

Theme 2: Development of curriculum and course contents in social work

Side by side, sharing knowledge, practice and life experiences.

The recognition of indigenous knowledge became part of the core competences of social workers at the university colleges Leuven-Limburg. This was translated into the policy and the curriculum through the participation of experts in poverty and social exclusion. These experts are 'social inclusion professionals' who finished a four year course. They are the heart of an inspiring methodology, developed in Flanders in 1999 by De Link. This NGO aims to train people in the promotion of their personal experience in poverty in professional contexts like federal public services, social work organisations and higher education. From the start lecturers of social work were involved in this project and they occasionally invited the experts in a course or supervision. Currently, the experiential knowledge is imbedded in the curriculum of social work. More specific, lecturers and expert(s) share knowledge, practice and life experiences side by side, as a tandem. By structurally integrating the experience of poverty and social exclusion, social work education is enabling future social workers to be conscious of several gaps which separates them from service users and to have the courage to be vulnerable and willing to invest in relationships.

In Belgium multiple possibilities to obtain aid from social services exist. Nevertheless they appear to be fundamentally unable to combat poverty and social exclusion (Casman e.a., 2010). One reason to explain the limited effectiveness is that social services do not sufficiently integrate the expectations and 'knowledge' of the people living in poverty. Hence, they remain blind to the various gaps which separate people living in poverty from the rest of society. However, the gap in participation and the feeling gap are of major importance. Living in poverty and being excluded from society marks the individual deeply. Shame, mistrust, anxiety, depression, a deep sense of worthlessness, ... are major obstacles to participate in society. In order to connect with society, people have to allow themselves to be seen. This is possible when they have the courage to be vulnerable and the willingness to invest in relationships (Brown, 2013). Understanding what this vulnerability means and developing the capacity for human empathy or connection is a core competence of social workers. By teaching and training side by side, the expert introduces this openness and courage to discuss and share life experiences in an atmosphere of equality, respect and reciprocity. Within this context, a meeting from human to human emerges and all participants let go of their prejudice or stigma. Hence, individuals and groups become connected and aware of each other and the circumstances they are dealing with. These insights reveal the structural mechanisms of exclusion, rather than pointing out individual responsibility (Bridts, 2016).

Vulnerability is a challenge for social workers, as they are trained to be 'professional'. Often, being professional is understood as being rational and distant, whereas meeting and being with one another as equal is crucial. Social workers have to enable the recovery of individuals and groups to develop self-confidence, self-esteem, self-worthiness and other competences. This recovery approach is a strengths-based approach and can be linked to the ideas of Paolo Freire (Freire, 1970). He introduced the idea of the "culture of silence", in which people are unable to reflect critically upon their world

and become fatalistic and dominated. When people bring their own knowledge and experience into the process, consciousness will rise. In this process of consciousness, dialogue and reciprocal respect are essential. Based on this idea, training in the curriculum of social work is typically undertaken in small groups with lively interaction.

During the workshop all participants will be part of the interaction. After a short session in tandem, impressions and questions will be shared, followed by testimonies of students' experiences. The meaning of sharing indigenous knowledge as an expert in poverty and social exclusion in social work education will be testified by the expert.

Keywords: experiential expertise, indigenous knowledge, vulnerability, consciousness, courage