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The role of caseworkers in asylum reception in Bologna: between pedagogical competencies and socio-political contradictions

Marta Salinaro*

Abstract

The current features of the migration of asylum seekers and refugees to Europe call for a redefinition of the tasks and scope of educational and social work. After a brief examination of the policies and national guidelines of SPRAR (Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees) in Italy, this article uses a pedagogical perspective to investigate the role of caseworkers in the Italian asylum reception system. Based on an empirical understanding of the everyday challenges of this professional practice, this paper shows the contradictions of the system through the perspectives of caseworkers. In particular, the paper highlights the gap between the institutional guidelines of SPRAR services concerning the role of caseworkers and practices on the ground. The article illustrates how the educational and training dimension, as well as pedagogical and intercultural competencies, are fundamental to the construction of caseworkers' professionalism.

Keywords: *forced migration; educational professionalism; reception system; social inclusion.*

1. Introduction

The literature in the field of social and intercultural pedagogy has shown how the promotion of self-awareness, empowerment and pedagogical competencies is essential to build an educational professionalism capable of facing the challenges of contemporary society. Moreover, according to the objectives of the European Union, UNESCO (2013) and several scholars (among others, Deardorff, 2009; Reggio & Santerini, 2014; Santerini, 2017), the acquisition of intercultural competencies is fundamental for successful living in the complexity of the modern heterogeneous world. The pedagogical competencies include: the communicative, relational, reflexive, planning, transversal and specifically intercultural (see Milani, 2017; Santerini, 2017). They are an important part of the professional

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knowledge of the social actors who work in educational, social and health contexts. The integration of skills, knowledge, methodological competencies and personal and social capacities allows us to move within the intercultural dynamics with responsibility and consciousness, if supported in action by a corollary of political, social and institutional measures. The need to develop a pedagogical awareness, both on the part of caseworkers, social actors and the beneficiaries of services, represents one of the aims of educational work (see Catarci, 2011; Fiorucci, 2011). The challenge in today's multicultural society is the acquisition of pedagogical tools capable of stimulating a critical attitude that will guide educational and social experiences and their interpretation, so as to move society towards a protagonism that makes everyone responsible for and the agent of their own life path and change (see Kanizsa & Tramma, 2011).

The figure of the caseworker[1] in SPRAR services that is the subject of this study is today a "liquid" profession (see Bauman, 2002) and needs to be outlined through an epistemology capable of giving continuity and coherence to institutional requests and social practices. Moving within the educational and social field and not being drawn from a specific educational and experiential background, the figure of the caseworker is characterised by a heterogeneity of tasks and mandates. This study aimed to explore the pedagogical skills of the caseworker in their representations and practices, considering them essential in achieving the objectives of accompaniment and orientation to autonomy and planning in the new context of migrant life.

2. Legal context of the Italian reception system: still an emergency approach?

In Italy, since the so called North African Emergency happened in 2011–13, the challenge has been to overcome the state of emergency through a *multi-level governance system* (Marchetti, 2014; Servizio Centrale, 2018), which involves institutions at local, national and European level. To this end, the Italian legislative decree n. 142 of 2015 was approved in order to adopt the indications established by the European Agenda in EU directives 32–33 of 2013. These directives aimed at managing the increase in landings in recent years, building a new asylum system and implementing reception and integration strategies. According to Campesi, the adoption of the EU Agenda has nevertheless redefined the strategies embraced by the Italian government, which has implemented a security and control approach:

1 It was considered appropriate to translate the figure of the 'operatore dell'accoglienza' as 'caseworker' since it is not possible to find a specific variation of this professional figure in the English language. In Italy, we refer to the social worker to specify another professional figure, the 'assistente sociale', who collaborates with the caseworker in taking charge of the cases.

