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# 1 **The redesign of field placement for social work students during the** 2 **pandemic. An Italian case study.**

## 3 Abstract

4 The first wave of the spread of Covid-19 was contrasted by many countries through a severe  
5 lockdown of working and learning activities. One of the solutions for preserving the  
6 continuity of teaching activities was the adoption of different forms of remote teaching. A  
7 similar “translation” has been adopted by many universities for re-organizing field  
8 placement<sup>1</sup>. This decision was undertaken by bachelor programs in Social Work in Italy too.  
9 However, since field placements rely on the physical presence and the participation of  
10 students in the activities performed by social workers, this shift was particularly challenging.  
11 Moreover, remote interactions hinder the possibility of observing the distinctive relational  
12 dimension of social work.

13 This paper examines the process of re-organization of field placements enacted by a  
14 Bachelor's Program in Social Work in an Italian university. We propose a preliminary  
15 assessment of this experience, reflecting on the positive and critical aspects of the forced  
16 reorganization of field placement. We consider this phenomenon as a process of  
17 organizational learning, that crosses multiple domains of social work. We discuss whether this  
18 process can be the driver of a mechanism of double-loop learning, leading towards the  
19 enrichment of teaching and learning activities rather than a temporary adaptation to a  
20 contingent need.

21           Keywords: Covid-19; social work field placement; remote learning process; innovation;  
22           resilience

## 23 **1. Introduction**

24 The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic dramatically hit the organization of teaching  
25 activities, including field placements. Most academic teaching activities were interrupted and  
26 **shortly** converted into distance learning activities. This shift was particularly challenging for  
27 the students of social work, who were either already involved in a field placement or  
28 supposed to begin this experience shortly.

29 In the meanwhile, **the providers of social services (local municipalities, social enterprises,**  
30 **local health agencies and other organizations)** were called to redesign their activities

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<sup>1</sup> There are interchangeable terms used to describe placements like field placement, field education, field practicum, practice learning, internship, and stage. The authors will use in the article the term “field placement”.

1 (Devlieghere & Rose, 2020). While some organizations were forced to close and interrupt  
2 their activities, **others gradually** adopted various forms of remote working, when possible.  
3 Many social workers had to work from home **as well**. Besides the several critical implications  
4 of this situation (Aluffi Pentini & Lorenz, 2020; Golightley & Holloway, 2020) some  
5 practitioners coped with this situation **re-shaping** their working arrangements (e.g. limiting the  
6 access of clients to their premises, reducing work hours, defining new priorities of  
7 intervention) as well as introducing some innovative practices (e.g. encountering clients  
8 through web-platforms or by phone, organizing online meetings with colleagues, creating  
9 networks with other organizations for tackling most urgent cases and needs, promoting the  
10 civic engagement of citizens and so on).

11 **Within this unforecastable scenario, most students had to interrupt their field placement,**  
12 **because of the strict lockdown adopted by the national and regional governments that**  
13 **prevented students to enter the hosting organizations. However, the directors and/or the**  
14 **coordinators<sup>2</sup> of bachelor and master programs in social work tried to devise some alternative**  
15 **forms of field placement, to provide continuity to this activity. From this point of view, the**  
16 **main challenge to be met was finding a solution for reproducing a learning experience outside**  
17 **its traditional and distinctive setting, i.e. the premises of the hosting organizations.**

18 **Our analysis is based on a case study that involved both the authors, since we account for the**  
19 **experience of the bachelor program of Social Work at the University of Milano-Bicocca,**  
20 **where we both work and where we were intensely engaged for coping with these tough**  
21 **events.**

22 **We approach this topic** drawing some notions from the literature on organizational learning.  
23 **Specifically, we will refer to the concepts of single and double-loop learning introduced by**  
24 **Argyris (1976, 1978), who provided a theoretical framework consistent for understanding**  
25 **how a change fostered by a single “event” of learning can move to a more stable and systemic**  
26 **reconfiguration of the structure the interactions between different actors.**

27 **(Morley & Clarke, 2020).**

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<sup>2</sup> One of the author of the paper is the director of a bachelor course in Social Work.

1 Our purpose is twofold. Firstly, we aim at analysing how fields placements have been  
2 converted into remote activities, accounting for the controversial value of this forced  
3 experimentation, in the eyes of both teachers and students. Secondly, we want to put the basis  
4 for a broader analysis about the possibility of maintaining some tools and processes  
5 introduced because of the pandemic. In some cases, these represent innovations that may  
6 enact new practices both at a professional and organizational level, while others might be  
7 rejected. We argue that this “selection” can draw attention to the borders of what is  
8 considered legitimate and worthwhile for the education of social workers as well as for the  
9 distinctive role of social workers in society.

