

Developing Social Partnership In Community Working With Children At Risk

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Abstract

When rendering social educational assistance in community (on self-government level), coordination of activities of different institutions working with risk group children is important: in order to attain this goal development of social partnership is one of the ways. The aim of the article is disclose development of social partnership when working with children at risk in community. In order to attain this aim three objectives were formulated. While implementing the first objective, the conception of risk group children, factors of emergence of this socially vulnerable group are discussed; the second – theoretical assumptions for social partnership in community while working with children at risk are disclosed and the third – the viewpoint of the specialists (social pedagogues and social workers), who work with children at risk in community, to development of social partnership is identified. Research methods: analysis of scientific literature, semi-structured interview. Twelve specialists (social pedagogues and social workers), who work with risk group children in community, were interviewed by the qualitative method (semi-structured interview).

Keywords: Children at risk, social partnership, community

Introduction

Research relevance

Children are treated as belonging to a social risk group for certain reasons determined by social, economic, demographic, psychological, pedagogical and other factors. Children may be part of a risk group because of nationality, material and social family conditions, etc. Due to the consequences of migration, economic crises and globalization, social pedagogues and social workers encounter a lot of challenges in working with children at risk. The changing environment calls for a new search for socio-educational work with this group of clients. Balachova, Bonner and Levy (2009) note that work with children at risk calls for assistance on three levels: national, municipal and individual.

- On the national level, legislation is developed for children's rights, their protection, and compulsory education, social and economic security as well as welfare.
- On the municipal level, municipal institutions address their tasks in line with the legislation and regulations. They provide children's social and economic security.
- On the individual level, social workers, social pedagogues at schools and social workers at NGOs directly communicate with a child and provide different types of assistance.

In providing assistance on the municipal level, the coherence of different institutions working with children at risk is important. Developing social partnerships is one of the ways towards it.

Scientific problem

The problem of social partnership is analysed in different viewpoints, for example, social partnership in education field is analysed in researches of Bellefeuille & McGrath, (2013) Gross, Haines, Hill, Francis, Blue-Banning, Turnbull (2015), Osipov, Karstanje, Tumalev, Zarubin (2009). Putnam (2001) discusses existence of social partnership as phenomenon of civil society; Bertrand (1998), Seddon, Billett, Clemans (2008) discusses parameters of social partnership – activity of social partners, their roles and expression. It is relevant to explore development of social partnership when working with children at risk in community. In this context two problematic questions emerge: How do specialists working with children at risk in community understand social partnership? How should social partnership be developed in local community while working with risk group children? The aim of the article is to disclose development of social partnership while working with children at risk in community. In order to attain the aim three objectives were formulated: the first one – is to discuss conception of risk group children, factors of origin of this socially vulnerable group, the second objective – is to heighten theoretical assumptions of social partnership while working with children at risk and the third one – is to reveal the viewpoint of specialists (social pedagogues and social workers), who work with children at risk in community, to development of social partnership.

Risk group children

According to Babbie (2010), two criteria should be taken into account when defining the concept of a risk group child: child's behaviour and the specifics of a child's closest environment. The European Union has no approved and acknowledged definition of vulnerable children and children at risk but the European Commission distinguishes the following

categories of the vulnerable children (Favourable Environment for Children and Young People, 2013, p.10):

- children experiencing poverty and social exclusion;
- disabled children;
- children who are the victims of sexual exploitation and human trafficking;
- asylum seeking children and children who came to the European Union unaccompanied;
- children who did not graduate from school, i.e. have only an initial or lower education;
- children of Roma Gypsies;
- children who run away or go missing from home or care institutions;
- children who experienced harassment in electronic environment and school (Favourable Environment for Children and Young People, 2013, p.10).

Prakapas (2001) employed monitoring at school and identified the following groups of children at risk:

- violating the rules of conduct episodically;
- violating the rules of conduct systematically (do not do their homework, communicate boldly with adults, smokers, use physical force, abuse the weaker, reluctant to go to school, etc.)
- delinquents (commit felony and crimes).

The characteristics of families and problematic children groups who face poverty and social exclusion were stated in a survey conducted in Lithuania in 2013 (Service Infrastructure Development Opportunities for the Family Welfare, 2013):

- families which do not look after the children because of the lack of social skills, conflicts or other reasons;
- families who have vulnerable children;
- families who have addictions;
- having experienced violence in closest environment;
- families living in poverty (receiving social benefits, etc.);
- families where parents are unemployed or economically inactive for a long period of time;
- transnational families;
- families who take care of disabled or older relatives;
- young families.

