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PRAISE:

Peer Review Network Applying Intelligence to Social Work Education

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Executive summary

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Table of contents

Partner: SFEP, Comune di Torino

www.comune.torino.it/sfep

ORGANIZATION: The Turin City Council runs social services directly through the Social Services Division or in agreement with private social bodies, for citizens in need: minors, families and adults in difficulty, the elderly and the disabled. The Social Services system is deployed throughou the territory with various services and professional roles, including coordinators, social workers, professional educators, social health operators, administrative employees, etc.

The Social Services Division also is required to check, coordinate and supervise the training of social workers, as it is the public body in charge of the Social Services For this purpose, Services for Life-long Training, SFEP (formerly, the School for Professional Educators) was created, accredited by the Piedmont Region. It is run by a director and it is organized in four units, three project units and an administrative unit. Each project unit is coordinated by a manager, supported by didactic professionals acting as course tutors, and by external consultants.

Aims: SFEP is responsible for planning basic and continuous professional development paths for social workers in relation to employment requirements not fulfilled by university courses, e.g., promoting the research, experimentation of themes connected to the professional profile of social workers, etc. Further aims are monitoring and checking social worker training by other training bodies in the city (the Turin Council may request the collaboration of the University and of the National Health Service and of other Social Services Bodies).

Teaching/Training Activities: SFEP carries out and manages professional, life-long, and distance learning training activities for social workers, using a distance-learning platform containing educational resources and hypertexts related to qualifying and life-long courses. The courses are targeted at re-training requirements, including regional authorities' qualifications, or life-long training courses. In 2004-2005, the SFEP qualified 430 social workers. SFEP has planned and is carrying out training paths to radically improve the Social Services system, involving some 1200 operators. In the PRAISE Project, SFEP's role was that of a pedagogic partner.

Supporting Activities: SFEP gathers informative material supporting research into service delivery to clients. It also promotes research into topics related to social professions and related issues.

Project Role: SFEP played a coordinating and managerial role within the PRAISE Project, elaborating and presenting the planning proposal, defining the final project submitted to the European Commission for approval and the financial agreement. It signed the contract with the European Community on behalf of all the partners. It achieved the specific tasks and implemented the stated projects, also writing the intermediate and final reports.

Local Experience – SFEP, City of Turin

The objective of this chapter is to describe the different aspects related to the constitution, planning and results obtained from the implementation and development of the virtuous circle [VC] methodology. The work done with the VCs was conducted by SFEP [Services of Permanent Training and Education], a component of the City of Turin Social Services. The chapter begins with a general description of social work in the context of the city of Turin. It proceeds to describe the need for change from the perspective of social services, concentrating on SFEP services that relate directly to the PRAISE methodologies. PRAISE was the vehicle with which SFEP reacted to these needs and initiated good practice training measures in production.

Experimentation with the methodology began in December 2004, and involved 32 social workers from the *Welcoming Services* team of Turin Social Services. This work consisted of three phases; firstly, the community of practice was formed and initial case studies were produced using the narrative description format conceived in collaboration with the UB partners. The second phase included analysis and validation of the documents, focusing upon critical factors and detection of formative needs, achieved through the use of expert focus groups. The final phase consisted of VC activation intended to provide a forum for Welcoming Services staff, including social workers, trainers, socio-sanitary workers, and administrative workers.

In order to understand the PRAISE experimentation in the Turin Territory it is necessary to understand the current status of social service restructuring, in particular the role of the Welcoming Services.

Turin context

Turin is a principal city in Northern Italy, as well as the Piedmont capital, with a population of 898,891 people[1]. Turin is divided into ten administrative districts. Historically, Turin has undergone strong industrialization, resulting in massive migrations of people from Southern Italy beginning in the 1960s. This mass immigration has fostered many problems, including unemployment, poverty, penury, and social exclusion. Recent immigration has expanded to include Third World countries, and this has intensified the social problems, thus multiplying the complex factors that social services have to accommodate in their own work. Such new situations include new emergency situations that have created a need to rearrange the role and function of the social services.

