

## THE QUALIFICATION IMPROVEMENT OF SOCIAL WORKERS WORKING IN CHILDREN'S CARE HOMES IN THE CONTEXT OF THEIR RESTRUCTURING

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**Abstract.** *The article analyses the qualification improvement of social workers, who work in children's care homes, in the context of their restructuring. A qualitative-empirical study has been conducted by using the method of a semi-structured interview. The study data were processed by using the method of content analysis. The results of the empirical study are based on the experience of 14 social workers, who work in care institutions, which participate in the restructuring, which consists of the changeover from institutional care to the services that are provided to children, who have become destitute of parental care, in a family and community. Internal (an aspiration for a continuous qualification improvement and the desire to share professional experience) and external (changes related to the restructuring, ever higher requirements for social workers, the encouragement and support of the administration of institutions to improve their qualification) stimuli to improve qualification have been highlighted. The most relevant topics of qualification improvement for social workers are the development of personal and social skills in children, the preparation of them for an independent life, the solution of behavioural and psychological problems in children and the preparedness of social workers themselves for the restructuring and the need for supervisions. The topics, which meet their needs, are: the development of social skills, the communication with children and the preparation of them for a family. According to the informants, there is a lack of trainings oriented towards the solution of practical problems which arise while organizing the restructuring. The following problems related to the improvement of qualification were highlighted: the mismatch between the teaching topics and the content, during the trainings for social worker, who work in children's care homes, the problems of other social groups, but not of children are analysed. During trainings, there is a lack of the detailed examination of the solution of practical problems. The social workers lack trainings related to the preparation for the restructuring.*

**Keywords:** *care homes, children, qualification, restructuring of institutional care, social worker.*

### Introduction

According to Statistics Lithuania, in Lithuania, in 2014 1325 social workers worked in municipal children's care homes, 227 - in state (county) children's care homes, 283 - in children's care homes which belonged to civil

society organisations and parishes. The reform of the system of children's care was begun in 2007, after having adopted the Strategy on the Reorganization of Children's Custody (Care) System, however, up until now the reform has not been completed. In 2014 "The Action Plan for the Transition from Institutional Care to the Family and Community Based Services to the Children with Disabilities and the Children who Have Lost Parental Care for 2014–2020" was adopted. When restructuring children's care homes it is foreseen to create new services and expand existing municipal services which are alternative to institutional care: municipal children's care homes where up to 8 children are given residence in flats and homes; protected housing/ independent living homes to those who leave care, by providing accompanying assistance, care in a foster family, care in a household etc. In order that a social worker would be able to properly perform the functions, which are delegated to him, it is necessary to create conditions to improve professional qualifications in the area of child well-being. The quality of social services is inseparable from the competence of the specialists that provide them. According to B. Daniel (2013), continuous expansion of professional competence is a very important part of social work which can assist social workers in deepening their current knowledge and reducing difficulties which arise. C. Hilarski and J. Wodarski (2001) note that social worker, who functions in today's modern society, must be engaged in a continuous learning process. The inevitability of the qualification improvement of social workers when restructurings are underway is emphasized by S. Hojlund (2011). B. Cooper (2000) maintains that when constant changes occur appropriate professional assistance for children can be provided only by a constantly learning social worker.

Over the past years the professionalism and qualification development of social workers has been researched by quite a few Lithuanian scientists. Different aspects of the education of social workers and their professional activity (supervision, conflict resolution ability) are examined by A. Kiaunytė and I. Dirgėlienė (2005), A. Kiaunytė (2008 a,b), A. Kiaunytė and N. P. Večkienė (2011). Relevant questions of the professional activity of social workers and their qualification improvement are analysed by I. Dirgėlienė (2008). R. Bubnys, I. Jocaitė (2011) analysed the content of the professional activity of social workers. V. Gudžinskienė (2010, 2012) revealed the key competences, knowledge, work-planning skills and attitude towards qualification improvement of social workers who work in children's care homes. The problematicity of professional competences is emphasised by S. Mačiulskytė (2013). While the restructuring is underway no studies, which analyse the qualification improvement of social workers, who work in children's care homes, in the context of the restructuring, have been conducted. The study seeks to answer the following problematic questions: 1) what are the incentives

for improvement of professional qualification of social workers, who work in children's care homes, in the context of the restructuring? 2) how the supply of the services of qualification improvement for social workers matches with their needs for qualification improvement in the context of the restructuring of care homes?

The purpose of the study is to reveal the qualification improvement of social workers, who work in children's care homes, in the context of the restructuring on the basis of their experience.

