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## **Community Service Learning in Complex Urban Settings**

### Challenges and Opportunities for Social Work Education

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#### **Abstract**

Urban diversity poses significant challenges for social work education in Europe's major cities. These challenges manifest themselves in an accumulation of conflicts, inequalities and fracture lines between individuals, networks, cultures, but also different groups and their institutional and political environments.

This current challenge for the education of the next generation of social workers is also related to the rapidly changing environmental conditions and complexity of the urban diversity. Urban society is increasingly fragmented and diverse requiring new knowledges and tools to support future social work practice.

The aim of the paper is to analyse the potential of Community Service Learning (CSL) as an approach that can be effectively applied in complex urban settings. CSL is an experiential learning format that integrates academic and experiential learning within a community service context. The participative training model identifies three basic principles: civic engagement, cooperative and multiple learning and the importance of critical reflexive learning. This paper builds on existing CSL literature and represents ongoing discussions in an Erasmus+ project, exploring social work education in complex urban settings.

**Keywords**

social work education, urban complexities, community service learning, experiential learning, partnerships, ethical considerations

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# Community Service Learning in Complex Urban Settings

## Challenges and Opportunities for Social Work Education

### Introduction

Throughout Europe (sub)urban areas face complex challenges. These challenges manifest themselves in an accumulation and intersection of conflicts and fracture lines between individuals, groups, cultures, classes, communities, networks, but also between groups and their institutional and political environments (governments, criminal justice systems, schools, social service providers, youth care). The complexity, fluidity and particularity of these conflicts reflect the intricacy of their causes. These include the gentrification of some neighbourhoods (Rowland & Bridge, 2005; Szirmai, 2019) and increasing social deprivation of others (De Graaf et al., 2015), transformations of urban spaces (Nissen, 2008), growing social inequalities (Dorling, 2018), superdiverse urban geographies (Vertovec, 2007) to intersectionalities of age, class, gender, sexual orientation and ableism expressed in issues of discrimination and the political discourses of 'othering' (Spivak, 1985).

For social workers and the educators whose responsibility it is to prepare them for practice these (sub)urban transformations and complexities raise many challenges. Adequate knowledge about urban complexities is fragmented, fluid and in many cases unavailable. It is also difficult to select which knowledges are relevant in which context, and how these different types of knowledges need to be combined, given the ongoing contested and contestable discussions on 'care and control' (Morrison et al., 2019). In what circumstances and to what end should social workers intervene, or interfere, in people's lives? What competencies are required in order to be able to assess when and how to intervene and who decides whether you have been 'successful' or not?

A separate challenge is intrinsically linked with the complexity of diverse urban settings. Engaging with diverse urban quarters to enhance learning processes for social workers is not a socially and politically neutral intervention. Political forces in certain European cities may, for example, try to discourage this learning process or even shape it, both for better and worse. Such interventions inevitably raise tensions and suspicions concerning negative surveillance of particular communities and othering of their inhabitants (see Birk, 2017). They shape the learning process exposing the heart of complex, intersecting tensions, making the learning process both a part of the problem and the solution. As such, social work works at an individual and community level requiring skills in social casework, but also in community development, advocacy and policy.

Despite these difficulties, social workers have to navigate these competing, contradicting and paradoxical urban realities. In order to support the challenging nature of practice, schools of social work are experimenting with a variety of models of university-community partnerships (Butterfield & Soska, 2004). Amongst these models is community service learning (CSL), defined as a "pedagogical model that intentionally integrates academic learning and relevant

community service” (Howard, 1998, p. 22). Even though multiple understandings and practices of community service learning co-exist (Butin, 2006), many models include three basic principles. First, the learning process of the social work student is driven by civic engagement, by a desire to put social justice into action, and the willingness to serve a valuable societal cause that transcends his or her self-interest (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Second, the learning process takes place in and with a group or community. There is an intentional effort to ensure that all stakeholders take part in and benefit from this learning process (Donaldson & Daughtery, 2011). Lastly, the construction of knowledge is strongly reflexive and experiential based, anchored in the needs and rights of the people and communities concerned. Within this evidence-informed practice perspective equal weight is given to service user experiential knowledge, practitioner wisdom and research evidence (McLaughlin & Teater, 2017).