10 Our article is structured as follows. We first introduce the theoretical framework of our  
11 analysis, referring to the studies on organizational learning as a primary source for  
12 understanding the implications of this event. We then provide an overall picture of the  
13 organization of field placements of social work students in Italy, underlining their importance  
14 within the educational path of social workers. Next, after a brief recall of the outbreak of the  
15 Covid -19 pandemic in Italy, we propose our case study and we report the initiatives  
16 promoted developed for coping with the interruption of field placements *in situ*.<sup>3</sup> In the  
17 discussion section, we analyse the pros and cons of the solutions promoted by the bachelor  
18 programs for reacting to this event. Finally, the conclusion provides some possible tracks of  
19 new studies and researches on an issue that is still far to be resolved.

20

21

22 **2. Learning to learn: the value of field placements in the education of social**

23 **workers**

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<sup>3</sup> The authors have been directly involved in this process, with different duties and responsibilities. Although this may compromise the blindness of the peer-review process, we think it is important to declare overtly our involvement in the activities reported and discussed in the article, for sake of transparency as well as for promoting a reflexive reflection on our work.

1 The theoretical framework of our analysis draws on the notions of single and double-loop  
2 learning, as proposed by Chris Argyris (1976, 2002). The model of single-loop learning refers  
3 to the incremental processing of the feedback of our actions coming from the environment. A  
4 process of single-loop learning typically occurs when the patterns and/or the strategies of our  
5 actions are effective, well-established, and consistent with previous events. In such a scenario,  
6 single-loop learning may be sufficient for refining the course of actions in a stable  
7 environment. Argyris states that processes of single-loop learning do not challenge  
8 “underlying governing values” (2002, p. 206).

9 Vice-versa, double-loop learning implies a rethinking and a change in the underlying values.  
10 Serious challenges coming from the environment may urge an organization to revolve its  
11 regular course of action. This happened with the lockdown of working activities brought  
12 about by the outbreak of the pandemic. The necessity of double-loop learning shortly emerged  
13 for reacting to the pandemic, since traditional forms of single-loop learning were ineffective.  
14 As argued by Argyris, “double-loop learning can occur under the conditions of the single-loop  
15 model under extreme crisis or revolution” (1976, p. 373).

16 It is possible to argue that the notion of single-loop learning identifies the “traditional”  
17 organization of field placements for the students of social work as provided by the Italian  
18 academic system. Some events may produce slight changes or issues (a variation in the  
19 number of hours, the unavailability of some hosting organizations, and so on). Thus, to  
20 understand the more radical discontinuities that may lead to a process of double-loop learning,  
21 it is necessary to know the pre-existing pattern of field placements.

## 22 **2.2 Field placements as a situated learning activity**

23 Within a stable scenario, the field placement represents a path that leads to two parallel  
24 directions. On the one hand, this path is a learning experience that is expected to match with

1 the lessons in the classroom. On the other hand, it represents a pathway to becoming a  
2 member of a professional community or “community of practices” (Wenger, 2000).

3 For most students, the field placement is likely to be the first opportunity for getting in touch  
4 with social workers within a professional context. Initially, students are called to observe and  
5 discover the “ordinary work” of social workers, spotting the main features of their activities.  
6 Day after day, trainees gradually move towards more central points of observation and are  
7 allowed to enact a process of learning-by-doing (Taylor, 2005; Crossan et al., 2011). These  
8 steps are not only individual achievements since they are the effect of a collective endeavor.  
9 The learning trajectory of the trainee in the field needs to be supported by an expert member  
10 of the organization (Lave & Wenger, 1991) or by a broader group of practitioners who act as  
11 supervisors. The trainee should not be left alone or isolated within the organization: on the  
12 one hand, this would compromise his/her learning path, and, on the other hand, this exclusion  
13 would be an organizational failure, revealing the difficulties of welcoming and including  
14 novices to be trained. Moreover, the organization itself would miss the opportunity to learn  
15 from trainees, since they could be sources of new ideas and reflections.

16 The field placement is also important for reducing the gap between the theoretical knowledge  
17 provided by the teaching activities and the actual practices performed by practitioners. For  
18 this purpose, many academic programs provide classes that accompany field placements  
19 experiences and allow students to reflect on what they have observed in the field (Alschuler et  
20 al, 2015; Baird & Mollen, 2018). Likewise, these classes, are devoted to translating an  
21 individual experience into a more collective process of learning, through the discussion of the  
22 issues that, day by day, the trainee may face during the field placement.