### **Research methodology**

**Research methods.** Qualitative research type was chosen for the study. According to J. W. Creswell (2009), the purpose of a qualitative study is to research complex phenomena with the properties that are characteristic of them and present the meanings and approaches, that were expressed by the participants of a study, on a researched phenomenon. In the study, the method of a semi-structured interview, which enables to come close to the understanding of human experiences, designation of meanings, the definition of meanings and the construction (explanation) of reality, was used. This article overviews two problematic questions of the study: 1) what are the incentives for the improvement of professional qualification of social workers, who work in children's care homes, in the context of the restructuring? 2) how the supply of the services of qualification improvement for social workers meets their needs for qualification improvement?

The obtained data were analyzed by using the content analysis method. Qualitative content analysis was carried out in accordance with the inductive, study data based and categories composed logic. According to J. W. Creswell (2009), content analysis is a technique which, having examined the specificities of the text, allows to objectively and systematically draw reliable conclusions. The qualitative content analysis was performed in the following sequence (Creswell, 2009): the repeated reading of the content of transcribed interview texts, the distinction of meaning elements in the text analysed, the grouping of the distinguished meaning elements into categories and sub-categories, integration of the categories/sub-categories into the context of the phenomenon analysed and the description of their analysis.

**The sample of the research.** Criteria-based sample was used in the study. The informants were chosen according to the following criteria: 1) social workers who have a degree in social work, 2) social workers who work in care institutions, that take part in the restructuring, which consists of the transition from institutional care to services in a family and community, which are provided to children who have lost parental care; 3) social workers whose length

of their working time in children's care homes is at least 5 years; 4) 3 recent years of work with adolescents who are about to leave children's care homes.

The study was conducted in the September-October of 2015 in children's care homes chosen for restructuring according to "The List of Residential Social Care Institutions and the Homes of Infants with Impaired Development Selected for Restructuring" (2015). 14 social workers (all female) participated in the study.

**Ethics of the research.** The permission of the heads of children's care homes to conduct the research in their organisation has been obtained. Personal permission of the informants to take part in the research was sought. The researchers obliged themselves to the research participants not to divulge the information related to the organisation and the informant. The principles of anonymity, volunteerism and benevolence were followed. The social workers were acquainted with the goal of the research, the interview questions, and the importance of argumentated reflection on their experience.

### **Analysis of research results**

According to S. Mačiulskytė (2013), social workers must fulfill professional competence requirements, which are very high, because their activity has a direct influence on the mental, psychological and emotional well-being of people. The Action Plan for the Transition from Institutional Care to the Family and Community Based Services to the Children with Disabilities and the Children who Have Lost Parental Care (2014) foresees the qualification and competence improvement of the employees, who work in the area of the welfare of the child, and the preparation for the restructuring of the personnel and community of institutional care.

During the study social workers, who work in the children's care homes, which participate in the reorganisation, were asked to express their opinion regarding the incentives for the improvement of their professional qualification.

When analysing the responses received from the informants the category "Internal incentives for qualification improvement" was distinguished (Table 1).

The results of the study revealed that one of the incentives for qualification improvement is internal motivation of social workers which is linked by the informants to the aspiration to continuously improve professional qualification and the desire to share professional experience. In the context of the restructuring, social workers feel an inner need for the improvement of professional qualification and draw particular attention to sharing best practices: "...when you share your experience you see how other colleagues in children's care homes are faring, and, if you get experience abroad as well, then the incentive is really greater" (H).

Table 1 **Internal Incentives for Qualification Improvement**

Subcategory	Confirming statements
Aspiration for continuous improvement of professional qualification	“The retention of higher level of qualification... the desire to update knowledge, to implement it in practice”(C); “...the desire to improve at work... I both want to get to know novelties and to keep abreast of what is happening...” (G); “...the desire to change, to develop, to look for novelties, to participate in all the gatherings, seminars, open workshops, methodological workshops and elsewhere as far as is practicable” (I); “...The willingness to carry out my duties as well as possible. ... To get to know the novelties in the field of social work” (A); “The most important thing during qualification improvement courses is to acquire as much of knowledge and praxis as it is possible...” (N)
The desire to share professional experience	“It is resulted by the desire to share best professional practices, to improve social, psychological and other competences...” (L); “...when you share your experience you see how other colleagues in children’s care homes are faring, and, if you get experience abroad as well, then the incentive is really greater” (H); “...it is good to share experience...Internal motivation ...” (B)

While analyzing data obtained during the research the category “ External Incentives for Qualification Improvement” was revealed as well (Table 2).