The purpose of this article is to explore if CSL could offer an opportunity to prepare social work students to work with the complex challenges they face in urban settings. After reconstructing the building blocks of CSL (step 1), the article focuses on the very nature of urban complexities (step 2) and, subsequently, asks to what extent CSL might be an adequate pedagogical environment in order to learn from and grow throughout these complexities (step 3). The article builds on existing CSL literature, as well as initial local experiences in five European cities, participating in an ongoing Erasmus+ project exploring social work education in complex urban settings. A more comprehensive study including student perceptions and outcomes will be developed in a post Erasmus+ project paper.

### **Urban diversities: the development of a blended learning course**

The Erasmus+ project ‘Urban diversities: challenges for social work’ is developing and implementing a blended learning course that strengthens the capabilities of future social professionals including social workers, social care professionals, youth workers and community development workers amongst others to intervene in situations that involve urban tensions. These urban tensions occur where cultural diversity is often associated with migration, social segregation, inequality and social exclusion, although Kesten and Moreira de Souza (2020) found that diversity can also lead to an attachment of place offering greater opportunities for new experiences, greater tolerance and comfort with difference. The project is carried out by a consortium of five schools for social work spread across Europe: Odisee University of Applied Sciences (Belgium), University of Applied Sciences Utrecht (Netherlands), Manchester Metropolitan University (United Kingdom), University of Debrecen (Hungary) and Turku University of Applied Sciences (Finland). Building on an earlier collaboration, these schools developed a joint educational approach to urban tensions in diverse European urban settings.

The blended learning course consists of a CSL trajectory at the local level, combined with transnational virtual exchange (see figure 1). In the CSL trajectory, students cooperate with social professionals, local residents and lecturers. They explore with them the needs and assets within the neighbourhood and find out how they can contribute to the development of the community. In this way, students gain experience in professional practice. Reflecting on this with each other (reflection-in-action) creates a powerful learning process.

In the international teams, students exchange experiences. They present their experiences in practice using case descriptions and they compare the practical experiences in the different cities and countries. Students reflect on each other's experiences and include multiple perspectives (reflection-on-action and reflection-for-action). This is supported throughout by an international classroom with mixed country student seminar groups and international presentations on theoretical models, key concepts and tools for learning along with a national group to co-ordinate, implement and evaluate the community service learning.

Table 1: Community Service Learning model in action.

\* insert table 1 here \*

### **Community Service Learning: the model**

Community Service Learning (CSL) contrasts with classical ways of classroom teaching and learning in that it focuses on real life learning environments (Donaldson & Daugherty, 2011). Students serve society by engaging in a concrete community. They reflect in a structured way on their experiences, and thus they learn on an academic, social and personal level. CSL privileges experiential learning in real life situations which become the trigger and study matter from which a learning process evolves. Social work students can accompany children in care to a parents' evening, or unaccompanied asylum seekers to a school. Social work students and law students may give legal advice to welfare clients in a community house in an economically deprived neighbourhood. Ideally, this opens the potential to learn about a variety of subjects including poverty, class and exclusion in superdiverse neighbourhoods, about language barriers and issues of social psychology in the home context. They may learn about the complexities of migration law, human rights, labour law, legal provisions related to social rights, anti-discrimination law, and even property law. All these interrelated issues emerge from what students experience in real time, and not solely from scientific literature and class notes. They learn how to formulate legal questions by listening to the concrete needs of service users. They explore how different legal disciplines and subject matters are intertwined and improve their capacity of legal reasoning in response to multiple needs of social protection.

It should be noted that these comments do not assume that all social work students, or tutors, are alien to urban diverse communities. It is highly likely that some of the student body will have spent some, if not all of their upbringing in similar circumstances. They will have experienced first-hand the challenges, opportunities and precarity such communities face. It may also be part of the reason why they have chosen to become social workers. However, it does not mean that tutors and other students should use them as the 'experts' in urban diversity, no more so than we should expect BAME students to carry the burden of educating others about racism. Instead, we should adopt an 'epistemic reflexivity' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) identifying how one's experiences are located within a discourse. There is thus a need to give consideration to tutors

and students' connectedness to diverse societal and institutional contexts in analyses of urban diversity.