> The policy papers published in 2015 in the wake of the so-called refugee crisis gave a significant change of direction to the reform of the Italian reception system that had been under way since 2011, resulting in an overall strengthening of the powers to control asylum-seekers through confinement and detention inside secured facilities. The "humanitarian emergency" paradigm that inspired the first phase of the reception system's reform has thus given way to a model in which the needs for security and control of asylum-seekers prevail. (Campesi, 2018: 59)

The reception system in Italy has undergone significant transformations to date, however a specific law on the right of asylum and a comprehensive plan for reception of forced migrants are still absent. The local actions carried out in the last few years both to develop a widespread and integrated reception and to overcome the emergency system of reception in the big centres have been followed by the approval of the Italian law n. 132 of 1st December 2018. This decree has meant a further tightening of immigration restrictions, encouraging the populist sentiments that animate the international political scene. In this scenario, the term *reception* is thus associated by the public discourse with national security issues as well as a possible danger due to the "invasion of migrants" (Marchetti, 2014). The word *integration*, conversely, refers to a type of assimilation that does not call for a commitment between natives and migrants (see Ambrosini & Marchetti, 2008; Catarci, 2011). The impacts of this law are increasingly visible and will have more and more effects at the political, social and economic level. It affects the fundamental human rights of migrants and the capacity for action of those who carry out social and educational work towards long-term inclusion (UNHCR, 2018; Bologna Cares, 2018).

According to the national guidelines (Servizio Centrale, 2018), SPRAR is a network that establishes reception projects for people forced to migrate. At the local level, the local authority, with the support of the third sector, such as organisations, lay and Catholic associations and NGOs, guarantees an "integrated reception" which includes: linguistic and intercultural mediation; material reception; orientation and access to local services; professional training and retraining; orientation to work placement; orientation to housing insertion; orientation to social inclusion; legal guidance; and psycho-socio-health protection (Servizio Centrale, 2018: 7). All these aspects aim to overcome an assistance and emergency approach. Usually, SPRAR projects involve reception in small or medium-sized structures, where the main objective of SPRAR is to take responsibility for the beneficiaries welcomed into the service. The aim is to provide personalised programmes to help them (re)acquire self-autonomy, and participate and integrate effectively in Italian society, in terms of finding employment and housing, access to local services, social life and education (*Ibidem*).

The Italian reception system – at the time of my study (2017) and before the approval of the Italian law n. 132 of 1st December 2018 – was organised as follows:

– a preliminary phase in Hotspots and a first phase in Hubs where first aid and identification procedures are carried out;

– the second reception phase in the SPRAR, planned by local authorities, where the migrants stay for the entire duration of the procedure to examine the application for protection and in case of a judicial appeal.

These structures encapsulate a project that aims to lead to long-term socio-economic integration and the construction of individual pathways of autonomy. However, due to limited resources and places in SPRAR, most asylum seekers are hosted in structures called CAS (Centre of Extraordinary Reception), where there are few and sometimes no projects at all for long-term inclusion (ANCI *et al.*, 2017). According to data from the Ministry of the Interior, the number of asylum seekers landing in Italy in 2017 was 119,000, many of whom came from Nigeria, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Bangladesh, Mali, and Eritrea. Among these, 70% were men and about 80% were aged between 18 and 34 years old (*Ibidem*). In 2018 and early 2019 arrivals had fallen by 80% and the reception in the SPRAR – today called SIPROIMI[2] – was guaranteed only to international protection holders and unaccompanied minors. The sharp decline in flows and the restrictions on the reception system determined by the new law – which excludes asylum seekers from the SPRAR programmes and abolishes humanitarian protection – makes clear the security direction taken by the Italian government. The law now traces a clear division in the second reception phase, between the reception system for asylum seekers and that for beneficiaries of international protection. The first are now welcomed only in CAS, the large reception centres, to which integrated reception facilities are not guaranteed, and the second are welcomed in SIPROIMI (ASGI, 2018: 80-81). What is important to say is that today, the situation in Italy is extremely varied and not in line with the regulatory requirements.

The resources of the welfare state and the local political agenda that determines the relationships between the regions, local authorities and the third sector significantly affect the process of social inclusion of immigrant people in the variegated national context, which presents territories with different political and social traditions (see, among others Ambrosini, 1999; Zincone *et al.*, 2011; Campomori & Caponio, 2017). Within such a structural context, the role of caseworkers is often problematic as they find themselves with few possibilities to find an agreement with the migrants for a long-term project of social inclusion and empowerment.

