

Introduction

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Social work education is not limited to teaching some basics of related disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, pedagogy, anthropology, or demography, and imparting a practice-oriented repertoire of skills and competences. These elements must be integrated and consistently fed back into the academic project of social work as a discipline, in which research and theory development are oriented towards the specific epistemological interests and positionings of social work and that shies away neither from academic exchange at eye level nor from the critical and reflexive engagement with social questions and needs for action. A crucial challenge for social work education therefore lies in providing knowledge and competences for theory-led reflection and research-based learning rather than providing a flattened practice training within a truncated understanding of *application*. Social work education must also address context issues in order to enable the critical engagement and understanding of how political, social, and cultural contexts shape and challenge social work. Furthermore, consistent elements of practice learning and field placements must be carefully supervised and well-integrated into the overall curriculum. These are fundamental requirements to educate future social workers as reflexive professionals capable of designing, delivering, and accounting for effective, ethical, and competent professional interventions. Holding all these requirements together and meeting them in the context of different professional and academic traditions of social work is both the central challenge and the reason for the heterogeneous characteristics and developments of social work education in the European and international context.

Offering a study programme in a multilingual border region opens the possibility to value the diversity of models, discourses, and traditions

of social work not as an obstacle but as an important opportunity to discuss and question academic and professional standards of social work in the light of growing transnational pressures on social policies and services, changing welfare contexts and paradigmatic shifts in social policy and intervention. In this sense, the context of the Free University of Bolzano has been and will hopefully continue to be a privileged place for a forum of comparative and indeed European social work as a common and critical space of thought and action to analyse and promote systems of solidarity and the answers they give in practice.

The contributions in this section provide reflections on the positioning of social work in different contexts and on the challenges for social work education and professionalism.

Walter Lorenz asks how to reconcile the claim to being a full profession and discipline, endorsed by a form of knowledge base that has universal scientific validity, with the necessity to ground professional competence in specific national, political, cultural, and social contexts in which service users live and in which concrete social problems arise. Against this background, he argues that a European dimension is essential in social work education and that all elements of the curriculum must be seen in relation to how social work practice is part of shared discourses and regimes of social solidarity that have their origins in the differentiation of European nation states and continue ever since in a variety of forms. The complex intertwining of histories, experiences and discourses make up a shared but never resolvable search for European identities that we must afford to help future practitioners to cope with the complexity with which problematic social phenomena present themselves in historically contingent contexts.

Urban Nothdurfter, Andrea Nagy, and Sabina Frei point out the potential of the multilingual border region South Tyrol as a laboratory for European social work. They show how the everyday challenges of developing a mutual understanding across language, cultural and national borders exactly point to the agenda of European social work as an analytical and political project.

Tobias Kindler and Lara Hobi analyse whether social workers agree with a political mandate of the profession and how they argue their professional practice as being political. The authors present quantitative and

qualitative results of a survey among Swiss social workers pointing out different rationales for a political mandate of the profession.

Martin Hunold discusses the importance of *understanding* as structure and habitus sensitiveness and as critical reflexive stance that must be developed as a professional habitus of social workers and social pedagogues. This requires a habitus-, structural-, violence- and socio-analytical attitude and research orientation that must characterise both academic social work education and professional training.

Anna Bortolotti, Mariarita Gervasi, Rocco Gugliemi, Mara Plottheger, and Angela Rosignoli focus on linking theory and practice and critically address the role of theory in field placement education, presenting the findings of focus group discussions on how placement supervisors refer to theory and understand its relevance and use in practice and practice learning.

Although not directly linked to social work education, the contribution of Katharina Crepaz has been included in this section as it focuses on the creation of participation opportunities. The chapter presents the results of a comparative research project on the political participation of persons with disabilities at a regional level in South Tyrol (Italy) and Bavaria (Germany).