CSL has strong affinities with practice education because of their common link with real life learning environments. However, it is additional and complementary to the latter. Its primary objective is stimulating reflection on lived experiences and not the evidencing of competences in practice. In contrast with internships, the competences that will be eventually acquired by students depend to a large extent on what the latter have experienced and what they have learned from it. At the same time, a number of those competences may well be the outcome of the service learning process (Furco, 1996). Another important difference with traditional practicum-based pedagogy is that the learning process is not one-sidedly directed towards students, but is inclusive of all the stake-holders in the field .

In the following paragraphs, we discuss the three basic principles of CSL, the focus on civic engagement, cooperative and multiple learning and reflexive learning by experience. Even though we discuss them separately in this article, in reality, all three are intertwined.

### *Civic engagement*

Whereas a classic practicum-based pedagogy is still largely basic to the idea of acquiring well-defined skills through training and supervision (Tsang, 2008), community service learning is grounded in often complex and indeterminate practices of civic engagement. It is therefore closely related to generic community service or voluntary work, its setting and underlying motivations. Students commit themselves to a project that will benefit individuals, groups or communities. They execute tasks, launch initiatives, organise events, distribute information, bring people together, support vulnerable people by being with them and actively listening to their priorities, wishes and experiences. However, it should not be assumed that this is totally altruistic as students benefit from this approach by a greater in-depth knowledge of the community, their own motivation and it is they who will receive academic credits at the end of their educational programme. CSL anchors the learning process in society and places the student in the role of an active citizen developing civic competencies and responsibilities. The difference with generic community service is that community service learning connects service with academic course material.

The more abstract and theoretical material of the traditional classroom takes on new meaning as the student "tries it out," so to speak, in the "real" world. At the same time, the student benefits from the opportunity to connect the service experience to the intellectual content of the classroom. By emphasizing cooperation, democratic citizenship and moral responsibility through service-learning, higher education connects to the wider community and enables students to contribute to the alleviation of society's urgent needs. (Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000, p. 25)

As the quote from Vogelgesang and Astin states, CSL is not value neutral but explicitly aims to foster civic engagement, promote democratic ideals and be committed to social justice (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Meens, 2014); all of which strongly resonate with the ideals of social work education (Lowe & Reisch, 1998). Whether or not CSL manages to accomplish these goals has

been subject of much research and discussion (Annette, 2008; Donaldson & Daughtery, 2011; McMillan, 2020). This is discussed later in this article. For now, we want to highlight two aspects that are relevant to take into account when trying to realise CSL's ambition for meaningful civic engagement. The first relates to the role of the educator. The educator is invited to role model what it means to be and act as a responsive citizen. The legitimacy and credibility as a leading and authoritative mentor in CSL depend on this exemplification. The second aspect relates to the idea of citizenship. If CSL is about anchoring learning in civic engagement, then critical reflection is required to explore the nature and experience of citizenship. What does it mean to be a citizen while accompanying children looked after to a school, or while giving legal advice to deprived communities? What makes students responsive, responsible and competent citizens in these specific contexts? These questions are not always easy to address because the concrete expression of citizenship in practice is often contested. It depends on the broader socio-political environment, the value base of the 'citizen' and the interplay between the variety of contexts and power structures in which community service takes place (Annette, 2008). One of the key aspects of the learning process is to reflect and articulate the multiple meanings of citizenship (its ideals, virtues, competences). In this regard CSL draws on an epistemology of value-based reasoning in complex and uncertain situations. It distinguishes itself from a classic practicum-based pedagogy that is still largely deductive and based within a positivist paradigm (Cheung, 2015), that primarily focuses on applying predefined competencies and skills instead of allowing students to critically assess multiple meanings of citizenship.