Table 2 **External Incentives for Qualification Improvement**

Subcategory	Confirming statements
The changes related to the restructuring	“Care system is developing and, whether you want it or not, you must develop...” (E); “.. The improvement of qualification is promoted by laws which change the status of social workers, including the plan for the restructuring of care system” (J); “ I choose the directions for qualification improvement, taking into consideration the priorities of the restructuring...” (F)
Ever higher requirements for social workers	“The retention of higher level of qualification during the restructuring...”; (G) “...The needs for the improvement of qualification are resulted by continuous changes, and the requirements set out for a social worker are increasingly higher”; (D) “...there are continuous challenges for social work, the existing competences are no longer sufficient for a social worker, the talk about the readiness to prepare the educatees for an independent life is getting increasingly often and loud: social skills, career education etc. It requires new professional skills...” (K)
The encouragement of the administration of an institution to improve professional qualification	“I improve qualification by taking into consideration the recommendations of the managers of the institution as well...”; (A) “...The attitudes of the administration, that a social worker must constantly improve qualification and the creation of opportunities for qualification improvement, are very important ...”; (C) “...qualification improvement to respond to the priorities of the restructuring is encouraged by the administration” (N)

External incentives are related to the effect of the environment which is linked by the informants to the changes related to the restructuring, ever higher requirements, that are set out for social workers, and the encouragement of the administration of an institution to improve professional qualification. The informants underlined that the necessity to improve qualification is conditioned by the constant changes of social system: *"...I choose the directions for qualification improvement, taking into consideration the priorities of the restructuring ..."* (F). On the other hand, increasing professional requirements for social workers encourages them to improve their qualification. According to the informants, *"the needs for the improvement of qualification are resulted by continuous changes and the increasingly higher requirements set out for a social worker"* (D); *"...there are continuous challenges for social work, the existing competences are no longer sufficient for a social worker"* (K). On the basis of the data of the study, it should be noted that the administration of the care institutions, which take part in the restructuring, understand, support and encourage the necessity of the qualification improvement of social workers. On the basis of the results of the study, it can be said that while the restructuring of children's care institutions is underway social workers are motivated to improve their professional qualification.

During the study it was sought to reveal how the supply of the services of qualification improvement for social workers meets the needs for qualification improvement in the context of the restructuring of care institutions. Based on the replies of the informants, the category „The Relevant Topics of Qualification Improvement“ was distinguished (Table 3).

The study revealed that, for social workers, who work in children's care homes, which participate in the restructuring, the topics, which are related to the preparation of children for an independent life (the development of personal and social skills), the solution of behavioural and psychological problems in children (the methods to address conflicts and aggressive behaviour and their management, work with children who have behavioural and emotional disorders, the promotion of positive behaviour, sexual education, problem solving) and the preparedness for the restructuring (how to prepare children for the restructuring, how to implement the restructuring by social workers themselves and how to get prepared for the specificities of their future work properly, how to cope with anxiety and possibly unfounded fears) are of particular relevance. Based on the experience of social workers in the context of the restructuring, the need for supervisions came to light. Experiencing changes becomes a professional test for the employees, which requires to maintain emotional balance, to change thinking and to acquire new professional skills. The participation in supervision can help social workers who experience changes. Supervision promotes the reflection of their experience. The

participation in supervision assists not only in analysing the existing expertise, but also to create new processes of their activity, to look for ideas and resolution strategies (Kianytė, 2008 a).

Table 3 **The Relevant Topics of Qualification Improvement**

Subcategory	Confirming statements
The preparation the child for an independent life	“The development of children’s independence: the improvement of personal and social skills in children... “ (H); “Due to the fact that I work with children, who are leaving the institution shortly, the topics, which are the most relevant for me, are related to the preparation of children for an independent life...” (E); “...what methods should be applied while preparing children for an independent life” (N)
The solution of of behavioural and psychological problems in children	“...the methods employed by the care homes to solve psychological problems in children... children often want to open their hearts, they ask for a piece of advice, however, I am not always able to advise or have knowledge what to do in one instance or another...” (A); “Aggressive behavior in children, learning motivation...” (L); “Work with children who have behavioural and emotional disorders...in addition, the management of aggressive behaviour ...” (G); “...I am interested in psychological themes... anger management tools for the educatees...” (M); “...the promotion of the positive behaviour in children and adolescents, the development of social skills, anger management“ (F); „Sexual education, ways to address problems“ (J)
Preparedness for the restructuring	“...how to prepare children for the processes of the restructuring... how to explain to children that they are going to live separately from their friends...” (A); “...we ourselves need trainings about the implementation of the restructuring, the specificities of the future work...” (N); “...when talking with the colleagues, who have already been restructured, a concern arises that nobody explained to them, did not help how to talk with children about the changes...” (F); “...we ourselves have loads of uncertainties, anxiety, possibly unfounded fears as well, there is the need for supervisions, in order to get a better perception...” (F); “...there is a particular need for supervisions...” (J)

When analysing the data of the study the category “Match/mismatch of the proposed topics and courses of qualification improvement for social workers with their needs” was identified as well (Table 4).