In summarizing, it can be stated that the main and most frequently recurring factors that do not depend on the child but on the child's family and influence child's belonging to social risk group are place of residence,

nationality, home environment, welfare. In this case children at risk are the children growing up at social risk families.

The support providing specialists (social pedagogues, social workers), while improving life quality and educational conditions of these children, are looking for new and qualitative forms of aid and support but responsible work of various specialists does not guarantee the integrated complex assistance that these children are in need of. Providing complex (social educational) assistance at community level is often faced with the laws, the lack of human and material resources, inability to make rational use of available resources.

The analysis of institutions providing services to risk group families in Lithuania was carried out in 2012, and the study was published. This study (Service Infrastructure improvement opportunities to the welfare of the family, 2013) revealed the following trends of social partnership:

- Public institutions associate cooperation not with joint work but with information collection in writing or by phone. In general, cooperation is associated with client forwarding to get the service, sharing information about services provided by other institutions, sharing best practices, collaboration among professionals.
- Non-Governmental sector usually associates cooperation with funding, support, raising money. It is often an obstacle to cooperate. Just a few institutions link cooperation with the joint work for the benefit of the client.
- Often, the communication between various institutions is fragmented, in written form, although the benefit of direct contact and personal relationship is acknowledged. This leads to duplication of services. Often cooperation is complicated by institutions' negative attitude, particularly government institution to certain groups of customers.

The assumption could be made that social partnership is an important factor for helping children at risk.

Social partnership

Most of the institutions working to help families agree that activity based on social partnership, i.e. when all institutions are involved in problem solving, is a very important and sometimes a vital factor for success. According to Petrylaite (2008), social partnership is understood as organisational principle involving social partners' collective relationship being implemented by negotiations and agreements.

Casey (2008) separates several most important social partnership traits. She notes that partnership is implemented through networking with other organisations and has shared achievements, common purpose, mutual

respect and willingness to consult and cooperate, competent participation, information sharing and joint decision-making.

Social partnership brings together people and organizations to draw attention to the issues of interest to all groups of people, such as unemployment, economic or urban development, education development (Casey, 2008). Social problems such as alcoholism, drug addiction, violence, social exclusion of risk group individuals.

Nelson & Zadek (2000) named principles of social partnership: societal aims; innovation, multi-constituency, voluntary, mutual benefit and shared investment, alchemical effect. According to Nelson & Zadek (2000), social partners are concentrated for joint work; they can help the socially vulnerable members of the society, who are excluded from participation in civil life, so societal benefits are created. Social partnership enables partners to find new innovative viewpoints and possibilities to solve social and economic problems. Partners from different level public (European, national or local), private business enterprises or associations, public or local community institutions, non-governmental organizations can take part in social partnership.

Summarizing various scientific studies (Casey, 2008; Petrylaite, 2008; Kaminskiene, 2008; Balciunas, 2010; Nelson & Zadek, 2000 and others), it can be stated that the social partnership is common goal achievement based on cooperation principles. It helps to solve complex social problems, and may be institutional, multi-institutional, national and global levels. Main features of social partnership when working with children at risk are as follows: collaboration in pursuing for quality of activity, coordination of activity fields, search for compromises, sharing responsibility among partners.

Social educational support for children at risk in the local community can be provided by various non-governmental organizations and public sector institutions such as schools, child protection services, police stations, neighbourhoods, educational psychological service. Social partners circle depends on the size of the community in which they operate, traditions and specialists working in the institutions.

Organization of social partnership (in the case of Lithuania), when working with children at risk in local community (self-government level), it takes place due to the initiation of main institutions: school and neighbourhood. The viewpoint of the specialists, who work at these institutions, to development of social partnership is presented in other part of the article.

Research methodology

The qualitative research strategy was chosen for the research. *The sample.* The X city community was selected for the research. The selection of the sample of the research was based on comfortable, target sample. City X community was selected for the research. Twelve individuals (No=12) were interviewed during the research: social pedagogues (No=6), working at X community schools and social workers (No=6), working at X community municipal units.