3. The relevance of intercultural and pedagogical competencies in the professionalism of the SPRAR caseworker

This study, conducted in a SPRAR project in the Bologna area, aimed to explore the pedagogical skills of the caseworker in their representations and

2 System of Protection for Beneficiaries of Protection and Unaccompanied Minors.

practices, considering them essential in achieving the objectives of accompaniment and orientation to autonomy and planning in the new context of migrant life. I analysed the multidisciplinary literature in refugee and migration studies, the institutional documents (at the international, national and local level), as well as social work and social pedagogy studies. I also conducted in-depth qualitative interviews and ethnographic observations in a SPRAR project in Bologna with 5 teams and 19 caseworkers (see Corbetta, 1999; Gobo, 2001). From October 2017 to December 2017, I conducted participant observation in a SPRAR project within a team of 4 caseworkers and 1 coordinator. This team worked in a centre that hosted 32 beneficiaries and managed three apartments with 12 beneficiaries. I also submitted 19 personal questionnaires to learn more about caseworkers' training and working backgrounds.

The team collaborates closely with social workers, psychologists, legal workers and teachers. The multidisciplinary network is characterised by different professionals, many of whom are not represented by a professional order and struggle to define themselves in the vast national scenario. This is the situation of the caseworker, an emerging figure in the social professions, emerging from and characterised by the specific context in which it operates. It is in fact within that excursus of laws, reception and integration policies, international, national and local strategies and the creation of the reception service of asylum seekers and refugees that the job of the caseworker has evolved.

Differences at the local and managerial level greatly affect the quality of the service offered, the consequence of which is represented, for the caseworkers, by frequently poor working conditions and sometimes by the hiring of unqualified personnel where the lack of suitable skills risks damage to intervention with users and conflicts within the structures. As reported in a recent study on the subject:

> The main critical point appears to be precisely that of the personnel. In many cases the caseworkers are in insufficient numbers or are not adequately trained, and this determines two problems: one of a formal nature, the violation of the European Directive on reception (Directive 2013/33/EU of the Parliament and of the Council European of 06/26/2013), according to which "the people who work in the reception centres receive adequate training" (art. 18, c. 7); the other of a substantial and practical nature, relating to the fact that inadequately trained and professional caseworkers are not in a position to promote and activate resilient processes for re-building the individual and collective identity of refugees and the host community itself (Mangone, 2018: 7)[3].

It was via the *First national conference of SPRAR caseworkers*, held on 19–20 February 2018 in Rome and organised by the ANCI (National Association of Italian Municipalities) and the Ministry of the Interior,

3 In this article, quotations from texts or documents written in Italian have been translated by the author.

that a first collective reflection on the main themes that characterise the reception system was promoted. One of the four thematic areas covered during the conference was specifically related to the figure of the SPRAR caseworker, where a picture was drawn of the professionals involved in the projects through the narration of experiences and good practices in order to establish the identity of the SPRAR caseworker and the professional evolution of this figure. This is reported in the work summary document:

> Almost twenty years since the establishment of the SPRAR, the path of delineation of the professionalism of the caseworkers of the system, the elements that characterize them, the work methods implemented and codified, make it time to intervene in favour of a formal recognition of the figure of the SPRAR caseworker. This involves an action of recognition, certification and protection of the competencies, also envisaging that – while maintaining the specialized training of the different professionals that participate in the multidisciplinary team – a common training matrix is outlined, in which those who hold the different functions can find themselves together with their operational tasks in the performance of the SPRAR reception services. This will undoubtedly be an important step for the establishment of a register of SPRAR protection and enforcement agencies, since – among the requirements for registration, in addition to the revision of a specific mission in the statute – it would be desirable to provide an adequate endowment of human resources, with specific skills and abilities. As a corollary of this, work protection is unavoidable and cannot be further delayed, as well as the contractual stabilization of the various professions employed in the implementation of the SPRAR services. (First national conference of SPRAR caseworkers, 2018: 4)

As expressly stated in the document, "[the caseworker] is an unprecedented professional figure in the Italian workplace" (Servizio Centrale, 2017: 1), which has passed in the last twenty years from reception practices organised on the basis of volunteering and adopting emergency interventions to the need to define a figure with specific skills that, as reported in the extract, requires formal recognition. The document hopes for training that respects the multidisciplinary character of the team, presenting distinct characteristics for each professional figure, but which goes on to outline a common matrix of a training nature for those who cover the different tasks within the project. What the document reveals, highlighted by the in-depth analyses carried out during the conference, is the need to understand the training requirements of caseworkers, who come from various backgrounds. This is useful to respond more effectively to the needs of the users, to collaborate profitably with different territories, in an attempt to reduce the structural obstacles that characterise the reception system, and to protect the caseworkers' professional status, through contractual stabilisation and the definition of a professional identity.