23 On these assumptions, students are expected to start to develop basic professional skills. The  
24 supervisor/s are required to engage the trainee in the experimentation of the repertoire of  
25 professional practices, such as encounters with the users, assessments of cases, writing of

1 reports, participation in teamwork, and so on (Bogo, 2006; Davis & Beddoe, 2010; Smith et  
2 al., 2015). These forms of participation in the working activities emphasize the belief that the  
3 field placements, beyond being the first stage of development of professional skills, is a  
4 process of socialization to a profession. By this concept, we argue that the path that leads to  
5 getting in touch with the professional activity is also a process that drives the student to  
6 become a legitimate member of a professional community and an organization (Orr, 1990).  
7 From this point of view, being a legitimate member of a professional community does not  
8 indicate the formal recognition that an individual must acquire to performing a given  
9 profession, such as that of the social worker, in compliance with legal arrangements.  
10 Conversely, this concept expresses the subjective status of an individual who is approaching a  
11 profession and is facing a twofold challenge: on the one hand, s/he must internalize the  
12 contents of the profession in the terms of knowing what and how to do in a particular situation  
13 (the so-called *savoir-faire*). On the other hand, s/he must understand what it means to be a  
14 social worker, in addition to working as a social worker: this is the dimension of the “*savoir*  
15 *être*”. As said earlier, this process is a collective endeavor that requires the involvement of the  
16 professional community, as it represents the first step for his/her inclusion. One of the  
17 distinctive aspects of this process of socialization is the discovery and learning of the so-  
18 called tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is a peculiar form of knowledge, hardly encodable  
19 formal notions or theoretical formulas (Polanyi, 1966). This is particularly relevant for social  
20 workers since their work has an essential relational nature (Folgheraiter, 2007; Winter, 2019).  
21 As such, the physical presence of the trainee is considered an essential requirement for this  
22 learning process. The very notion of placement recalls the assumption that this experience is  
23 located in a “place”. This place is typically an organizational context, where the trainee can  
24 recognize the embeddedness of professional practices in specific operative settings and the  
25 dynamical interplay between organizations and professions. From this point of view,  
26 organizations (such as Municipalities, social enterprises, hospitals, and other units of social  
27 care providers) are more than physical locations for social workers. In working contexts, the  
28 professional status of a social worker is shaped by several organizational factors: the  
29 relationships with colleagues and managers, the institutional mandate of the organization, the  
30 resources an organization may benefit and or might be lacking, the types of stakeholders, the  
31 organizational climate and several more issues. Being a social worker means being situated in  
32 an organizational context. Therefore, it possible to argue that a field placement is a situated  
33 activity (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Healy, 2000; Alston & McKinnon, 2001; Adams et al.,  
34 2002).

## 1 **2.3 The organization of field placement: national regulation and local** 2 **arrangements**

3 **It is important to notice that, in Italy, the organization of field placements for social work**  
4 **students is suffering from a long-term underestimation. Compared to other countries, Italian**  
5 **students have to do a very short placement, in terms of hours and days.** The Italian Ministry of  
6 Education[FM1] has provided national guidelines<sup>4</sup> (MLPS, 2021) for the organization of  
7 field placements of social work students. These guidelines maintain some basic binding  
8 requirements while they provide for a high degree of discretion to the universities that hold a  
9 bachelor's program in social work. The main requirement universities must comply with is  
10 that field placement is mandatory. Beyond this requirement, universities enjoy a high degree  
11 of flexibility in organizing traineeships. The aspects that each degree course can discretionally  
12 define are:

- 13 a) the number of hours of field placement for each year (within the range decided at the  
14 national level);
- 15 b) the organizational setting of the field placement (i.e. local municipalities, social  
16 enterprises, hospitals, local health agencies, and so on);
- 17 c) the presence of a supervisor and his/her profession (in some courses it is not necessary  
18 s/he is a social worker) and his/her formal involvement in the field placement;
- 19 d) the type of classroom support and assessment of the field placements;
- 20 e) the period (either first/second term or one year);
- 21 f) the criteria for selecting the hosting organization (i.e. geographical proximity, the level of  
22 specialization, the preferences of the students, and so on).

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<sup>4</sup>Ministry for Labour and Social Policies, “Guidelines for field placements and guidance” (“*Linee guida in materia di tirocini formativi e di orientamento*”), [https://www.cliclavoro.gov.it/Normative/Linee\\_guida\\_25\\_maggio\\_2017.pdf](https://www.cliclavoro.gov.it/Normative/Linee_guida_25_maggio_2017.pdf)

1 In addition to these settings, each bachelor program course can arrange more specific  
2 conditions for the organization of field placements. The field placement is unpaid, because it  
3 is considered a curricular experience in the education of social work students, rather than a  
4 working experience.