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[1] c. April 2005

Turin maintains social relief services in each of the ten administrative districts; these services are dedicated to welcoming clients and the evaluating their needs. These services also provide the structure that supports all potential users, minors, adults, disabled and elderly. This setup is intended to increase and improve the quality and operative capability of the social services, via dialogue with sanitary districts, through shared planning and funding.

In order to meet these needs, the *Social Relief District Service* is organized into two main components:

1. A component dedicated to the welcoming citizens into social services and assessing their needs in terms of social service functions;
2. A component which supports each category of social service user, e.g., minors, elderly, etc.

This composition allows the Welcoming Service to adjust form and function in relation to other relevant organizations. It seeks to minimize the critical aspects resulting from different organizational cultures, some of which might be dependent to socio-geographical differences throughout the territory. Furthermore, it permits the Welcoming Service to implement organizational, procedural and professional characteristics to support integration of staff and function.

Turin Social Services has a general goal of seeking to homogenise service standards for every citizen in the territory. This should result in equality of service for citizens regardless of which district in which they seek assistance. For this reason, the city has initiated a supporting process for the further development of Welcoming Service functions; it is this supporting process which empowers the PRAISE experimentation. In order to understand how PRAISE impacts, a description of the Welcoming Service is now given, as well as a methodological description of SFEP.

Welcoming Area Functions

All Turin residents are guaranteed access to Turin Social Services; access is given through Welcoming Services, which provide initial reception, assessment and assistance. Following initial enquiries, the service provides the following functions:

- Provide information concerning the range of available social services and social sanitary integration;
- Develop acknowledgement activities and react to requests of social relief by assessment and evaluation and providing immediate advice as well as orienting the user to other available services;

- Engage in counselling activities for any type of social problem;
- Observe and evaluate demands submitted by citizens, organizations and institutions, in cooperation with the social sanitary services according to defined protocols. This reception and evaluation process can include one or more interviews, a domicile visit, documentation analysis, evaluation of necessity, assessment of approval requirements to take charge of the demand, triage activity to prioritize actions, and establishment of appropriate allocation according to common protocols.
- Welcome and evaluate social emergencies;
- Collect information on expressed demands (direct or via third party) in order to evaluate access to services by citizens.

Welcoming Area Organization

A guaranteed maximum of five days response time has been made for a welcoming interview for all service users from the initial request. Access can occur in either via free access to the service by the citizen, within the time foreseen for that function or by previous appointment for those citizens who are not able to wait in reception. Normally the reception would take place at social service premises, but possible additional locations for welcoming services are tracked according to the needs expressed by the population.

Three tools for welcoming functions have been identified: electronic resources, both for data entry and documentation relating to the welcoming interview, as well as the Department of Social Welfare website which provides necessary information for acknowledgement and meeting social relief demands.

Welcoming Area Assigned Staff

Because of the pressures involved with the role of welcoming staff, including the subsequent needs evaluation, there is a high skill level requirement associated with the role as well as a thorough knowledge of the territory. Social workers who are exclusively dedicated to this role need to be present in sufficient numbers to guarantee service delivery to users, all year round, within the specified interval of five days following application.

The other staff who are not exclusively assigned to this role, e.g., educators, relief instructors, domiciliary assistants, and tutelary services, are considered technical

collaborators for the welcoming activity. These collaborators give extra value to the experiences and acquired training of the primary staff. Additionally, another role has been created, counsellor, which is different to the other roles who are functioning as cultural mediators.

In order to better understand the PRAISE experimental context in Turin, it is necessary to detail the theoretical framework in which SFEP began its work. The methodological and epistemological choices are typical for Turin social workers. Indeed, SFEP represents the arena where social service techniques are gathered and analysed. The following are some of the main components of this framework.

