How superdiversity is unsettling social work education

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Theme: Social Work Education

Keywords: Superdiversity, Capability Approach, Social Work Education, and Social Work Identity.

For social work education in the Netherlands, the rapid transition towards superdiversity means that its capacity to adapt to this new reality and to adjust to new and old students’ backgrounds, is fiercely challenged. The current polarisation in society emerges in the classrooms and makes it complicated to see this increasing diversity as positive, as a resource. The key question of this presentation is to describe how social work educators are dealing with the unsettling challenges of superdiversity. Two different groups of educators were asked to comment on the outcomes of a study among Turkish- and Moroccan-Dutch students, representing two large ethnic minority student groups. One of the dilemmas for educators is what is considered to be supportive and inclusive and reducing inequality in education. Two key theoretical concepts are used, ‘superdiversity’ and ‘the capability approach’. Both theoretical perspectives emphasize the urgency to involve students as ‘active agents of change’, by building a social work community to create opportunities for ongoing dialogue. To be able to play the pivotal role in the
upward mobility or emancipation of ethnic minority students the social work curriculum needs to be adjusted to diverse student groups.

One of the conclusions is that the social work professional identity itself doesn’t offer a lot of solid ground. The boundaries separating professions have blurred and many professionals are being asked to take on multiple work roles. The field of social work in the Netherlands is currently changing dramatically due to the transition of the welfare system. This challenges the role of professional identity in education and practice. We have to accept that professional identity is becoming more fluid and can be characterized as a process, more than offering solid support to find in clear demarcations.

. It is still difficult to acknowledge the diverse competencies, skills, knowledge and values that ‘new’ students bring into the classrooms and the profession. In a predominantly ‘white’ educational context, a rigid normativity by educators will reinforce the divide between them and their ‘new’ students. This conforms the need for a new unifying ‘we’, a dialogue ‘in which coming together is essential and for which diversity is a condition’ (Parker, 2003). In other words: the need for finding common ground.

One of the many dilemmas for educators is what is considered to be supportive and inclusive and reducing inequality in education, especially in a polarised context in which dialogue is hampered. Students need to be involved as ‘active agents of change’, by building a social work community and to create opportunities for dialogue. A permanent process of dialogue is required in which students and educators formulate their assessments and proposals for change.