The informants identified the topics and courses which match with their needs: the development of social skills, communication with children, the preparation of them for a family life. Based on the thoughts of the informants, it should be noted that certain topics are of particular relevance in contemporary society when solving social problems (the harms of alcohol and smoking),

however, there is a lack of trainings oriented towards practical applicability and specific methodologies employed when working with children of different ages.

Table 4 **Match/mismatch of the proposed topics and courses of qualification improvement for social workers with their needs**

Subcategory	Confirming statements
Topics and courses which match or match in part with the needs	“...there is nothing better than when qualification improvement seminars are on the development of social skills, communication with children and their preparation for a family life...” (A); “...a lot of topics are proposed on the damage caused by alcohol and tobacco consumption, the topics are relevant, but I would like more trainings oriented towards practical applicability: how to work with children who have not started smoking, who have already picked up smoking...” (F); “...the majority of seminar instructors tell what to do, but there is the lack of the methodologies how to do that...” (H); “...we choose urgent topics, we have them, but there is a great need for methodological knowledge and steps how to do that in practice” (L)
The proposed topics and courses which do not match with the needs	“...I am not always able to apply knowledge in my practical activity, ... when trainings are led by theorists they are clearly not oriented towards practical problems ...” (E); “... the content of the training programmes not always match with the topic of the training, therefore, trainings not always meet expectations. Sometimes during trainings other social groups are covered, therefore, I cannot apply the knowledge in my work with children...” (B); “...the match is very rare... it is not always possible to apply theoretical knowledge in a practical activity, because there is the lack of practical advice, for example, specific experience.... A seminar, for example, on harmful habits, and statistical data and dry theory on smoking are presented ...” (D); “...It happens that the content of the topics of organised seminars does not match with the name of a seminar. Theorists discuss an urgent problem in a shallow manner without getting deep into it... “ (M)

During the study it came to light that part of organised trainings do not match with the needs of social workers in the context of the restructuring. The social workers, who participated in the study, noted that the content of training programmes not always match with the topic of a training, during the trainings, which are aimed at social workers, working in children's care homes, it is talked about other social groups, therefore, the knowledge cannot be applied to work with children, there is a lack of the examples of practical problem solving methods and the analyses and methodologies of their solutions. Based on the data of the study, it can be established that, so far, social workers, who work in children's care homes, which participate in the restructuring, are not sufficiently prepared for the restructuring. As stated in Common European Guidelines on the

Transition from Institutional to Community Based Care (2012), a systematic and coordinated training programme is a prerequisite for the creation of community services – this approach guarantees that employees would receive adequate training.

### **Conclusions**

Based on the experience of social workers, internal and external incentives for qualification improvement, which are associated with the restructuring of children's care homes, were highlighted. Internal incentives for professional improvement are associated with the aspiration of social workers, which work in children's care homes, to constantly improve professional qualification and the desire to share professional experience. Internal incentives for professional improvement are linked to the changes during the course of the restructuring, ever higher requirements set out for social workers and the encouragement and support of the administration of institutions.

The study has established that during the course of the institutional restructuring of children's care homes the development of personal and social skills in children, the preparation of them for an independent life, the solution of behavioural and psychological problems in children and the preparedness of social workers themselves for the restructuring are qualification improvement topics of the greatest relevance to social workers. The need for supervisions came to light in the context of the restructuring.

The study revealed qualification improvement topics of the investigates which match with their needs: the development of social skills, communication with children and the preparation of them for a family life. There is a lack of trainings oriented towards a practical solution to problems arising in the course of the organisation of the restructuring. The following qualification improvement problems were highlighted: the mismatch of training topics with their content, during the trainings intended for the social workers of children's care homes not the children's problems, but those of other social groups are analysed. The trainings lack an exhaustive examination of the solution of practical problems and methodological recommendations. There is insufficient number of trainings related to the preparation for the restructuring for social workers, who work in children's care homes, which participate in the restructuring.

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