### 5 **2.3.1 The organization of the field placements at the University of Milano Bicocca**

6 The Bachelor's Degree in Social Work provided by the University of Milano-Bicocca  
7 proposes a specific model of field placement, following the abovementioned ministerial  
8 guidelines. It is important to notice that no more than 130 students may enrol in the bachelor  
9 program each year. Some of the distinctive features of this model are the following:

- 10 - students can undertake placements only in institutions where there is a social worker  
11 who will act as supervisor;
- 12 - the university chooses the host organization, it is not up to the student to find a hosting  
13 organization;
- 14 - for each year of the course, students are divided into 4 subgroups and supervised by an  
15 external professional, who facilitates the reworking and sharing of individual  
16 experiences in the classroom;
- 17 - the field placement is to be held in the second term, two days a week (in the remaining  
18 days students have classes):
- 19 - in the third year, the hosting organization cannot be the same where the student  
20 conducted his/her field placement in the second year.

21 The duration of the field placement is minimum of 127 hours in the second year and at least  
22 202 hours in the third year. In the first year, students perform a very short and limited  
23 experience of field placement, with the purpose to explore their territory rather than entering a  
24 hosting organization.

1 In the second year, students are expected to understand the organizational dimensions of the  
2 profession, conducting a field placement in a specific organization, supported by a supervisor.  
3 Likewise, students enjoy the first opportunity to learning and directly experimenting with  
4 basic professional skills and methodologies of intervention.

5 In the third year, the field placement is aimed at directly experiencing the professional  
6 dimension of the work. Although they are still supported by a supervisor, students enjoy  
7 greater autonomy. Greater attention is given to the skills for developing a helping relationship  
8 with clients as well as for managing casework intervention. The main goals of the field  
9 placement in the third year are:

10 - understanding functions and specificities of the role of the social worker and reflect on  
11 professional intervention process, methodology, and tools;

12 - developing the capacity of understanding, the needs, and problems of clients, applying  
13 theoretical knowledge;

14 - mapping the macro characteristics of the context, to identify the main issues, the presence of  
15 professional and organizational networks, the availability of economic resources, and so on;

16 starting to encounter clients and caregivers, to support them and develop helping  
17 relationships;

18 - being involved in the design of new services or activities.

### 19 **3. The pandemic and the forced interruption of field placements**

20 Italy has been the first western country hit by the spread of Sars-Cov-2 (or “Coronavirus”). As  
21 in most countries, the need for reducing the spread of the virus and the consequent breakdown

1 of the healthcare system, a very tough lockdown was introduced by regional and national  
2 governments.

3 Most of the work activities were suspended, except those dedicated to carrying out essential  
4 activities. If possible, work activities were carried out adopting devices for distance-working,  
5 allowing people to work from home.

6 Schools and universities were called to organize alternative forms of teaching and assessment.

7 Distance-learning was the only way to guarantee the continuity of teaching. Many different  
8 solutions were adopted: online meetings with students (through platforms such as Webex,  
9 Google Meet, Zoom, Skype etc.), video-recording of lessons, files-sharing, and so on.

10 In such a scenario, while classroom activities could be – at least partially – substituted by  
11 distance-learning, field placements could not and they had to be stopped or postponed. It was  
12 difficult to find alternative solutions, both because of the very nature of these activities and  
13 because of the uncertainty surrounding the evolution of the epidemic in the following months.

14 In the next sections, we will provide an account for the re-organization of field placement,  
15 highlighting how we cope with the uncertainty and what solutions were adopted and devised.

### 16 **3.1 The first phase: taking time and waiting for the return to the “normality”**

17 In the first phase of the emergency, dating approximatively from February 24th to March 8th,  
18 "waiting for the events" was the only viable option. At University of Milano-Bicocca, most  
19 third-year students had already begun their field placements, while second-year students were  
20 scheduled to start their field placements at the beginning of the second term (on March 2nd).

21 Therefore, third-year students had to interrupt their field placements, although most of the  
22 hosting organizations were still open and working.

1 From our position, the main issue was the uncertainty about the evolution of the pandemic. It  
2 is was unclear whether we could have soon come back to the “normality” or the lockdown  
3 would be longer.