The figure of the caseworker, as observed up to now, as well as not being specifically defined and being particularly diversified in the contexts of first and second reception, is characterised by a varied educational and experiential background. Precisely because of its peculiarity – which allows the third sector to integrate workers coming from different academic and work paths into this role – more careful management, as suggested by the Central Service, needs to be provided to train operators through continuous training courses, on specific issues, in complementary areas and transversal competencies. This is as necessary for those involved in ordinary reception as to those taking charge of specific vulnerabilities, to respond to the detection of needs with personalised projects with a view to integrated reception. As the document specifies:

> With the change in migration flows and the consequent change in the profiles of the beneficiaries, the SPRAR caseworker must today deal with the need to take charge of increasingly widespread vulnerabilities, which go beyond the same differentiation of types of reception, as regulated by the ministerial decree for access to the SPRAR, because even in the interventions of so-called ordinary reception it is inevitable to find oneself in the face of increasingly complex situations, in which the vulnerable component assumes heterogeneous aspects and is combined in multiple situations: the expansion in time and space of migratory journeys with the exponential increase in the risk of suffering violence, harassment, travel accidents, shipwrecks – can be combined with the lowering of age of people arriving in Italy (especially young women), with weakness or lack of personal tools to react and start redesigning, gradually, the potential for personal resilience, also due to the lower awareness of one's own experience in the country of origin and during the migration journey. (First national conference of SPRAR caseworkers, 2018: 3)

According to the findings of the analysis of anonymous personal survey, the cooperative I studied responded with attention to the recommendations given in the national guidelines, selecting highly qualified personnel. In fact, from the analysis, it appears that all of the respondents have a training background with a double degree (bachelor and master) and have participated in numerous training and refresher courses proposed by the cooperative and/or carried out on personal initiative. The interviewees had studied various subjects in the past, ranging from political science to international cooperation, from social service to sociology, from an expert in social and cultural education to philosophy. Also with regard to previous professional experiences, the interviewees have – in most cases – carried out work activities as operators in first and second reception facilities with adults and minors, as educators in minor communities or low-threshold services, giving legal advice to foreign citizens, involving themselves in voluntary activities or the planning of intercultural activities. Everyone was between 25 and 36 years old and had occupied their positions within the

cooperative investigated for an average of two years. This represents a significant element of analysis, which characterises a high turnover of the professions not yet legitimised in terms of contracts and wages within the public and private sector (see Salinaro, 2018).

All respondents have an intermediate knowledge of two foreign languages, mainly English and French, but some also know Spanish and one of them has Arabic as their mother tongue. The number of female operators and coordinators (16 of 19 interviewed) is significant compared to the male gender (3 of 19 interviewed). Overall, the particularly heterogeneous background that characterises the figure of the caseworker, as previously argued, does not allow a single professional profile to be identified either specifically within the investigated context or at national level. As argued by a caseworker, the presence of opportunities for training and self-training is relevant to the exercise of their work:

> I always try to adhere to the training proposed by the cooperative, because sometimes some topics are exactly centred on the needs, even practical ones, that we have. These are also an opportunity to be inserted into a community that must create thought and theory. It is the possibility to bring back what is the daily experience of the caseworker and make it re-emerge at a theoretical level, because it is also necessary to create opportunities for reflection and action that go beyond the "do the ticket for the medical examination, buy the bus pass, etc". (Op. 10)

The centrality of training and professional improvement as an enhancement of the caseworker's skills is a fundamental tool to create awareness not only on the specific issues addressed, necessary for the performance of their duties, but also in terms of the creation of a community of thought. That can promote moments of reflection and meta-reflection on one's own professionalism (see Schön, 1993), on the system in which they operate, and in which they are included. It is also noted that the relevance of training proposals is not always in line with the real practical and operational needs of caseworkers and coordinators, as indicated by another caseworker:

> Sometimes the training programmes are also interesting, but less so at the operational level, in fact, sometimes they are even frustrating. This is an unwanted aspect, but a real one. You go to training on trafficking, interesting, but then? With a woman that I know is a prostitute (and we have them in reception), I would need, to try to field even a tenth of those things that I heard during the training, to spend hours together, if not days, on the basis of what does she decide to inform me about certain things, to make me participate, to put her life in my hands? It takes an extreme sensitivity to do these things that not all of us have and you should also practice having it, but if you lack the basis for which we see each other for an hour or two, which are made up of: "Ah, your project is this, you have to go to the Italian course, you have to go to the visit, I'll explain to you how to go for the

