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Is there anyone on the other side? About the opportunity of build educational social work focused on youth

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ABSTRACT

Social policies and welfare state in their different configurations are not neutral. Groups and individuals labeled as of higher risk have been prioritized to youngsters who in most of the cases have become unattended. In this article we value whether or not a youth-based approach in welfare policies should be considered and what would be the implications for social work in its double dimension of profession and particularly as an academic discipline For this purpose we will analyze the basic elements a youth centered welfare approach should have focussing our attention on social work education.

1. When young people speak. Listening from social work education

Youth is the stage in which individuals prepare to take on the responsibilities of adult life and define priorities and life projects. For this purpose, they need opportunities to help them develop their potential. In this way, they can become active members of society and contribute to its improvement. This necessarily involves the full exercise of their citizenship rights (Marshall, 1950). Resolution a/HRC/RES35/14 of the United Nations Human Rights Council urges states to promote and ensure the full exercise of all human rights and fundamental freedoms of young people and to remove obstacles to their participation and social integration (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2017).

The main instrument for achieving social cohesion in developed countries has been social welfare systems which, inspired by the principles of equity, universality and equality of opportunity, have sought to respond to individual and collective needs in the areas of health, education, pensions, employment, housing or social services. Since their inception, these systems have undergone major transformations in terms of coverage and intensity. Thus, at present, we are witnessing greater conditionality in terms of accessibility to services and a greater level of social control over users, which ends up being profoundly exclusive (Cummins, 2018).

Among the group of users who have not traditionally been a priority of social welfare systems are young people who, either because of their heterogeneity, because of the

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stereotypes socially assumed for their age group (healthy, energetic, creative, susceptible to experience greater drawbacks as part of their learning process) or because their care and attention has traditionally fallen on their families, have been neglected in relation to other beneficiaries considered to have greater needs, particularly in the ´familistic´ welfare models in Southern Europe (Moreno Mínguez, López Peláez, & Segado Sánchez-Cabezudo, 2012) . They have also been the first who have traditionally suffered the consequences of cutbacks in times of crisis. All of the former confirms that social protection systems are not neutral as they prioritize some groups over others (López Pelaéz & Gómez-Ciriano, 2019)

Today's young people live immersed in a double bond, since, on the one hand, they are presented as protagonists of the digital revolution, advertising icons and examples of healthy lifestyles, while at the same time they face a complex process of social integration, characterized by the difficulty of emancipation, a precarious labor market, and welfare states focused preferably on other groups (López Peláez, 2016). The situation is even more complex in those places where welfare states have been dismantled, have not been developed or simply do not exist. From the social work education perspective young people are a priority, not just as future social workers but also as a group at risk for multi-professional and multi-disciplinary teams intervention.

2. Surviving in 'multi-risk' environments

Numerous recently published reports reveal that today's generation of young people will end up experiencing worse living conditions than their parents. The White Paper on the Future of the European Commission (2017, p. 9) demonstrates this. Such worsening cannot be dissociated from the risks to which young people are exposed, the intensity of which is inversely proportional to the preventive educational and sustenance capacity that families, educational centers and institutions exercise over them (García-Castilla, De Juanas, Vírseda-Sanz, & Páez, 2018).

Young people are thus exposed to increasing levels of vulnerability. The European Youth Survey carried out at the request of the European Parliament and gathering the opinion of more than 10,000 young people from the 28 countries of the European Union (European Parliament, 2016) found that 57% of young Europeans felt that young people in their country had been excluded from economic and social life as a result of the crisis.

This exclusion is reflected in multiple ways. General observation nº 23 of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights states that the excessive use of internships and unpaid training programs as well as short-term and fixed-term contracts that negatively affect job security, career prospects and social security are not in accordance with fair and favorable conditions of work. Something similar happens with regard to the access to housing (General observation 7), education (General Observation 11) or health (General Observations 14 and 22) Economic, Social and Cultural Rights committee, 2019).

