue of educating social workers for resilient professional identities.

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