> visit, I'll give you pocket money, do the cleaning… that is, if this is the level, why does a person have to tell me her history? Which is prostituting herself, being blackmailed… first of all she needs to trust me, that I have to propose things to her… it is not that we are or we must be experts in trafficking, but we must have the possibility, once we seize things, to open a space in which we can actually orientate a person and entrust it to… this thing, for example, is not there and it's definitely frustrating. (Op. 2)

The above excerpt highlights the organisational needs raised by the caseworker, which refer above all to the possibility of enhancing the time and methods available to build a relationship of trust, such as to allow the caseworker to identify the needs of the beneficiary and activate the network suitable for that specific need. According to the SPRAR national guidelines, the basic tools available to the caseworker are: empathetic listening; the construction of a relationship based on dialogue and negotiation; knowledge of the beneficiary and of their history; sharing, verification/evaluation of interventions with the entire team; the re-elaboration with their own team, and with the support of a supervisor, of their working modalities (Servizio Centrale, 2018: 23). As reported by one caseworker:

> There are many skills that a caseworker must have, so many. Because they must deal with different types of situations. Surely, he should know how to manage an interview, how to create a setting and decide how to present it, whether to do it alone or do it with a colleague, how to conduct it. It is very difficult in an interview also to stay on the active listening part, so give the cues, collect and then see how it develops. It is a bit unpredictable, but there is a capacity, a 'training' to know how to guide the interview, to be able to recognize certain things and not to insist on others, this is a fundamental competence for us. (Op.13)

From the analysis of the interviews, the caseworkers show the difficulty of adopting operational tools and communication and relational strategies that are functional to find keys to reading and possible ways of meeting with the beneficiary in the construction of a relationship of trust. The factors that hinder the implementation of pedagogical and intercultural competencies, such as empathy, active listening and decentralisation, are the result of the lack of awareness of the educational dimension of one's role, often determined by a cultural heritage that identifies educational action associated with children and regulatory practices. In fact, the specific competencies related to the pedagogical and intercultural competencies, if not matured through the caseworker's educational and experiential background and appropriately supported by the structural variables given by the organisational-managerial context, risk being neglected even within the training courses.

The caseworkers interviewed in fact claim that they have never received specific training on pedagogical and intercultural competencies which they consider to be useful tools in their work. In support of this, the team's

supervision practices allow it to offer important opportunities for comparison and promote caseworkers' work. The psychological supervision on the work team and on the cases treated is promoted and organised by the managing body on a monthly basis. They are not guaranteed by all the cooperatives, but the caseworkers claim they are essential to avoid burnout and are indispensable moments of reflection and discussion on their work.

As Milani points out, if characteristics of pedagogical competence are given by *know-how* and *know-that*, in the pedagogical field an integration with two other dimensions of knowledge is envisaged, detected in the *know-why* and *know-where*. With the first expression, we want to emphasise that *know-that* and *know-how* must be supported by the ability to question oneself with respect to the reasons, the choices, the constraints and the possibilities of the action. This is closely connected to the *know-where*, namely the finalised knowledge, knowing in which direction we are moving, because the intervention is not just the application of a procedure, but a teleologically oriented activity (Milani, 2017: 26). In this sense, the characteristics supported by the *know-why* and the *know-where* determine the entry into the field of the dimensions of professionalism and responsibility, as a construction of meaning and intentionality of the educational action, which leads the caseworker to question their professional self.

4. A pedagogical approach to studying refugee reception and integration

Faced with an already complex phenomenon, encouraged by the "entrepreneurs of fear and insecurity" (Fiorucci, 2011: 9), the question arises of directing pedagogical reflection in social, educational and training contexts formal and informal – and, more specifically, towards the actions of caseworkers. As Fiorucci claims, the ability of services to redefine themselves in intercultural terms calls into question, beyond classroom settings:

> all those workers (native and/or migrants) who intentionally or naturally (in education, social or health care) play an educational role of intercultural mediation: a process of integration that is not connoted in an assimilationist sense requires both majorities and minorities to question themselves. (Fiorucci, 2011: 11)