Vulnerability is particularly pronounced in the case of the so-called second and third generations of immigrants, in which many young people witness how the dreams that led their parents to emigrate crash for themselves due to scarcely inclusive integration models (Gómez-Ciriano, 2010, p. 85) that lock them up in work, urban and relational spaces from which it is very difficult to escape. This hinders their possibilities for social ascent and generates frustration that, if not properly attended to, can lead to rebelliousness, anger and

withdrawal (Body-Gendrot & Wihtol de Wenden, 2007; Scandroglio & López_Martínez, 2013; Standing, 2014).

Today's generations of young people also live in a context of technological development that previous generations did not experience and for which neither the structures nor the professionals of welfare systems, nor in many cases academia itself, are prepared. The fact that many of these young people are digital natives from a very early age affects the way they learn, relate and communicate. Technological progress is not aseptic and reshapes priorities and methods of intervention. It is, therefore, no coincidence that Communication COM (2018a) 269 final entitled ´Engaging, Connecting and Empowering young people: a new EU Youth Strategy´states the following in one of its paragraphs:

'Digital technologies have revolutionized young people's lives in many ways and policies need to consider both opportunities and challenges, by tapping the potential of social media, equipping youth with digital skills and fostering critical thinking and media literacy' (p. 4).

However, the acquisition of digital skills is not unique to young people, as another paragraph states that it is also the responsibility of those who work with youth:

´Youth workers themselves, on the other hand, need to adapt to changing needs and habits of young people and technological change. Youth workers have to upgrade their skills to understand the issues youth face online and exploit new opportunities offered by digital learning, in line with the European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens and the Digital Education Action Plan. Youth work has suffered from funding cuts in many parts of Europe. Such investment is therefore often challenging (p. 8) ´.

3. Insufficient responses to complex challenges

Resilience, adaptability and prevention are the pillars underpinning the strategy toward young people in the European Union and the United States. In the European case, the Communication from the European Commission entitled ´Engaging, Connecting and Empowering young people: a new EU Youth Strategy´ (COM, 2018, 269 final) states in its preamble that:

´More than ever, they need to be resilient and able to adapt to these challenges. They should acquire the necessary skills to contribute to prosperous, democratic and cohesive societies in Europe and beyond.'

The report entitled ´Vulnerable Youth: Background and Policies´ published by the US Congressional Research highlights the cultivation of resilience and the development of a sense of opportunity as key factors for positive youth development (Fernández-Alcántara, 2018).

In both cases, there is a commitment to reconnecting with young people who have been disconnected from the system, to involving young people in decisions that affect them, and to training them in intercultural, technological and conflict resolution skills that enable them to interact better with society. In the European case, the extension of the Erasmus + program, the strengthening of the European youth portal or the creation of the so-called European solidarity bodies are important elements.

Within the so-called structured dialogue process developed by the European Commission to test the needs and aspirations of young people for the youth strategy

2019–2027, eleven goals were identified, which were presented at the European Conference on Youth in Bucharest in 2018, one of which concerns quality learning and sets out, among other objectives, to: Promote open-mindedness and support the development of interpersonal and intercultural skills'; 'Create and implement more personalized, participatory and cooperative learner-centered methods in every step of the educational process' and 'incorporate methods within formal and non-formal educational settings that enable the learner to develop personal skills including critical and analytical thinking, creativity and learning' (European Commission, 2018b).

For its part, the abovementioned report of the United States Congress entitled 'Vulnerable Youth, background and policies' states that 'Young people who develop strong cognitive and emotional skills have greater opportunities to reach their goals' (Fernández-Alcántara, 2018, p. 35).

It should be noted that the articles developed in this special edition of Social Work and Education correspond essentially to some of these objectives.

Finally, special mention should be made of the issue of prevention: events such as the conflicts in Los Angeles in 1992, Paris in 2005, London in 2011, movements such as the 15M and Occupy Wall Street have provoked a hypervisibility of young people in general and have intensified suspicion toward certain groups: this is perceived in documents such as the European Security Agenda (European Commission, 2015), which literally states:

'Education, youth participation, interfaith and inter-cultural dialogue, as well as employment and social inclusion, have a key role to play in preventing radicalization by promoting common European values, fostering social inclusion, enhancing mutual understanding and tolerance' (European Commission, 2015, p. 17)'.

Consequently, together with the double bond referred to above, there is the bond of being, on the one hand, perceived as a risk and, on the other, of being at risk (Béhar, 1995; Cohen, 2011; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009).