4 Those weeks were characterized by contrasting pressures. On the one hand, health agencies  
5 asked for stricter measures of lockdown, while many other actors (mainly companies)  
6 reclaimed the ease of those measures. Teaching institutions stood in the middle: while being  
7 aware of the lacunae that the interruption was bringing out, they realized of being one of the  
8 most dangerous locations for the spread of the virus, because of the crowdedness of their  
9 premises.

10

### 11 **3.2 The second phase**

12 After March 8<sup>th</sup>, the dramatic evolution of the pandemic made it clear that waiting for a return  
13 to the “normality” was no longer an option. Teaching activities were suspended *sine die* and  
14 distance learning was adopted from primary schools to universities. So far, distance learning  
15 and remote working in Italy were scarcely used and they were considered radical innovations,  
16 adoptable only in specific circumstances, and under contingent conditions. Suddenly, for a  
17 wide set of activities, the possibility of working remotely (in most cases at home) replaced the  
18 taken-for-granted routine of moving to an office or other premises.

19 So, while lessons could be moved outside their physical locations (although with several  
20 issues that here we cannot account for), this could not be the case for field placements. As  
21 said earlier, **field placements** are situated activities and their situatedness is essential for  
22 catching the relational dimension of social work.

23 In a few days, some alternative solutions were discussed:

- 1 - postponing the beginning or the resumption of the **field placements**, having no idea of
- 2 when they would be restored;
- 3 - discontinuing them permanently for the academic year
- 4 - converting them into some forms of remote placements, not knowing what that could
- 5 mean since never a similar practice had been organized.

6 After some long and debated meetings with colleagues and external supervisors, the third  
7 option was chosen. The second one was not pursuable, because it would have prevented  
8 students from achieving the number of ECTS planned for the academic year.

9

#### 10 **4. The redesign of placements as remote learning process**

11 The “conversion” of field placements in remote learning activities was a complex task. Beside  
12 the substantial difficulty and “sense” of this process, on March 2020 the situation of students  
13 was very fragmented. The students of the third-year had already begun their field placement,  
14 supported by a supervisor. After the decision of converting the placements in remote learning  
15 activities, some supervisors could not confirm their availability. **This was due to many**  
16 **reasons. Some of them were working at home and did not have the possibility to follow on-**  
17 **line the students. Others had to stop working because their organization was closed or reduced**  
18 **the number of activities to carry out. Some supervisors disconfirmed their availability arguing**  
19 **that remote placement was not adequate for the education of future social workers. Finally,**  
20 **some supervisors would have been available, but their organization denied them this activity.**  
21 **A similar situation affected the students enrolled in the second year.**

22 **In order to ensure the support of a supervisor for all students, we asked to other social workers**  
23 **to collaborate with us as new supervisor. In such hard times, this operation was fruitful,**  
24 **although we did not succeed in finding a new supervisor for all students. In some cases, a**  
25 **professional (already acting as supervisor) accepted to supervise more than one student. For**

1 those students who remained unsupervised, we organized what we called on-line stages (we  
2 are going to describe this below).

3 Within this confused scenario, we devised program made of four steps:

- 4 1. the adoption of web-based platforms for interacting with supervisors and clients, for  
5 those students who still had the support of a supervisor;
- 6 2. the scheduling of webinars held by expert social workers (for all students);
- 7 3. the organization of on-line stages for simulating field placements (devoted to students  
8 whose supervisor disconfirmed his/her availability);
- 9 4. the analysis of the reactions to Covid-19 promoted at local level (devoted to students  
10 whose supervisor disconfirmed his/her availability but open to all students).

11 Before analyzing these steps, it is important to have an overall picture of the situations of  
12 students after the outbreak of the pandemic, with regards to the interruption or postponing of  
13 field placements. Some data about these changes are reported in Table 1.

14

	<b>2nd year</b>	<b>3rd year</b>	<b>Total</b>
Supervisors who confirmed their availability	53 (64,6%)	74 (73,3%)	127 (69,4%)
Supervisors who disconfirmed their availability	29 (35,4%)	27 (26,7%)	56 (30,6%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>183</b>
Hosting organizations that confirmed their availability	29	27	56
Social workers engaged as new supervisors	11	6	17

Students On-line stages	3	26	29
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1

2 **4.1 The adoption of web-based platforms for remote working**

3 The first step of this program addressed the need and the will to maintain the continuity in the  
 4 achievement of the goals of the **field placements, mainly for** the students of the third-year.

5 This meant leading the students to perform – although remotely – encounters with clients,  
 6 under the help and the support of their supervisors (who were interacting with clients online  
 7 too). Thus, we asked the students to analyze and report the emerging challenges for social  
 8 worker forced to adopt these new forms of interaction with clients.