The reason for an investigation in the educational field into the migration phenomenon is to respond to the need to reconsider social environments – i.e. SPRAR services and the projects implemented in them – as spaces for reflexive and planning action to build real social inclusion. Today, in the field of studies on intercultural pedagogy, there are challenges that, in terms of educational actions and practices, require the planning of paths aimed at enhancing differences and similarities (see Bolognesi & Lorenzini, 2017). After the emergence of multiculturalism in Canada, Aus-

tralia and the United States in the 1960s and the first intercultural strategies in European countries, defined in Germany as *Ausländerpädagogik* (pedagogy for foreigners) and in France as *pédagogie d'accueil* (pedagogy of reception), the development of an intercultural education in Italy took some time to appear, following the migratory phenomenon of the mid-1970s (see Catarci & Macinai, 2015). The presence of new foreign students in schools, of their families in society, and the emerging needs of the globalised world, made pedagogical reflection, and new educational and training purposes and methods necessary, to face the challenges of and undertake research on collective engagement strategies in an intercultural perspective (see, among others, Gobbo, 2000; Genovese, 2003; Bolognesi & Lorenzini, 2017; Santerini, 2017). As Cambi underlines:

> Interculture is a radical challenge to the current and common mentality, rooted in the convictions of tradition, and has become a mental habitus of Western man (ethnocentric, linked to the idea of being a superior anthropological model and to that of domination). A challenge that is also difficult, precisely because it is radical and because it is constantly on the move, due to the close links it maintains with its practice, its urgencies, its resistance, etc., and for the corrections that must operate – constantly – in itself exposed as it is to the tensions, to the inversions, to the deviations imposed by the historical becoming. (Cambi, 2001:15)

Interdependence and openness to *others* become fundamental characteristics in this research approach, where integration strategies and reformulation of intercultural practices are not sufficient, but new meanings and new forms of cultural reciprocity and social cohesion are expected. The enhancement of differences is therefore accompanied by pluralism as an institutional background that lays the foundations for the construction of mutual dialogue. Intercultural pedagogy, as a pedagogy *in situ*, is aimed at investigating the specific needs of educational events that take shape in the current multicultural society, in spaces of social encounter that do not deny conflict and uncertainty, but deconstruct to create and reclaim dialogue between cultures. This assumes that, in a multicultural and democratic society, education must necessarily be intercultural (see Catarci & Macinai, 2015). Migration, in this sense, as Demetrio maintains, "is therefore a challenge to our way of doing science in a society intended to be increasingly intercultural, despite the push in the opposite direction" (Demetrio & Favaro, 1992: 6). In this scenario, the acquisition of intercultural competencies assumes great importance. One definition is given by the Council of Europe, which defines intercultural competencies as:

> a combination of attitudes, knowledge, understanding and skills applied through action which enables one, either singly or together with others, to: – understand and respect people who are perceived to have different cultural affiliations from oneself; – respond appropriately, effectively and

> respectfully when interacting and communicating with such people; – establish positive and constructive relationships with such people; – understand oneself and one's own multiple cultural affiliations through encounters with cultural "difference". (Council of Europe, 2014: 16-17)

According to the reference literature (among others, Fantini, 2007; Deardorff, 2009; UNESCO, 2013; Portera 2013; Reggio & Santerini, 2014), a wide variety of elements are considered in the different definitions of intercultural competencies that determine a multidimensional nature. We can identify, with the studies of Reggio and Santerini (2014), three salient aspects in educational and social work: the ability to interpret and understand cultures; decentralisation as the ability to grasp problem-situations; the search for shared horizons and the reduction of prejudices; empathy. In operational terms, as regards reception and integration practices, the role of the caseworker appears to be strategically significant, as Catarci observes:

> The ability of operators of care facilities and social inclusion to critically reflect on the practices adopted in view of the improvement or testing tools, it is relevant to address the critical issues and problems arising from everyday experience. In this way it is possible to build responses which, although limited to specific territorial areas as is characteristic of any social intervention, can altogether configure a social state system that effectively promotes social integration. (Catarci, 2011, pp. 53-54)

In this direction, understanding and giving space to the practices and reflections of the caseworkers would make it possible to stimulate new operating lines and trajectories useful to define further meanings and interpretative horizons. This also applies to words such as *welcoming* and *integration*, which risk becoming "worn out" (Contini, 2009) and deprived of the authentic sense that characterises the value of these processes.