Maintaining a constant relationship between praxis – theory – praxis via a model based on learning from experience:

Social Work is an area of work that quickly wears down practitioners. This weariness can be endured if the work is seen through a research lens, research intended as a process of deepening and enlarging professional experience. One's professional actions become a source of reflective knowledge, and undergoing experience produces an awareness which enables one to gain and have more experience, producing positive cyclic feedback.

A mechanism through which this feedback can occur is written narration. Indeed, writing and externally expressing the subject matter enables an important objective distance required in order to facilitate deep consideration of one's own professional practice. In this way, writing can become the tool that permits experience to sediment and undergo a process of elaboration, which transforms the experience into knowledge, i.e., experiential knowledge of which one is conscious and aware. Moreover, writing introduces a third element, namely, the person who is reading and interpreting. This element allows for comparison, distanced in space and time, making the learning process more dynamic.

Experiential Knowledge

Experiential knowledge is that which accumulates and sharpens through (professional) practice. It can be differentiated from both scientific knowledge and common sense, since it focuses on *the sense* of practice. Normally, this intentional meaning of a social professional's practice hovers at the edge of scientific knowledge. Relative to common sense, it constitutes a pondering synthesis, which augments and adds meaning to what is endured through passive acceptance. This type of knowledge makes no separation between ends and means, what we do from why we do it.

Training enables path self-construction

The most appropriate training environment for social service operators is one that facilitates analysis and reflection of professional experience. This leads to conditions where the social operator allows possible knowledge to surface into conscious focus. This means that the operator is able to describe, to cast what is done by Social Services. The operator is able to create a space in which to determine relationships between actions and situations, to choose, advise and help in reflected experiences. The proposed training paths must be able to couple revision and mobilization of the operator's already recognized cognitive resources and skills, thus putting into evidence and then satisfying the formative training needs self recognized by the social worker. It is, therefore, fundamental to consider training paths that focus on the needs identified through the reflection, as these are active subjects in the new elaboration and reconstruction of their own professional practice.

The narrative tool

A social worker has no option but to elaborate and contemplate, emotionally and intellectually, what is experienced during normal work. This process needs to allow for the acquisition of contextual knowledge and truth, in order to produce and develop experiential knowledge. As listening, watching, telling and writing are all actions made by a social worker, the narrative tool is particularly suited to communicating the operator's daily work. The activation of this narrative tool as a means of relating experience to others, to sharing it, communicating it, creates the possibility of developing the virtuous circle, which can bring added value to the practice of experience.

The Project: The Culture of Welcoming

We now turn to a description of the training project itself, focusing on the culture of welcoming. The experimentation was targeted on people in charge of the welcoming service, namely, the social workers. The project was promoted and coordinated by SFEP, as this department is normally involved in training programmes for these staff members. Therefore, the next section delineates some of the theoretical premises which underlie the project; this will help to understand the methodological and epistemological choices made by the training services through their experience in social services.

The project: The Culture of Welcoming

PRAISE incorporated Turin social workers involved with welcoming functions based upon the hypothesis that these methodologies would better allow them to interpret their working experience in different ways. This would allow them to reduce the distance between thought and action while remaining coherent with the organizational philosophy, all during a period of great change for the institution. Particularly, the training project endeavoured to:

- Develop new support for the operating group, by rethinking and restructuring the supply of services to the client, that the services be more oriented to organizational values and delivered by operators;
- Develop a process aimed at achieving constructive attitudes.

Therefore, the method used is one that orients to sharing working situation representations and the associated characteristic problems.

A tool was needed that would enable the story reconstruction to facilitate narration, enabling a re-elaboration of the organization's past; this would help to avoid actions of denial or expulsion that are normally seen during organizational reflection and change. Yet also this avoided a sense of navel gazing or starting completely afresh.

More specifically, the method used was that of *training-research* that is meant to detect results which are intermediate yet still significant for rethinking and restructuring. These results should demonstrate that the operators are both active subjects in the process of change for themselves and their organization, but also active in their own training process. The training path has offered to the management, operators and others involved the opportunity for a series of observations, uniformly organized and accessible, concerning service practice and development.

