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Teaching Social Work Ethics through Photography: An Action Research Project in Undergraduate Education

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Abstract

This action research project examines the use of photography as a pedagogical tool for teaching ethics in the first-year undergraduate course Principles and Foundations of Social Work at the University of Bologna. The study is currently underway and aims to engage students in an active exploration of core social work values—such as respect, social justice, and self-determination—through both visual analysis and creative production. Students participate in two complementary activities: (1) collective reflection on professionally curated photographic images projected in class, guided by ethical discussion prompts; and (2) the creation of their own photographs to represent specific ethical principles, followed by peer discussion in large-group sessions. Data sources include students' written reflections, transcripts of group dialogues, and the images they produce. By the time of the conference, the research will have yielded substantial findings on how integrating participatory visual methods into ethics education can stimulate critical thinking, foster personal connections to abstract principles, and strengthen the articulation of professional identity in early-stage social work students. The paper will discuss the implications of these findings for innovative and value-driven approaches to social work education.

Keywords: Social Work Education, Ethics, Participatory Photography, Action Research, Professional Values