### *Cooperative and multiple learning*

The second characteristic of CSL can be linked to new ways of innovative knowledge building in small, horizontally organized structures, or to grass roots experiments of deliberative democracy. CSL shares with these approaches an explicit participative and co-creative style of learning (Meens, 2014). CSL takes place with a variety of stakeholders: professionals in the field, service users, residents or active citizens in communities as well as educators (Gelmon et al., 1998). As Clayton and colleagues (2013) point out, "service learning pedagogy requires and fosters learning – often transformational, paradigm-shifting learning – on the part of everyone involved, including faculty" (p. 245). The learning environment is one which promotes reciprocity and facilitates a process of mutual learning. This of course does not mean that everyone must agree with each other's position all the time. Such a reciprocity involves a shared sense of equality, a willingness to listen to each other and an acknowledgement that each has something to learn from the other and that only by doing so can we learn the full picture (Miller-Young et al., 2015). Therefore, the learning environment should promote, and support differentiated learning trajectories according to the needs and interests of each stakeholder. Implementing CSL should not reserve mentorship and guidance merely to students but needs to extend it to all the stakeholders involved in cooperative learning.

This idea of cooperative or participative learning involves an acknowledgement that those on the receiving end of policy and practice experience both the intended and unintended consequences of such policies and practices. As Beresford and McLaughlin (2020) note, "to ignore this perspective is to negate any identified recommendations for change as at best partial



and at worst mis-informed” (p. 518). Effective participative learning leads to a focus on key community issues, more innovative problem solving and community owned results. This shared sense of equality is particularly challenging in a neo-liberal context in which the commodification of knowledge has become an important asset.

### *Reflexive learning by experience*

A third CSL characteristic relates to pedagogies of experiential learning which in social work literature is closely connected to the idea of practice wisdom (Samson, 2015; Tsang, 2008,). Experiential learning is often viewed as a fluid process of producing informal ‘tacit’ knowledge subjectively acquired through ‘hands on experience’ (Cheung, 2015; Gillard et al., 2020). It is socially situated and is not separate from who people are and can be shaped by experiences of power, and other intersectional sites of disadvantage, advantage, oppression and privilege. Personal development studies argue that experiential learning begins with strong, personal experiences taking students out of their comfort zone and placing them in a situation in which they are urgently called to learn new skills, challenge taken for granted attitudes, question internalized norms and values (Dochy & Segers, 2018). Experiential learning can be confronting, because participants in such a process are often faced with their own vulnerabilities, pre-judgements and taken-for-granted assumptions that have been blocking their learning abilities. A girl who has taken part in a trekking adventure with a group of young people from a boxing club reflected upon this experience with the following words:

The most important lesson that I have learned occurred when walking in the snow and ice: Step into the print of the person before you, because they preceded you in their trajectory. But leave also your imprint, in order for somebody else to follow in your footsteps. This insight counts also for life itself. Follow the path of those who have succeeded but leave also a trace for others. To follow someone’s trail, means that you can ask others for help. [...] Trekking in the mountains is hard. And that’s why you empathise with others. They are probably also tired, annoyed, or suffering. You fully acknowledge your weak spots, but also your strengths. Here’s a thing. One person has carried my backpack, the other has encouraged me. And the kindness of others has stirred up the kindness in me. (Claes, et al., 2020, p. 228, authors’ own translation)

As the quote exemplifies, experience-based learning is strongly embodied learning. It requires events that strongly affect a person on a deeper, existential level. The learning process presupposes reflexive distance in order to intensify self-understanding (the possibility to trust in the capacity of friendliness) and deepen understanding of the world (human interdependence). Reflexive learning by experience is a key feature of CSL. It takes place within a context of community service and civic engagement and is triggered by strong experiences felt in such contexts. In CSL reflexive learning is not only limited to personal experience and to personal growth. Since CSL strives for cooperative and mutual learning it often facilitates occasions for collective experiences and collective reflection, or at least a sharing of personal reflections in dialogical settings.

This does not fit well with traditional conventional competency-based pedagogies which Rossiter (2005) has argued are reductionist creating an emphasis on technical and prescriptive

methods resulting in social work academics being under pressure to be less academic and more technical. As such they have a tendency towards a consensual agenda negating the importance of critical reflective practice and awareness of the inequalities and power differentials within society. Hurley and Taiwo (2019) have proposed a critical-competency curriculum for social workers in Canada to try and bridge critical social theory and the positive aspects of competency education. CSL likewise adopts a critically reflective approach evolving around both the expected and unexpected experiences in real life as a starting point for learning. The competencies to be acquired cannot be articulated completely in advance but are discovered on the way. In CSL there is no guarantee that all students will acquire the same knowledges and competencies, because each experience resonates differently in each unique biography. This is not to make a claim of relativism but an acknowledgement that we experience things differently and that in reflecting upon it we can make sense of it and share it with others.