Qualitative research methods. Data collection. The data were collected by applying the method of semi-structured interview. *Data analysis.* By integrating ideas of different scientists into the realisation of qualitative content analysis, the method of qualitative content analysis was chosen according to the following steps: *Step 1: to prepare the data* (Mayring, 2000; Berg, 2001): the interview data presented by the research participants were transcribed, i.e. the analysis of audio records was performed on the basis of transcription when a whole transcription of the interview is recorded. (Bird, 2005). *Step 2: to define a unit of the analysis* (De Wever, Schellens, Valcke, & Van Keer, 2006). One sentence was chosen as the analysis unit. *Step 3: construction of categories and formation of coding scheme* (Hsieh, & Shannon, 2005). *Category* was chosen as the largest level of coding; subcategory, which is obtained by heuristic method – by reading the sentence of a research participant and abstracting the information expressed in it as well as creating a subcategory for it, is chosen at the lowest level of coding. The category can consist of two or more subcategories; subcategories are integrated into one category when they are united by one idea expressed by the formulation in the category; several categories integrated into a topic. *Step 4: full-text coding* (Neuendorf, 2002). The texts of seven topics were unanimously analysed according to coding scheme – subcategory, category and topic – in seven electronic files. *Step 5: evaluation of coding integrity* (Patton, 2002; Schilling, 2006). The coded texts were many times read by two researchers, titles of subcategories and categories were discussed and specified as well as combination of subcategories into categories were considered, the combination of categories into topics were corrected and specified. *Step 6: presentation of generalisations from the coded material* (Schamber, 2000). Contents of the coded texts are presented in constructed tables.

Research instrument. The semi-structured interview consisted of 10 questions. The questions were of two types: demographic and information questions. The block of interview demographic questions consisted of three questions. Their purpose was to find out total work experience of the informants, their education and the work experience at the institution they work at present. The research participants were given seven questions while

searching for the answer to the research questions: how the specialists working with children at risk in community understand social partnership and how social partnership should be developed in local community while working with risk group children. Their purpose was to find out how the participants understand social partnership, what goals of collaboration among institutions they raise, who has to initiate social partnership, with what social partners one is collaborating while working with children at risk, what principles of social partnership partners must follow, what benefit, advantages and disadvantages of social partnership they envisage while working with children at risk.

The following *principles of ethics* were considered (Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, 2001): autonomy, benevolence, justice, confidentiality.

Discussion of the research results

Research results: only women participated in the research and all of them had acquired university education. First six informants work as social pedagogues and other six work as social workers at neighbourhoods. The specialists have the medium experience of 4.25 years in their field of work. The education and work experience at institutions of the informants suggest that the specialists have experience and good knowledge working with children at risk and providing them an educational social assistance.

Having performed the analysis the interview participants' data, in the topic „Social partnership”, category „Social partnership” was distinguished that consisted of five subcategories: “*Collaboration with partners*”; “*Method of help*”, “*Problem solving*”, “*Social dialogue*”, “*Communication among different social groups*”. The results showed that the informant described social partnership as collaboration, which included dealing with the social partners, other agencies and organizations, their employees and even private individuals. One of the interviewees described the social partnership as a social dialogue. These two concepts are quite often used as synonyms in scientific literature. Separate sub-category – “*Method of help*” shows that research participants linked social partnership with the goal to help the customer, the common goal and its definition. Subcategory – “*Problem solving*” has shown that it could be the way for problem solving. Subcategory “*Communication of different social groups*” confirms the statement by Petrylaite (2008) that social partnership helps to lower the tension among different social classes.

The topic „*Social partnership organizers*” contains two categories: “*School*” and “*Neighbourhood*”. According to majority of the respondents, social partnership organization at schools should be initiated by a class teacher because it is the person who first notices the child's problems („...*class teachers <...> Class teacher is the first who can recognise the*