The type of training-research aimed for has its roots in action-research methodologies, intended as knowledge development achieved together with the research subjects. This results in situating the research action along with the learning action, specifically here, allowing a group of social workers operating a social situation with the purpose of changing it. This situation puts the group in a research mode, enabling them to gain a new awareness of their own professional history, and thus through extrapolation, their professional future. A formative conjecture develops from this methodology, aimed at promoting the expression and comparison of their professional experience. This offers to each operator the possibility of defining herself as an individual in relation to other individuals.

So, in summary, the goals of this method are:

- To learn from knowledge of the current welcoming activities, in order to enable a training project seeking to strengthen such activities during a restructuring process;
- To produce good praxis documentation originating from case studies, proposed and elaborated in training circles that are intended for discussion, analysis and knowledge renewal. In this sense of *good praxis*, good does intend to judge, but rather signifies an effort to achieve improvement through analysis of critical factors, problems, limits and potentials of those involved in the situation. It also relates to the formative needs of those involved, of their fulfilment, monitoring, assessment and the entire process of restructuring.

We now turn to the project's three phases.

Description of the different phases

Phase I: Case study selection, production and distribution.

The importance of the social worker's role and the need for their formative support was paramount during the preparative work for the project. Therefore, the proposal developed around this role, involving representatives from the start of the project, during debate and planning of the workplan. Meetings to improve the knowledge of the proposed training model were held with the social workers. These meetings were always augmented with additional training in the use of computer equipment, the web, and specific software. Simultaneously, web documentation was prepared to support collection and diffusion of information related to case study narration. This allowed the case studies to circulate throughout the group and receive comments, both face-to-face and online. The case studies were categorized according to client types, e.g., minors, disabled, troubled adults, etc. The social workers defined some narrative parameters, e.g., actors, actions, scene, etc., and defined some keywords.

Objective

The first module was meant to promote the written narration methodology to the social workers working in the Welcoming Service. This enabled them to create an area of thought and to codify, in a raw form, their own professional practice, which was to be subsequently shared with other professionals.

Contents

This module is meant to promote the learning of contents related to the basic elements of computer science as a technological framework. Moreover, it is meant to yield those elements which enable the construction of a narration of one's own professional stories, as a pedagogic method to become fully aware or cognizant, putting a story face to face with its legitimate author in the optic of partaking of the authors.

Method

The social workers of the Welcoming Service were divided up into two groups, as not to leave the offices unattended. In this first phase the training path consists of a part relating to the *narrations* and one to *computer usage*.

Time

January, 2005-March, 2005

Computer usage

Aim: *Narration dissemination.*

Contents: *Knowledge of computer technology, including file administration, networks and the internet, databases.*

Methods: *one expository introduction, two meeting at social service operator premises focussing on simulating supply of direct counselling, one meeting at SFEP to summarize and verify module.*

Narration

Through the course of their job, social workers are required to author observations, reports, planning, etc. The writing requires a great deal of time and effort; they also represent a journey from the experience to its depiction that normally results in a loss of meaning and context. Particularly in many attempts at narration, there occurs a loss of some sense of the reality which leads to a sense of deprivation for both the writer and the reader, i.e., the writer is not able to express themselves adequately. The original, motivating experience, captured on paper, becomes non-descript and the reader does not find it as interesting as if a conversation had been the medium of transmission. Due to this, the idea to hold a module for narration writing arose.

Aim: *Acknowledging the elements which characterize the narration; ability to elaborate the work related stories in written form;aAbility of expression, through the definition of concepts regarding one's own professional knowledge.*

Contents: The function of narration and its theoretical elements; the narration as opportunity to "detach oneself without losing touch with oneself" (re-evocative remembrance of the events); definition of the elements which characterize the narration of the case studies related to minors, disabled and seniors.