Shared critical reflections on personal experiences require time, a space of trust, a willingness to acknowledge one's vulnerabilities, but also basic hermeneutic and linguistic skills needed for introspection and self-understanding. CSL requires preparatory work in order to set the stage for shared reflection, safe learning environments and tools to stimulate reflection. Moreover, the role of educators is to shift from classic college didactic teaching to mentoring small groups of students and stakeholders in their experience-based learning processes. The students, together with stakeholders, identify their own goals, assess their own strengths and areas for development whilst identifying their own solutions and how the experience will help them achieve these. The mentor provides a safe, creative and non-judgemental space, with challenging opportunities and asking thought-provoking questions, guiding them towards relevant literature and theories whilst actively listening to the students to help them explore and reflect on their decisions and outcomes.

### **Urban complexities**

Could CSL offer an opportunity to prepare social work students to work with the complex challenges they face in urban settings? Before we formulate an answer to this question, we first explore the specificities of urban settings for social work. The histories of social work and the city are intertwined, including the historical Settlement movement in the 1880's in the US and UK (Henderson & Thomas, 2002) or Rowntree's (1901) study of poverty in York. Daynes and Longo (2004) have highlighted the pioneering work of Jane Addams in the US for her work at Hull House in Chicago, a settlement house working in area of immigrant families as an early example of community service learning in practice. Hull House was a centre for social work connecting the community to education and services whilst emphasising the importance of "application as opposed to research; for emotion as opposed to abstraction; for universal interest as opposed to specialization" (Addams, 1895, p.78 quoted in Daynes & Longo, 2004, p. 8). Addams also recognised that the house residents had a unique perspective of the lived-realities of institutions, but also that they had skills that could benefit the neighbourhood. Addam's work did not see Hull House as a service but also a form of activism to promote a vibrant democracy.

The intersection between urban settings and social work has largely been ignored or taken for granted in recent social work research and education literature (Shaw, 2011; Williams, 2016). However, Bryant and Williams (2020, p. 321) argue that we are currently seeing a “‘re-turn’ to place in social work research’. This is not surprising, given the fact that for the first time in history half the world’s population live in urban areas (56.2 percent in 2020), a number that is predicted to rise further in the future (Demographia, 2020). Increased and increasing urbanization will inevitably raise numerous challenges for social workers and social work education, since we know that one’s neighbourhood or city of residence can impact on social issues and life chances. Moreover, there is a demonstrated link between place, space and socialisation (Tonkiss, 2013).

Notwithstanding the variety and plurality of processes of urbanization, we distinguish five major urban transitions that are relevant to take into account when discussing social work education in an urban context: unprecedented demographic shifts through global migrations which lead to superdiverse urban populations, huge disparities in access to basic human rights and public services destined to support or protect these rights, renewed strategies of oppression and domination, the emergence of counterbalancing innovative trends, and the increasing valorisation of lived experiences and experience-based knowledge.

### *Superdiversity*

Contemporary cities are attractive for newcomers from all over the globe. Their (informal) arrival infrastructures, those parts of the city in which newcomers become entangled on arrival and where their future social becomings are produced as much as negotiated, allow urban geographies to absorb, at least temporarily, successive and simultaneous migration waves (Saunders, 2011; Schrooten & Meeus, 2020). Many urban areas throughout Europe are characterized by increasing ethnic and cultural diversity, “not only because the number of new identities is growing but also because identities are becoming more complex and fluid than ever” (Taşan-Kok et al., 2017, p. 8). Some accounts of urban diversities consider them a driver of growth and social progress, whereas others point at growing anxiety about immigration and segregation. This anxiety increases when social investment aimed at promoting spaces of multicultural cohabitation is scarce or has been cut. This may result in the existence of tensions between different ethnic, cultural groups, between second generation migrants and newcomers, but also between minority groups and their institutional environment (schools, municipal authorities, social services), which are expected to provide access to their rights and needs.