problem... “, „...If the child attends school, this meant that the organising of help should start from class teacher..“). Also, all informants mentioned social pedagogue as organizer (*I think that it's school and this has to be done by social pedagogue... “ „...at school it is a social pedagogue... “*,). This is a specialist who receives all information about children's bad behaviour or school problems. The social pedagogue is a person who evaluates child's needs, chooses effective methods of support, plans the process of assistance to the child, and consults with colleagues and other professionals. Therefore, we can conclude that the class teacher can be the initiator of the problem solving process, i.e. to report to a social pedagogue, but all the problem solving process and the organization of social partnership is a social pedagogue's, rather than the class teacher's responsibility. The topic “Social partners” includes one category with the same name and seventeen subcategories: “*Children rights protection service*”, “*Police*”, “*Neighbourhoods*”, “*Children's day-care centre*”, “*Children's day-care centre*”, “*Schools*”, “*Social support centre*”, “*Youth Centre*”, “*Caritas*”, “*Businesses*”, “*Child care homes*”, “*Pedagogical Psychological Service*”, “*Municipality*”, “*Crisis centre*”, “*Volunteer Training Centre*”, “*Church*”, “*NGO*”, “*Private individuals*”. The research participants mentioned that the circle of the social partners depended on the situation and the particular problem of the child. Having performed the data analysis, it has become evident that it is mostly collaborated with institutions of public sector. The topic “The objectives of collaboration between institutions” includes the category “*The objectives of cooperation*” and eight subcategories: “*Obtained information*”, “*Exchange of information*”, “*Asking for help from partners*”, “*Consultations about problem solving*”, “*Concentration of effort*”, “*Direction to correct institutions*”, “*Assistance given*”, and “*Learning from partners' experience*”. In the partnership process one consults social partners about providing assistance for children, distributes fields of responsibility, and consults specialists of other fields. The topic “The benefits of social partnership in the process” includes two categories: “*Benefits of social partnership for children*” and “*Benefits of social partnership to support givers*”: The topic “Principles, which are followed in social partnership” distinguishes the category “Principles of social partnership” and eight subcategories: “*Mutual respect*”, “*Benevolence*”, “*Fulfilment of obligations*”, “*Responsibility*”, “*Trust*”, “*Volunteering*”, “*Equal rights*”, “*Persistence*”. According to the research participants, it is necessary to follow these principles not only in social partnership but also in working with children. Referring to the research results it is possible to state that social partnership is based on volunteering principle; this makes conditions for every partner to actively participate in decision-making. Such partnership allows increasing the resources necessary for the work with children and

share risks as well as input (social, financial, human resources and so on) among all participating partners. The obtained data complement the principles of social partnership named by Nelson & Zadek, (2000). Trust in the social partners is very important for the research participants. They understand insistence as the search for new ways of assistance while working with children at risk. The social partners have to pursue more than for the simple sum of their performed works, one has to pursue for synergy effect. The topic „Advantages and disadvantages of social partnership” distinguished the category “Social Partnership Benefits” and sub-categories: “Required information received” (“... *it is necessary to information ...*”, “...*it is possible to receive more detailed information about the children ...*”), “Provided assistance” (“...*there is a need to provide assistance... “*”, “...*received assistance*”), “Security feeling” (“... *certainty and a sense of security when you know that you are not alone and that the assistance will be provided at a request*”), “The client receives comprehensive assistance” (“...*a comprehensive assistance which is affective is received.*”, “Possibility to learn” (“...*informal opportunities to learn*”), “Promotion of volunteering” (“...*volunteering is promoted*”). Category “Social partnership shortages” and sub-categories “Indifference of partners” (“...*indifference*”; “...*indifference, and sometimes miscommunication*”) and “Bureaucracy” (“...*bureaucracy is not fully withdrawn*”).

Conclusion

The research results showed that social partnership is built on the basis of participation and relies on open communication between all members, supporting each other in common, pre-planned activities and making decisions collaboratively, that collaborating parties need to respect each other and the principles of perseverance, kindness, engagement, responsibility, commitment, trust, voluntariness and equality have to be engaged when developing a social partnership.

After data analysis it can be assumed that the employees of the organizations that operate in the X community and provide social and educational assistance to children at risk, understand the essential of social partnership development and operating principles. Socio-educational personnel clearly identified the importance of social partner’s involvement in a comprehensive assistance process affirming that it allows improving the quality and providing the necessary assistance to children at risk in order to improve their quality of life. From the socio-educational personnel’s (social workers, social pedagogues) point of view the benefits of social partnership when working with children at risk are:

- successful solution of problems faced by children in the community;

- social partners share the information when solving the problems, consult with each other, give/receive financial support for joint activities (organizing children's occupation).

The main difficulties of social partnership development are indifference of partners and bureaucracy.

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