9 Although access to several local organizations (municipalities, healthcare agencies, social  
 10 enterprises, etc.) was denied to both workers and clients, some of these organizations  
 11 continued to provide their services (encounters with clients, counseling, support in the  
 12 interactions with other actors) through web-based platforms (such as Zoom, Meet, Webex and  
 13 so on). The willingness of supervisors to collaborate in such a critical situation can be  
 14 explained by considering three main reasons. Firstly, during the lockdown, the supervisors  
 15 directly experimented with the opportunity to manage their work at distance through these  
 16 platforms, developing new skills, and discovering some unexpected positive aspects of the  
 17 adoption of these technologies. Thus, they also realized the possibility to manage a remote  
 18 **field placement, with the additional goal of sharing these “brand-new” skills.** Secondly,  
 19 supervisors reinforced their belief that placement, regardless of its location, is a crucial stage  
 20 in the training career of social workers and this led some of them to overcome critical issues  
 21 to “give back” what they received in the past when they were students, despite the dramatic  
 22 situation. This prompted them to learn how to use web-based platforms (they were often

1 helped by students who were more familiar with these technologies). Thirdly, supervisors  
2 developed a sort of individual and professional motivation for helping students in coping with  
3 the dramatic evolution of the pandemic, as if students were subject were people who needed  
4 to be supported too. Many students were hence involved by their supervisors in the new tasks  
5 they were called to perform. Students were engaged in remote team-working, conducting  
6 remote interviews with clients and remote assessment, remote monitoring of case, as well as  
7 remote facilitation of online support groups for fragile people in order to reduce their sense of  
8 being left alone and unsupported. Some of these activities were organized in “real-time”,  
9 having any experiences and with scarce (if not null) possibilities of confronting with the  
10 professional community. In a whole, the adoption of these technologies drove some  
11 supervisor to feel more “updated” and able to reshape the settings of their interactions with  
12 clients.

#### 13 14 **4.2 Organization of a stream of webinars**

15 The second stream of activities was the organization of a panel of webinars held by field  
16 placement supervisors. They ran, voluntarily and beyond their ordinary task of supervision,  
17 three hours long webinars in which each of them provided an account of her/his activity as a  
18 social worker in a specific area of intervention. The webinars addressed topics like child  
19 protection, social work in hospitals, poverty and social inclusion, immigration, case  
20 management and teamwork, family counseling, youth justice, social work intervention with  
21 adolescents, social work in disaster emergency, and more. Supervisors also provided students  
22 different insights for stimulating the discussion about the topics they introduced. Every  
23 student was expected to attend from 7 to 10 webinars. These activities enabled students to  
24 have a broader view on the organizational settings where a social work can be engaged, as  
25 well as a more specific focus on some central issues of the profession. Likewise, the  
26 supervisors who held these webinars enjoyed the possibility of sharing their experience with a

1 broader audience, extending the conventional dyadic interaction between students and  
2 supervisors.

3

#### 4 **4.3 Organization of on-line stages for simulating field placements**

5 The third initiative was the organization of an on-line field placements for students who could  
6 not be directly supervised by a social worker, neither on site, nor remotely. We labelled these  
7 activities “virtual” placements. Students were asked to participate to eight workshops  
8 conducted by a senior social worker, who simulated some practical situations, asking the  
9 students to imagine and develop a professional intervention. The workshop simulated  
10 different situations, dealing with issues regarding child protection services, first-level social  
11 services in Municipalities, children’s court, and specialist health care services (addiction,  
12 mental health) to enable students to experiment with a whole helping intervention. This  
13 activity was aimed at reproducing the situations, the events, and the relationships that a  
14 students may typically encounter in his/her field experience.

15

#### 16 **4.4 Analysis of territorial reactions to the emergency**

17 The fourth initiative aimed at analyzing the reactions of local social services and social  
18 workers to the pandemic and the lockdown. The purpose of this activity was gathering  
19 information about the actions that municipalities and other public and private actors promoted  
20 for facing urgent emerging needs, both for citizens already taken up and for the whole  
21 population. Students were asked to collect data about some of the services developed for  
22 coping with the lockdown in their towns and draw a picture of the institutional and  
23 professional responses to this emergency, with a special focus on the action promoted for  
24 supporting the citizens hardly hit by the social, health and economic implications of the  
25 pandemic. Each student wrote a paper about the initiative s/he has examined. Students were

1 later divided into subgroups based on the type of service and/or the type of clients they  
2 focused on, to share and discuss their analyses. In the end, a plenary remote session for  
3 discussing collectively the works of each group was organized. As for the previous one, this  
4 initiative was conducted by an expert social worker.