What is common to all these responses, however, is the fact that they do not question the cultural and economic model that has led young people to precariousness, nor do they sow the slightest doubt on the actions of welfare systems in reproducing youth invisibility. In Diprose's opinion, 'It seems to be, in the end, an invitation to compromise with precariousness and inequality and to postpone any possibility of transformation. An opinion rooted in the omnipresent and dominant thought of economic neoliberalism' (Diprose, 2014, p. 15).

4. Youth from the educational social work perspective

Invisibilization of youth in our cosmopolitan societies makes it more urgent than never revitalize the view from the social work education perspective. This is basically because as this work is made with young people their needs, perspectives and demands should be considered (UN Conventions on the rights of the child, 1990). This, however, entails challenges such as ensuring a human rights perspective is embedded in the contents of the degree, master and postgraduate qualifying and post-qualifying courses in social work (Shapiro, Hudson, Moylan, & Derr, 2015)

All the contributions made for this special issue agree in identifying young people as their main audience. Analysis of the suitability of existing training programmes in social work and their congruence both with the Bologna programme and with the needs of

young people (De la Fuente Robles & Marín Cano, 2019), the internationalization of education in social work as a tool for broadening mentalities and developing skills of various kinds (Di Matteo & Ganne, 2019). The importance of technologies in education, understood either as one of the ways to redefine programs in social work (Aguilar-Tablada, Erro-Garcés & Pérez-García 2019) or as a learning experience that improves social connectivity, resilience and access to information (Castillo de Mesa & Gómez-Jacinto, 2019). The research process itself is addressed in the articles of Tina Wilson et al. (2019) and of Harrison et al. 2019 either focusing on the skills of critical research (Wilson), or on the Goal Attainment scaling instrument in the practice fields.

Finally, two case studies (Heinsch et al. and Domenech & Bartomeu) are included that emphasize the importance of the vision of secondary school students (Heinsch) and users as active participants in learning processes and as key actors helping to develop skills. The final result is a balanced and compact number of contributions that openly raise the difficulties young people face, the risks they run into, but also the real possibilities of emerging from their situation of exclusion and of being empowered through education in social work.

4.1. By way of conclusion: toward youth-centered social work?

The global definition of social work defines social work as a profession based on practice and as an academic discipline that promotes, among other things, social cohesion and the strengthening and emancipation of people from a human rights and social justice perspective that seeks to involve both people and structures (International Federation of Social Workers & International Associations of Schools of Social Work [IFSW & IASSW], 2014).

When referring to young people, their involvement implies that they have agency and are protagonists of the policies that affect them. When it comes to structures, it makes sense to understand the social welfare system as a structure in which young people are neither invisible nor excluded.

In this article, we have addressed how the different strategies that are proposed to improve the living conditions of young people fail to respond to needs that require a transformation of the existing welfare model, so that young people occupy their rightful place within its priorities. This means questioning an economic and cultural model that produces precariousness and vulnerable young people. It also means revising a university model that does not understand or respond, either through ideas or through practice, to the desires and ambitions of students who move within a global digital framework.

On the other hand, the digital society in which we are immersed forces us to redefine priorities and methods of intervention. The usual limitations of ethnography, linked to the influence of the observer on what is observed, disappear in netnography, since it can be observed and analyzed without influencing the field, in the digital sphere. In recent years, there has been an increase in the number and quality of online interventions by social workers, from those focused on relational models (Castillo de Mesa & Gómez Jacinto, 2019), to the use of information systems (Lagsten & Andersson, 2018) or social work with young people in local administrations (Mackrill & Ebsen, 2018). The demand for training in this field has also increased, from distance learning to research into new

technologies applied to social intervention (including algorithms and social network analysis) (López Peláez, Pérez García, & Aguilar-Tablada Massó, 2018).

However, one question remains: should we promote the creation of youth-centered social work so that we do not forget to put young people at the center? A model that could be defined as one that takes as its main field of intervention the problems of young people, from an approach to intervention based on the diagnosis of the situation of young people, the participation of young people in the design and implementation of specific social interventions, and the support for the life strategies of young people, with special attention to health, employment and youth emancipation? Judging by what we have been observing, this could constitute a field into which we should be delving deeper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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