Methods: Five meetings were held on this subject. The social workers were provided with the theoretical elements that characterize the narration and justify its use for transmitting professional knowledge, including conveying emotional aspects and also permitting reflection. The meetings focused on those elements relevant to the welcoming service functions. In particular, the writing was conceived and defined as a cognitive action that produced two documentary perspectives: 1) The writing as an opportunity to elaborate experience, via writing in a group to find a balance between the event and communicating it to others, and 2) professional writing, meaning keeping together a sense of experience of the workers and the fulfilment of institutional communication needs. The narrations were produced by the operators and uploaded on the VLE.

Phase II: Case analysis and validation, including critical factors and training needs definition.

The case studies were selected according to their perceived relevance, and the keywords and definitions were shared. Also in this phase, the use of blended learning was used. The case studies validated in this fashion constituted a central archive structured by topic and keyword. From the sharing of the case studies and the selection of critical aspects, it moved on to the analysis of critical factors and identifying the most important and recurrent problems, from the operators perspective. This process also helped to highlight the training needs as expressed by the operators themselves.

Objective: Creation of a system of selection and analysis of the documentation produced by the operating groups during module 1 (see above); Construction of a methodological tool enabling the structuring and transmission of a consolidated professional knowledge corpus for welcoming, in order to start a process of renewed elaboration of operative routines, lead by past experience.

Methods: The work began with hermeneutic theory. In particular, two parallel aims were set. The first was to construct qualitative research that identified possible models of organization and management for the welcoming services. Also, it sought to clarify the interaction between the personal and the professional perspectives. The second aim was to implement a specific training path based on the social workers' shared experience of good praxis on the specific issue. The main point of the programme was to use the narrative method to realize the sharing process for professional experiences. This method characterizes all the operative phases of the work and includes the identification of the learning process within the operative group.

The programme can be analytically articulated into two different sub-programmes. The first consists of a research process realised by a team of sociologists. The aim of this was to start a process of empiric interpretation of the qualitative documentation produced by the stories of professional experiences concerning the welcoming function in the social services, conveyed by those who took part in the training programme. The analysis was meant to identify the terms present in the narrations that relate to emergency treatment models. Furthermore, the researchers aimed to describe the social representations of those phenomena uncovered in the use of specific systems of elaboration during the qualitative analysis.

The aim of the second sub-programme was to realise a hermeneutic process that involved all of the participants, to construct a collective experience of narrative analysis. The process was articulated into three operative phases:

1) The first phase began with the formation of four cohorts, all formed by programme participants. The formation was meant to maximize diversity along the following criteria: a) years of service and b) professional contexts, e.g., geographical placement in the city, working domain, etc. All the group types had a specific assignment during this process and during this first phase the *selection* group was charged with creating a empiric classification of the narrations previously produced. This was achieved through focus groups, enabling a series of discussions centred on particular themes. During these discussions, an agreed definition of ranking criteria was made that was then used to score the narrations.

2) The second phase belonged to the *interpretation* groups who were charged with analysing the case studies selected in the first phase. As in that phase, the data building technique employed was a focus group. In this phase, focus group interviews provided a monitoring opportunity for the sharing of professional experiences and with which to identify the specific practice needs required for welcoming services. Both the first and second phases had two focus groups for each operative group.

3) The third and final phase was characterized by a total compositional change of the operating groups in the previous phases. The two new, equally sized groups were of *selectors* and *interpreters*. Again relying upon the focus group methodology, each group animated a discussion fostering a comparison between selection and analytical criteria. This final phase allowed all of the participants to share their representations of good practice related to welcoming services. These representations were influenced through the process of collective hermeneutic interpretation. At the end of these two group activities, the analytical results made by the research team and the case studies produced through the hermeneutic interpretation were presented in a final meeting. This final meeting provided a reflective opportunity for critical observation by all of the participants.