5 In addition to these initiatives, the lessons of *Field Placements Support* (Guida al Tirocinio)  
6 regularly continued, although online and regardless of the different conditions of field  
7 placements the students were carrying out. This helped students to keep in touch, reducing the  
8 feeling of being “left alone”. This made it possible to keep the unconventional forms of  
9 placement anchored with the established educational path, attaching a more consistent  
10 meaning to this experience. The constant interplay within the groups and with the coordinator  
11 of these groups was appreciated by the students, who had the opportunity to learn each other's  
12 experiences and to experiment with a process of mutual help, trying to bring out from an  
13 unexpected and critical situation some positive aspects. The interactions within these classes,  
14 with the support of the teacher, helped the students to approach the ability for creative  
15 problem – solving, an essential skill in the Covid-19 pandemic emergency (Amadasun, 2020;  
16 Cohen & Cromwell, 2020).

## 17 5. Discussion

18

19 From this unexpected and confused “experiment” of reorganization of the field placement we  
20 can draw some insights, both positive and negative.

21 Firstly, it is important to state the conversion of field placement was the only way to provide  
22 continuity to this part of the learning activities, as for classrooms: an achievement that was  
23 nearly unexpected in such a pandemic situation. Moreover, although it was not possible to  
24 reach the specific objectives of the field placement of the third year, this experience provided

1 some positive insights for the students, as well as for teachers and practitioners (MacDermott  
2 & Harkin- MacDermott, 2021) .

3 Students drew their attention to a specific area of social work, coping with emergencies and  
4 developing a basic expertise in managing health pandemics. They directly experimented with  
5 the ability to cope with and overcome a traumatic event or a period of difficulties, enacting  
6 resilient behaviors. During remote helping interviews and remote team meetings, they  
7 observed how clients can develop, in such a critical situation, unexpected resources, and  
8 coping skills. This is a core learning goal for social workers, who are supposed to deal with  
9 and manage helping relationships following empowerment principles and adopting  
10 methodological approaches that enact individuals' capabilities.

11 Students were invited to achieve the awareness of the need of acting in situations "*knowing*  
12 *what is going on around you and staying vigilant to any changes or threats*"(Endsley, 1995).

13 Another insight was the stimulus of being creative in the relationships with clients, both in  
14 direct intervention and during the encounters with users (Walz & Uematsu,1997; Janagan &  
15 Wahab, 2010). They were shown how to manage remotely the helping relationships, outlining  
16 the role of a social worker in similar occurrences. As far as it was possible, supervisors  
17 remotely recalled the functions of social workers as well as the activities s/he carries out:  
18 during a "regular" field placement, this should be the core contribution to the education of a  
19 student. The interactions within the groups emerged as a fundamental opportunity for mutual  
20 support for the students during those hard months. Students directly assisted and enjoyed the  
21 benefits that mutual help and group work can provide to the actors who usually participate in  
22 these activities (both clients and practitioners).

23 Students were invited to understand the relevance of the participatory perspective in social  
24 work (Warren, 2007). In such an uncertain situation, without any prior knowledge, they were

1 engaged by field supervisors for designing the remote learning plan, identifying the  
2 worthwhile activities that they could do remotely. They were thus considered “experts” in the  
3 definition of their learning path, and their contribution was considered essential.

4

5 However, the conversion of field placements into remote placements (and other forms of  
6 supervision) has been inevitably full of limits and critical issues. The most relevant is, *ça va*  
7 *sans dire*, that students did not directly observe the supervisors’ daily working routines and  
8 were not engaged in *face-to-face* encounters with clients. As such, they missed the  
9 opportunity to grasp a rich source of information, necessary for understanding how a  
10 professional social worker follows and interprets the ethical and methodological basis of the  
11 profession. Although during the remote field placements supervisors stressed the relevance of  
12 this topic, this kind of support cannot replace the richness of the confrontation in presence.

13 Students could neither be engaged in the tasks of multi-professional team, with the exception  
14 of some remote teamwork meeting. This relational dimension is one of the most important  
15 formative goals of the field placement, especially for the students enrolled in the third year.

16 Many students reported to feel unready to begin a professional career. Although they  
17 hopefully will fill this gap while working, they will have to cope with the complexity of the  
18 first impact with the “real world” without having formed a first “armor”.