### *Dualisation*

While there are many positives for people living in cities, there are also vast population disparities which can lead to a two-tiered social service system. Insured individuals have access to state services whilst uninsured marginalized populations lack the needed access or care. Urban sociologists argue that contemporary cities are ‘dual’ cities with many internal dividing lines (Castells, 1989; Sassen, 2001). The city, in Tonkiss’ (2013, p. 20) terms, “embeds injustice” in spatial scale, with marked geographies of inequality in terms of income, housing, social class,

security, mobility, opportunity, consumption, power and privilege. According to Beauregard (2018), cities have multiple faces because of these contrasts and there are sometimes several cities in one (see also Szirmai, 2019). The precarious access of certain (groups of) urban residents to their basic rights is a particular challenge in this sense. What's more, cities are also often the scene of increasing polarisation of access to political, economic and cultural rights between the societal mainstream and the 'others' including minorities, along 'ethnic' or other lines (including gender, age, religion, sexuality, language, legal status, length of stay and life course position) (Van Ewijk, 2011), as well as ethnic segregation (Duyvendak & Tonkens, 2016).

### *Strategies and discourses of domination*

In urban environments with an increase of density and diversity conflicting needs and interests easily present themselves. Powerful groups are generally more inclined and able to secure their access to precious resources. Each urban geography has its own specificity, and the impact of these strategies is as fluid as the city itself. Whereas in a complex, urban reality these strategies mix and mingle, typically there are at least three ideal type strands that can be distinguished.

The first is a *strategy of neglect*, meaning that urban areas and their populations are left to their own fate. As a consequence, whole urban areas are weakened in their political resilience to claim a redistribution of resources and rights. Residents living in these neighbourhoods experience neglect as a lack of respect and feel judged on living in unpopular or poor city districts. Some residents abandon their hopes, or respond to this with non-conformism, internalizing stereotypes and thus perpetuating processes of (self) exclusion (Claes et al., 2020; Jamoulle & Mazzocchi, 2011; Willis, 1981). The second strategy is one of *containment and displacement*. Privileged social classes who control public bodies, or powerful economic actors deploy state or economic power in order to contain, and in some cases displace the deprived and oppressed. These efforts may be oriented to restricting deprived groups to certain areas. They may also encourage or simply force people to move so that the neighbourhood can become more economically attractive again. This has also been captured in the notion of gentrification which is "the process by which higher income households displace lower income [households] of a neighborhood, changing the essential character and flavor of that neighborhood" (Florida, 2017, p. 5). At the same time these powerful actors strip these people of their dignity and full citizenship by depriving them of secure housing (Appadurai, 2013).

The third strategy is *othering*, and *scapegoating*. This strategy is directed against specific minority groups (refugees, religious minorities, populations with a recent migration background, the unemployed, people depending on a replacement income). These images of the 'other', are often contrasted with images of the 'us', as having differing values that threaten our lifestyles, identities, institutions, and traditions (Allport 1954; Coleman 1995; Petersson 2003).

### *Social and political innovations*

Despite the processes of dualization, gentrification and strategies of domination that we described above, recent studies show that cities are also places of hope, development, social mobility, solidarity and empowerment. Cities are good for people and their well-being in many ways (OECD, 2015; Wienke & Hill, 2013). They offer (survival) strategies for people living in precarious situations (homelessness, addiction, illegality). Cities are hubs of innovation and creative platforms for forging change and new forms of urban solidarity. As such, they present opportunities to engage with and mobilise resources for change and to form creative spaces, relational networks and strategic alliances amongst different actors and for the potential of co-produced (social work) knowledge (Schrooten & Van den Broeck, 2018).

As a response to these forms of social innovation, (at least some) public discourses and policies tend to adapt their strategies. Public actors become more pragmatic, facilitate solutions on a local level, allow platforms of negotiation of needs, or simply absorb bottom-up formulated claims in their political agendas. With regards to cultural and religious diversity, Boccagni (2020) states that;

it is at the local level, and most notably in metropolitan areas, that cultural and religious diversity is critically negotiated vis-à-vis the assimilative pressures and expectations of receiving societies. [...] Local public policy is necessarily more sensitive to the problems and social dynamics which result from the settlement of foreign-born populations, rather than to principled statements. (p. 14)

Notwithstanding the counter-balancing potentials and tensions inherent in social and political innovations, the identified strategies of domination can easily weaken these innovations. Efforts to redistribute resources and rights are by no means guaranteed and remain uncertain and unsure.