5. Unpacking educational and social work in contemporary society

The professional figures operating in the educational and social sectors in recent years are going through deep redefinitions, in training courses, in the transformation of working environments and in new areas of intervention, in legal and professional recognition and in the organisational and management structure of services. The changes involve society as a whole and, in particular, work in the social sphere, require a continuous adjustment of the dimensions that make it up. The complex articulation of educational and social work in Italy, therefore, highlights a transformation both for what concerns the social intervention itself and for the professional identity of the figures operating in this field. All the social professions, in fact, between new emergencies, new needs and renewed theoretical-methodological and opera-

tional scenarios, are today an integral part of the networking which – each with its own specificities – make up the articulated world of social work.

The relationship that links these figures within multidisciplinary teams defines their differentiations and overlaps in terms of skills. In fact, their work is carried out by a *unified* and non-divisible person, who tries to resist such disciplinary and professional fragmentation (see Tramma, 2009). For these reasons, specifically regarding the role of the caseworker, it is important that social work is composed of the elements that characterise educational work, which are essential in defining the epistemology of such a figure. In particular, this role involves pedagogical dimensions necessary to achieve the objectives desired by the reception and integration project. The educational relationship, the accompaniment and orientation towards autonomy and the construction of a new life project within a different social and cultural context, such as social inclusion, require a complex educational background. That includes, above all, even before the *goal*, the understanding of the *direction* for which one operates, and the awareness of specific skills, intercultural and pedagogical strategies that represent the essential basis for supporting the complexity of a projectual and intentional work (see Bertolini, 1988) such as that of caseworker. Thereby, it is important that the professional knows how to read and interpret the context in which they operate and knows how to place themself within a value system. As Milani underlines:

> to implement a pedagogically based intervention it is essential to choose which side to stand for, towards which ideas of education, educability, society, relationship… we intend to direct action and which tools and methodologies we wish to adopt. (Milani, 2017: 137)

This essential feature of educational professionalism constitutes not only the common horizon in which the different professional figures operate but represents the training proposal offered to the subject in education. Furthermore, it is crucial to interpret educational and training needs, which cannot be identified with psychological, anthropological or sociological needs. Although related, the social actor has the specific task of identifying the potential of the person not yet expressed and making them mature, through a project that looks at the specificities of the individual. Moreover, the intervention is aimed at the ability to grasp the implicit needs in addition to the explicit ones as well as the ability to make the subject responsible for their own education. Networking with different professionals requires an awareness given by the interdependence between the elements of the real context and the adoption of a methodological approach of social and educational services. As Milani points out:

> social workers, to which Italian and foreign literature currently refers, are no longer just social workers, but educators, street workers […] trainers who work in projects focused on minors or adults with special conditions (unemployment, drop-outs, foreigners, prisoners […]). (Milani, 2017: 151)

The purpose of networking is to bring back *power* to those who are defined as *users* with the intention of transforming them into *subjects of the action*. In this sense, the role of the social actor in networking, with a view to empowerment (see Rappaport, 1981; Zimmerman, 2000; Tolomelli, 2015), acts towards the promotion and support of the action of the individual or of the group (Folgheraiter, 1999). The network operator is the one who, as Besson claims, "works in the frontiers; is interested in the person as an integral part of a collective; he puts himself in a position of listening and accompaniment, meeting the other in his originality" (Besson, 1993: 11). In light of this, the specific competencies of networking are related to the ability to build links, to open up possibilities and to build professional enrichment processes, to the conscious management and, in balance with one's own professionalism, to the ability to be actively involved, decentralised and goal-oriented (Milani, 2017: 155).

Through the considerations noted so far, it can be seen how the professional work of the figures in the social sphere is articulated in a fragmented way in the national context due to the presence of a multiplicity of different professions regulated by the current principles which, on an international level, are included in the large core defined as "social work" (Barberis & Boccagni, 2017). The debate on the ethical-value background in the definition of social work that the international scientific community shares has played a decisive role in identifying those common traits that aim to represent the directions on which to build a reflection in ontological, epistemological and operational terms of the social work (see Giudice, 2011). The international definition, adopted in 2000 in Montreal by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), reports:

> The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being.
> Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. (IFSW cited in Hare, 2004: 409)

The definition then takes into consideration the empowerment of the person as a possibility of personal and social change, where the principles of social justice and the protection of human rights in the practice of social work are considered fundamental. This description, as we have shown and according to Milani's reflections, refers to social work in its complexity and not to the definition, more restricted, in use in the Italian tradition, of social service. The latter, in fact, refers to the specific training relating to the profession of social worker, while the definition given above in the international sphere integrates differ-

ent professions in social work, such as the social educator, the social worker, the community operator, and the socio-cultural animator (see Hare, 2004). It is important to underline how, in the specific field of social work with immigrants and asylum seekers, the definition of a reception system at national level has led to the solidification of a multidisciplinary team that requires the specificities of each figure, but, at the same time, urges the acquisition of transversal skills such as to support the taking charge of migrants.