19 Finally, students could partially develop a sense of belonging to the profession, since they  
20 could not perceive the subjective “sensation” of being a social worker, because of the distance  
21 between their location and the setting of work. They could neither perceive the informal  
22 dimension of the interactions that take place within an organizational context. Moreover, they  
23 could not be engaged in the community work, that is a relevant step for the development of  
24 professional skills. As a consequence, students could not catch the consistency of professional

1 work with the organizational mission and goals, as well as the possible tensions that may  
2 emerge between professional ethics and methodologies and organizational and environmental  
3 requests and pressures. Finally, students missed an important occasion for learning the “tricks  
4 of the trade” that characterize the ordinary work of practitioners and allow them to reach  
5 stability in uncertain situations.

6 A last critical issue regards the reduction of the possibilities of observing the interactions of  
7 social workers with a network of different actors, such as voluntary associations and social  
8 enterprises. Although some innovative initiatives could be followed thanks to the direct  
9 participation of the supervisor, the lockdown, and the other measures for contrasting the  
10 spread of Covid-19 dramatically undermined the continuity of these relationships.

11  
12 We claim that the analysis of this experience of reaction to the pandemic should be developed  
13 from two viewpoints. The first deals with the effectiveness and the validity of the initiatives we  
14 described concerning the former and traditional patterns of field placements. In this perspective,  
15 it seems clear that most initiatives cannot be compared to the past: they look like temporary  
16 solutions that cannot replace situated field placements. From this point of view, it is possible to  
17 state that the double-loop learning forcedly enacted during the first wave of the pandemic will  
18 step back and more traditional patterns of field places will be restored.

19 However, we want to consider a second viewpoint. The challenges to the ordinary practices,  
20 both at professional and educative levels, offer the possibility to discuss reflexively over some  
21 taken-for-granted assumptions of the profession. The question we want to raise is: why some  
22 innovations are expected to be rejected and why others will be maintained? The answer, in our  
23 view, is related neither to the emergency nor to some “update” of well-established practices.  
24 The pandemic brought out some new “affordances” for the work and the education of social  
25 workers. These affordances (e.g. the adoption of web-based platforms, the possibility of  
26 remote-working) are to be examined not only for studying their effectiveness, but mainly for  
27 their legitimacy. This “process of selection” cannot be the outcome of single and circumscribed  
28 experiences, but is an issue that challenges a broader professional community (Freeman, 2007).  
29 Currently, we do not have an answer to these issues, but we are interested in studying whether  
30 and how this broad and collective double-loop learning will become an opportunity to innovate  
31 some practices, rather than disappear as an incident that the professional community aims at  
32 disregarding.

### 33 34 **Conclusion**

35 In this article, we described and analyzed some of the initiatives that a bachelor course in  
36 social work implemented for avoiding the complete interruption of field placements of

1 students during the first wave of the Covid -19 pandemic. We are aware that the findings of  
2 our analysis cannot be generalized. They have been drawn from a single case study, observed  
3 in a very peculiar contingent situation. Unfortunately, at the time we are writing, the  
4 pandemic has not been stopped and the virus is still spreading around the world. In such a  
5 scenario, every institutional, professional, and organizational decision is influenced by a  
6 persistent uncertainty. This affects the organization of teaching activities, including the  
7 organization of field placements. Likewise, the “traditional” working routines of social  
8 workers are still being challenged because of the necessity to combat the spread of the virus.  
9 These actions have critical implications for the whole population and, more specifically, for  
10 those who are facing long-term or emergent diseases.

11 On these bases, the community of social workers, including scholars, teachers, and students,  
12 needs to be aware that the hopeful return to the “normality” will not be a simple reset of  
13 professional practices and organizational arrangements. We argue that some of what has been  
14 invented and experimented with for resisting and contrasting the pandemic could be retained,  
15 broadening the repertoire of professional skills and knowledge. Concerning the organization  
16 of **field placements**, in the short term, the endeavor of the whole professional community  
17 should be oriented to the recovery and re-establishment of the basic features and conditions of  
18 this crucial learning experience. However, in the long term, we claim a more reflexive  
19 discussion around the possibility of extrapolating some insights from this confusing  
20 patchwork of professional and organizational reactions to the pandemic: they have been  
21 urgently adopted, but they could be maintained if they will be accepted by the whole  
22 professional community. This means they should not be expected to replace the traditional  
23 patterns of activities, rather to broaden the scope of social work. To this purpose, scholars are  
24 expected to collect and compare local and contingent cases, outlining – if possible – a  
25 common framework for updating learning activities, both in the classroom and in the field.

1 This could help to enact a double-loop learning process, overcoming the mere adaptation and  
2 resilience to the emergency.

3

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