### *Valorisation of experience-based knowledges*

A final trend is related to knowledge building and understanding that knowledge and power are inextricably linked. As Gillard et al. (2020) claim, “the power to act in certain ways, to claim resources or to control others depends on the ‘knowledges’ currently prevailing in a society” (p. 41). Recently, social work practitioners, as well as researchers, have championed the recognition of experience-based knowledge (Beresford, 2000; Gillard et al., 2020; McLaughlin & Teater, 2017). This wisdom tends to be personal, tacit and context specific. It is encapsulated in stories, metaphors, jokes, rap songs, and it is always embedded in concrete lived experiences. From a perspective of political and social justice, this experience-based knowledge contains at least two promises. The first revolves around power relations. Capturing and mobilizing this street wisdom can help oppressed groups acquire political power, and to claim a seat at the negotiation table in order to gain a more just redistribution of resources and rights. The second revolves around ethics. Capturing and mobilising basic ethical intuitions, underlying these practical wisdoms can confer moral status to oppressed groups in order to provide an ethical framework for modern city life.

This trend of revalorising the wisdom of social work’s service users and communities in which it is embedded, acknowledging the daily experiences of people struggling for their basic needs in

superdiverse and dense urban environments, has become more and more visible. It can be noticed in socio-artistic projects (Huss, 2017), participatory research (Beresford & McLaughlin, 2020), ethnographic studies (Zaviršek, 2006), experiments and platforms of deliberative democracy (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015), efforts of schools of higher education to encourage first generation of working-class students (The scholarship hub, n.d) or supporting young people who had been in care to access higher education (GM Higher, n.d.).

### **Reassessing CSL in complex urban settings**

In the following paragraphs we critically examine the model of CSL against the background of the five urban evolutions discussed above. We do so by mapping its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to appropriately address these urban complexities.

#### *The primacy of an ethical call*

The learning environments that are inherent to CSL expose students to the diversity and duality of the city. Students immerse themselves in an urban setting for an identified period of time, during which they interact with residents within the framework of concrete projects, for example reflecting with service users on how to realise their social rights with public officials or mapping conflicts and tensions around a social housing complex. Through this emphasis on experience and engagement students are inevitably *ethically called* to learn. They are exposed to the moral urgency of being capable to understand the complexities of urban interactions, and to respond appropriately to it.

In addition, CSL opens dialogical settings in which students are invited to reflect on their experiences, observations, stories and feelings of indignation, injustice, despair, powerlessness, but also of hope, creativity, resilience and enthusiasm. Experiential learning and critical reflection allow students to interpret their experiences, to connect these experiences with broader social transformations and to sharpen their capacity to decode urban interactions and frictions. These reflections challenge the taken for granted assumptions of students, which is crucial for social workers working in complex urban settings.

#### *Creating the conditions for empowerment*

Broadening the scope of reflexive learning to service users, residents, and stakeholders can trigger an alliance in which oppressed groups together with students succeed in jointly articulating and systematising experience-based knowledges. As we argued above, experience-based knowledge might allow urban residents to establish a solid position to negotiate on a more equal access for basic human needs and rights. Students should also be able to offer academic knowledge to support the citizens from the service level community and help understand and theorise the experimental knowledge.

In order to create the conditions to support citizens' empowerment, students should use a participatory field or action research approach, using the principles of co-creation which refer to

the active involvement of end-users in the various stages of the production process to create innovative public services that actually meet the needs of citizens (Van Acker et al., 2021). As Lorenzetti (2013) notes, to support an urban resident to successfully access a foodbank does nothing to challenge the inequalities and structural problems that have led to foodbanks becoming part of the European and international social fabric.

A key focus throughout the project should be: how does the research process and its intermittent results contribute to creating the conditions for the empowerment of the oppressed, and to creating political impact? Moreover, CSL should be well prepared, with a thorough consideration of the 'field' where it will take place, as well as a well thought-out learning trajectory for all the stakeholders which is well planned and based within a shared ethical framework that adopts an anti-oppressive approach (Laird, 2008).