From a methodological perspective, this project represented an attempt to create a hermeneutic process with participant cooperation. Particularly, the dominant scientific interest is to observe the mechanism by which shared

beliefs and professional cultures are built. Since all of the focus group discussions were recorded, the research team could use the qualitative data in order to elaborate and identify interesting aspects of the construction of shared professional cultural models.

Another scientific interest was to identify the selection and interpretation criteria chosen by different social actors during this process. The comparison made in the third phase can be considered as interpretation of the interpretation process itself, i.e., the participants collaborate to realise a doubly hermeneutic process. At first, they analyse their narrations to seek similarities in their experiences and to identify the operational criteria for the selection and interpretation activities. Then they are involved in further comparative actions that help to plan a group reflection of their own working culture.

With regard to psychological and sociological professional aspects, this programme yielded the possibility to implement both a *task* and a *job* analysis with the direct participation of operators. This analysis is more specific and useful for clarifying professional culture terms than indirect participation. This experience serves as a starting point for connecting to professional training theory or to sociological and psychological conceptualizations of a professional culture.

Time: *April, 2005-June, 2005.*

Case Study Title	Key Concepts	Practice Themes: could include practice knowledge or lack of knowledge, informing practice, reforming practice, organizational context	Learning themes, theoretical and/or research work applied, importance to learning, module development
The rebel	Provoking attitude; Disinterest; Contrasting emotions.	Giving value to the teachers' availability. Promoting the overcoming of the parents' disinterest. Giving value to the girl's availability.	Social network, integrating the work of educational institutions. Conflict management.
From illegal minor to worker.	Foreign unattended minor. Multi-professional team. Street work.	Interviewing all the involved actors, e.g., relatives, social assistants, trainers. Overcoming the minor's distrust. Finding an agreement with the minor concerning aims.	Counselling techniques. Minors in other cultures.
A grown up child called Saladine.	Different worlds, e.g., Turin vs. Arabic village. Evaluation of a social assistant, school principal, adolescent.	Giving ear to cultural diversity. Taking into considerations the astonishment due to the habits of our context. Informing about our traditions.	Working with multiculturalism.
The purpose justifies the means.	Household. Minors, inadequate income, resources, institutions, volunteering.	Inadequate income. Overcoming the attitude of a mother to delegating the resolution of problems to the social services. Support, yet underlining individual responsibility.	Support for parenthood. Social operators depicting parenthood.
My son was born down…what now?	Trauma due to the delivery of a disabled child. Listening.	Welcoming and acknowledgement of the sorrow felt by the parent. Management of the feeling of powerlessness by the social worker. Aid proposal, proportional to the needs and to the resources of the Social Services.	Normality and Difference. Disabled children, management and mental representation. The social work in conjunction with the family of the disabled person.
Family abuse	Abuse and mother-child community	Listening to the abuse situation. Proposal of support. Moving away from home.	Abuse and maltreatment: social and psychological aspects.

Phase III: The training project, including the formalization of the course and experts.

This module allowed for full use of the online material and expository sessions. Through observation and analysis, as well as data collection and analysis, monitoring and verification were also achieved.

Objective: Redesign of the training.

Method: Redesign the training path on the basis of the new elements emergent through the focus group; definition of future scenarios; personalization of the tools and training methods.

Time: July, 2005 onwards.

Conclusions

The PRAISE training experimentation involved 32 social workers from the Turin Welcoming Services. During this trial, the each had the opportunity to meet to be able reflect on their professional activities. These professionals eagerly embraced the chance to consider welcoming practices encapsulated in cases studies because it allowed a concrete identification of professional actions. The actually production, the writing, of the cases studies met with some resistance, however; the participants found it less formal, more congenial, and less difficult to produce oral narrations. The process of writing case studies in the training area afforded the participants' resistance to writing to be socialized; this allowed them to face the task in a more relaxed manner. The PRAISE experimentation is still taking place in Turin and further developments, specifically the meeting of formative training needs, will be carried out by municipality of Turin as resources permit and in accordance with the official sustainability plan.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

Acronym	Description