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Social Policy in Social Work Education and Practice - Innovative Approaches

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Introduction to the special issue

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) defines social work as a “practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people” (IFSW, 2021). The IFSW definition also cites principles such as social justice and states that social workers need to “challenge and change those structural conditions that contribute to marginalisation, social exclusion, and oppression (ibid). It is clear from this definition, and others, that social work is positioned as a profession that undertakes both individual and structural work to promote social justice. Despite this focus social work has been critiqued for becoming a profession which upholds the status quo, rather than having a more radical or proactive role in challenging oppressive social structures. As Jordan & Jordan (2000, cited in De Corte & Roose, 2020, p. 228) stated, social work is a “dog that doesn’t bark”. Indeed Morley (2016, p.39) and others have highlighted succinctly the antagonism that exists between the “market-led demands” of a profession that has been critiqued for not challenging the current state of affairs and the need for the profession to be reflective and critical in order to maintain its identity and status as a profession which “promotes social change [...] and the empowerment and liberation of people” (IFSW, 2021).

However, as De Corte & Roose (2020) pointed out, the structural work of social workers has not been wholly forsaken. In their paper, they argue that social work can achieve its social justice role by engaging within the policy cycle itself, for example, by raising issues with policy makers, proposing potential solutions that are grounded in their practice experience, and highlighting the impact of social policy on the lives of the people they work with (ibid). Additionally, social workers could support the development of participatory social policy, as advocated for by Beresford (2016). As a bare minimum, it is crucial for social workers to be policy literate, but to have a more active role in social policy reform it has been argued that they must move beyond this and critically and actively engage with each aspect of the policy cycle (e.g. De Corte & Roose, 2020; Pawar, 2019). The way in which social policy is included and taught within the social work curriculum is therefore of great importance in enabling social workers to take on this more critical role.

Social Policy itself is a broad field of research. In recent years, the literature has been especially interested in adjustments or reforms of the welfare state or of certain social policy areas because of the global economic crisis and other perceived challenges like migration, aging societies, changing world of work etc. (cf. Busemeyer et al. 2013; Rathgeb 2018; Craig 2018). Discourses range mainly from retrenchment to the social investment perspective. A growing body of literature has been addressing social innovation through entrepreneurship,

organizational reform, forms of collaboration, technology etc. (cf. Moulaert et al. 2017; Hulgård & Andersen 2018; Bifulco 2020). What we know little about is the relationship between social policy research and social policy education. This Special Issue is therefore interested in the educational context of social policy and its implications for social work professionals and community practice.

This Special Issue

This Special Issue was initiated at an International Social Work Module at the Malmö University, which has for the past ten years been bringing together students and researchers from different welfare traditions (cf. Christensen et al. 2017). We invited contributions that tackle the development of students' knowledge acquisition and understanding in relation to social policy, social problems and living conditions from a diverse perspective. As we are aware that differences in social policy traditions, national systems as well as educational contexts may have an impact on the focus of social policy education (cf. Allmendinger & Leibfried 2003; Stasio & Solga 2017; Hamilton & Daughtry 2017; Kessler et al. 2019) we offer an international perspective with contributions from the UK, Germany, Estonia, Italy, USA, and Norway.

This Special Issue addresses the following questions in particular:

- How is social policy integrated in curricular content and educational practices?
- How do we train social workers to influence social policy?
- How limiting is the statutory duty of higher education institutions (HEIs) in educating social work students to be policy actors?
- How can education support a critical understanding of the role of social workers in policy-making in a sustainable way?
- What contributes to innovative learning in Social Policy and how is social innovation already happening at HEIs?
- What policy responses to new challenges related to the COVID-19 global crisis, Black Lives Matter or the Me Too Movement exist and what is the role of social work intervention?

We selected the papers presented here based on an open call for contributions. They examine the role of social policy within the context of social work education and its relationship to actual experiences of professional practice. Additionally, they explore the debates around social workers as 'policy actors' (De Corte & Roose 2020; Klammer et al. 2020; Weiss-Gal & Gal 2019), with a focus on how social work educators train or educate social work students to influence social policy.

Overview of the papers in this issue

A neoliberal focus is argued by Reeli Sirotkina & Kersti Kriisk (Tallinn University, Estonia) to dominate social work education and indeed as having reformed the educational system itself. Sirotkina & Kriisk, in their paper "Insider-outside view of social work curricula in Estonia - should one competence of future social workers be policy literacy", focus on

programme leaders' perspectives on social policy within the social work curriculum. The context of social work education in Estonia is presented as the precursor to discussion of the research findings. The authors present the challenges of including social policy in social work curricula, arguing that there is a need to develop both social policy knowledge and policy practice skills for social work students. Supporting the generation of concrete competencies, the authors say, will enable social work to take on new challenges and transform policy.

The article by Tony Evans (Royal Holloway University of London, United Kingdom), "Social Work and policy practice: group reflection and public inquiry" takes a closer look at the role of social workers as policy practitioners and proposes a framework for policy education in social work curricula. Starting from the 1980s the New Public Management approach in running public sector organizations has limited the playing field of social work practitioners. Still social workers have tailored policies to meet practical needs and have thus developed informal responses to policy challenges. According to the author, the concept of democratic education is a well-suited didactic approach, as it views learning as a group effort in critically examining social phenomena and finding solutions to social problems. Evans argues that applying structured policy reflection in social work education enables students to develop skills to evaluate the policy context of social work practice and to identify strategies that would advance their professional practice.

The article by Lluís Francesc Peris Cancio (Sapienza University of Rome, Italy), titled "The need to improve social work students' skills as future social policy actors: experiences and prospects in undergraduate training" examines the role of social work education in supporting practitioners as policy actors. Social workers are not mere policy implementers but also advocates on behalf of their clients as well as policy actors that raise awareness about social issues and propose policy solutions. For this purpose, they need to have an understanding of the historical and cultural context in which they operate in order to provide an integrated response to the needs of the community. Social work education should therefore reflect this. According to the author, this is best done through pedagogical approaches that allow students to interact with professional and social contexts during their studies. Next to volunteer activities, field research projects and professional internships, Peris Cancio proposes integrating service learning in social work curricula.

Mariam Zaidi (Church World Service, Vulnerable Populations Program) and Håvard Aaslund's (VID Specialized University/Oslo Metropolitan University) paper "Pedagogy of the Protest: Teaching social workers about collective action and the social policy context" addresses social movements as a feature of social work. The authors explore social justice and social workers' political engagement, drawing on international comparisons and contemporary examples to illustrate and critically examine social worker's responses to collective action. Within this, Zaidi and Aaslund explore social work education as a means to prepare social workers for collective action. Presenting a framework to support the discussion, the authors argue that the social work curricula should help students to become more self aware and to reconcile personal and professional views. This, say Zaidi and Aaslund, will enable social workers to better serve marginalised communities.

In the paper, "Professionalisation in low-threshold drug aid – between managerialism and practitioner knowledge", Joachim Thönnessen & Christiane Westerveld (from the University of Applied Sciences and Caritas in Osnabrück, Germany, respectively) explore the impact of a shift towards managerialism in social work. The authors situate this exploration within the context of low-threshold drug aid, presenting cases to support their argument that the care

based model used in this area of social work practice and the managerial model do not fit well together. The authors present an interesting debate concerning how aspects of social work practice, such as resilience and relationship building, can benefit from the business model which neoliberalism enforces.

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