### *The pressure of authoritarian settings*

One of the important findings of comparing different urban settings throughout European cities, is the particularity of each urban geography. Whereas cities like Brussels or Utrecht create considerable possibilities of social and political bottom-up innovations, other urban areas (especially in Eastern Europe) are much more embedded in conservative, authoritarian styles of governance. These authoritarian settings have an important impact on the prospects of CSL, from the perspective of professional social work organisations, as well as from the nature of the educational culture. Students as well as social work professional are socialized in a public culture of 'obedience' based on rules and procedures (Harrikari et al., 2014). This culture sits ill with the core essentials of CSL. It undermines reflection on experience, and valuing reflexivity and the lived experiences of the oppressed. Introducing CSL in such an authoritarian context may even produce counter-productive effects where it can be interpreted as civil obedience, instead of exposing oneself to a variety of cultural traditions, and to the ethical call of social justice. Furthermore, CSL might be seen as a subversive pedagogical approach with no legitimacy, given the prevailing state-imposed ideology. It risks being seen as dangerous and complicit in pursuing the interests of excluded minority groups. It could also be viewed as a means of controlling communities by promising co-creation and participation but instead being used as a tokenistic tool for manipulation and non-participation (Arnstein, 1969).

### *The pitfall of pragmatism*

One of the most invisible pitfalls that endanger an adequate match between CSL and urban dynamics, pertains to pragmatic attitudes and strategies of both schools of higher education and social work organisations (McKay, 2010). Such pragmatism privileges short time perspectives and seeks the quickest, most efficient time investments. In such a logic CSL easily becomes one of many trajectories that have to be managed and reported efficiently, next to a bulk of other activities. Social work organisations, on the one hand, might host students pragmatically as useful additional labour force or potential employees, assessing exchange of experiences and reflections as redundant and time consuming. Universities and students, on the other hand, might reproduce social inequalities, colonising urban skills and street wisdom for

their faculty, leaving urban residents with no gains, no assets and no change of their situation. Instead leaving residents disillusioned and exploited, refusing to engage with universities or students again. Falling short in investing in solid and grounded preparatory work and failing to answer what urban residents are likely to get out of their involvement in CSL risks negative engagement and alienation.

## **Conclusion**

This article started from the observation that urban tensions and complexities pose multiple epistemic challenges to social work education. The first related to a (re)turn to place in social work education and the need to synthesise previous knowledges with current contexts to allow for a deeper understanding of these urban complexities. The second revolved around a lack of know-how in selecting and combining different types of knowledge in order to appropriately understand and address these complexities, particularly the experiential knowledge of both residents and practitioners which tends to be both tacit and unwritten. The third pertained to contested nature and difficulties as to knowing the appropriate role and positioning of social work in urban settings.

One response to this challenge of urban complexities is community service learning (CSL). However, this not a panacea and may not work in all urban settings particularly in those with more authoritarian regimes. We are also not claiming that CSL will not work in rural settings, but have focused on urban settings where increasingly more and more people are choosing to live. This article critically confronted CSL within modern urban settings and sought to tease out its potential to work within superdiversity, dualization of cities, stereotypes and discourses, the potential for social and political innovation and the valorisation of experiential knowledges. With its features of civic engagement and the importance of critical reflexivity it offers an additional and complementary learning opportunity at another level for the social work students co-producing learning with local community members on mutually agreed issues. As such it complements practice learning or practicums and challenges students to confront social inequalities and oppression whilst challenging academics to act as mentors but also highlights the need to prepare both students and community members to create the conditions for empowerment within an ethical social justice framework. It potentially offers social work students a unique learning opportunity but is not without risks for students and communities requiring careful planning and preparation. It does however challenge students to go beyond individualised practice and to begin to identify and experience issues at a social and political level which is currently being marginalised in many social work programmes. It requires students to be able to work at individual, group and community levels requiring casework, groupwork and community development skills. Social work education needs to evaluate effective ways of addressing these challenges. We are not claiming that CSL is the only answer, but we do believe it provides glimpses of a potential way forward that seeks to integrate different knowledges and experiences to provide an impactful learning experience for social work students.

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No potential competing interest was reported by the authors.

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