In an overall framework that has led the state towards a marginal role, also and above all in the absence of solid and homogeneous regulatory policies and orientations, local contexts play a fundamental role in the multilevel governance network that nonetheless still possess a significant degree of fragility. Within this structure are the educational and social actions that, in multiple areas of intervention, characterise the territorial services. In this framework, as Barberis (2010) points out, the micro-community dynamics determine the intervention structures and an important weight is supported by the last piece of the system, represented in fact by the caseworkers of the services.

6. Conclusions

The arguments previously supported on the fluidity and the interweaving of different professional figures characterised by competencies, operational tools, interconnected objectives and goals, lead me to emphasize the need to trace the pedagogical skills of the caseworker. These are identifiable in the relational practices and dynamics in which the caseworker acts and is inserted and, as argued above, are necessary for the definition of the responsibility of the educational action and professionalism it intends to create and support.

Additionally, the moral dilemma of the actors involved is expressed in the search for a continuous balance between an institutional mandate given by the bureaucratic role and empathic listening, dialogue and negotiation, covering roles that are often not fully made clear. The need revealed by my observations in the field and the interviews carried out is to solicit a renewed awareness of the caseworker with respect to their own professional role and to protect their relationship with migrants as a fundamental necessity to be able to carry out a real path of social inclusion. An interviewed caseworker reports how the construction and protection of a relationship with the migrant is fundamental to the success of the project.

> Now my goal is to protect the construction of a relationship, because for me it is an essential thing. Something on which the success or failure of a project depends, which is not only looking for home and work but that you have also learned to trust and to be followed by a person who for you

> maybe was an orientation for a period and who gave you the tools you used. This is already a result for me, especially with people who come with a charge of terrifying distrust with everything they have gone through, being able to get this kind of relationship is something tiring that asks you for time, space, skills, so many things, in short… Doing bureaucratic and relationship work together I continue to argue that you can't do or that you need to find a way to be able to do it better but not like that, to do so giving priority to the relational part of the caseworker. (Op. 8)

In this extract, the caseworker, aware of the relevant task to which they are subjected, reports how in their experience it was fundamental to protect the relational dimension and how this can be functional in generating greater trust in the people received – while having to overcome the many limits and ambiguities arising from the effort, from the contradictions of the system, from time limitations, from the (un)suitability of spaces, and from the heterogeneity of needs of the people involved.

In conclusion, the study conducted, and the excerpts reported, highlight the strong presence of an institutional mandate (see Fargion, 2008; Faso & Bontempelli, 2017) that characterises the social work of the caseworkers – specifically, concerning the obligations and constant changes that the political, managerial, legislative and institutional aspects provide, and which meet the criteria of bureaucratisation of one's own work. On the other hand, a social type of mandate is defined which requires the caseworker to perform the functions of their profession based on relationships, carrying generative and transformative educational and social interventions towards the specific person and their uniqueness, promoting their self-determination. The interdependent demands of the two mandates that are traced in the representations of the caseworkers reflect what is often seen in everyday practices. The risk that seems to be realised is that the institutional dimension and the demands made by these factors influence, if not obstruct, the principles of the social work of the caseworkers to the point of limiting the social mandate, implementing itself in the mere application of prescriptions and standardisation of directives.

The specific and transversal competencies, the experiences and the abilities of the caseworkers, require them therefore to respond to different expectations simultaneously in their professional actions. The caseworkers find themselves engaged in a complexity that requires balancing the exercise of their functions, assuming both an active and a reflective role to combine the needs of the mandates. The conflict that ensues is likely to result in a levelling of interventions that distance themselves from the key objective of a reception system that directs its intervention in the co-planning, together with the beneficiaries, of personalised paths routed towards their achievement and autonomy. Promoting pedagogical and intercultural competencies in social actors, therefore, represents a necessity in a complex and multicultural society, which needs to be supported at the political and institutional level in order finally to be realised.

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