COMPETENCES OF SOCIAL WORKERS FOR WORK WITH YOUTH: CASE ANALYSIS

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Abstract. *The Article reveals competences of social workers for work with youth based on the case analysis of social workers dealing with youth problems. It provides the content of social workers' competences, peculiarities of social work with youth from the professional point of view. Practical experience of social workers working with youth is interpreted as a reflection of professional activity of social workers which highlights the competences of social workers solving youth problems. The aim of the article is to evaluate competences of social workers working with youth. The research strategy was based on the perspective of constructivism, research applied a targeted – partially structured interview data collection method. The research revealed strengths of social workers working with youth: development of trust-based professional relationship, ability to work with a group of young people, empathy, ability to take the initiative, and ability to flexibly and creatively respond to situations. Yet some weaknesses of social workers solving youth problems have been identified: understanding the role and professional restrictions of social worker and problem solution skills.*
Keywords: *competencies, youth, social work with youth, social worker.*

Introduction

Social work with youth is an area requiring high professional competences, because youth in the current society is one of the most vulnerable social groups in the context of social work. This is determined not only by the peculiarities of young age people but also by the reasons increasing social exclusion of youth. Currently problems related to the youth social group and characterized by differentiation have been widely analysed by the researchers: factors characterizing social exclusion of youth have been investigated by R. Brazienė, G. Merkys (2012), L. Okunevičiūtė-Neverauskienė, J. Moskvina (2008), R. Rudžinskienė (2013); aspects of social exclusion of youth (deviation, migration, education, health status and accessibility of social services) by D. Jurgaitienė, A. Stankuvienė (2007), I. Jonutytė, Š. Litvinas (2007), G. Petronytė et al., (2007), S. Vaitekūnas, A. Bukauskaitė (2008), A. Juozulynas et al., (2009), R. Pilkauskaitė-Valickienė etc. (2009), J. Žukauskaitė (2012), G. Žibėnienė, D. Brasienė (2013), R. Ilgūnienė (2014); political factors (civic

and political involvement) by R. Žiliukaitė (2008); I. Zaleskienė & V. Andriušaitytė (2015).

Although researchers accord great importance to specific problems of the youth target group and analyse basic professional competences of social workers not only at national (Kavaliauskienė, 2005, Leliūgienė, 2006, Indrašienė, Garjonienė, 2007, Ivanauskienė, Varžinskienė, 2007, Dirgėlienė, 2008, Gudžinskienė, Norvaišaitė, 2010, Makštutytė, Vaškevičiūtė, 2011, Verbylė, 2012 et al.,), but also at international level (Valutis et al., 2012, Jedynak, 2014, 2014, Bartoş, 2015), there is still no extensive analysis specifying professional competences of social workers working with youth.

In Lithuania youth workers are the persons workingin the sphere of youth activity (in the municipal education, culture, sports and social institutions) and are correspondingly called social workers, cultural workers and social workers having education of social sciences or having acquired relevant competences for social work with youth. At national level there is a uniform system for the evaluation of competences for work with youth and youth workers based on the "Methodology for Certification of Youth Workers (Sakalauskas et al., 2012) and "Mechanism for the Evaluation of Competences of Persons Working With Youth (2012). Yet, the aspects of social work with youth are still not regulated, i.e. the aspects highlighting the competences of social workers acquired for work with youth. This proves the relevance of this Article in order to analyse professional readiness of youth social workervia the competences for work with youth.

Object of the Research: competences of social workers working with youth.

Aim of the Article: to evaluate competences of social workers working with youth.

Research methods: Scientific literature and document analysis; partially structured interview.

The content of competence of social workers

The analysis of preparation of social workers is based on a reflective social work competence model complying with the contemporary labour market requirements, which highlights the importance of competences acquired during the learning process rather than learning outcomes. When analyzing the content of competences, it should be noted that the main three composite parts of professional competences have links with the holistic competence concept, i.e.: the knowledge and understanding of a certain subject (theoretical knowledge); the ability to apply the acquired knowledge in certain situations (practical application of knowledge); values and attitudes (Dirgėlienė, 2008; Pukelis,

2009; Teresevičienė 2011; Paurienė, 2012). It could be stated that usually the presented structure of social worker's *competence* is a three-polar concept consisting of knowledge, skills and attitudes which correspondingly form relevant values. This paradigm explaining the competence provides an explicit structure of competence and, consequently, reveals multipolarity of the content of competence.

It is important to note that theoretical sphere of social work which should be understood by a social worker is a system with various social work, social welfare and other social theories, principles of their application, analysis of social problems, individual problem cases, and empowerment strategies (TAR, 2015, No 11591; Official Gazette, 2006, No 43-1569). The skills could be specified as the ability to use theoretical knowledge, personal qualities and sources in practical social work activity. In other words, this is a component of practice connecting knowledge and values and transforming them into specific actions equalled to work "tools" which are used by professionals in their work in order to provide effective services to the client (Kavaliauskienė, 2005; Gudžinskienė, Norvaišaitė, 2010). There are five areas of activity of social workers. In order to realise them, the basic professional competences consist of social work skills since operational areas are exclusively directed toward practical activity: 1) identification of social assistance needs; 2) planning of social assistance; 3) organisation and provision of social services; 4) evaluation of effectiveness of social work; 5) improvement and development of social worker's professional activity (Standard for Preparation of Social Worker, (2008).

Values (ethics) are an inseparable part of social worker's competences. The expression of social work values is analysed as an aspect explicitly revealing the mission of profession (Kavaliauskienė, 2005; Ivanauskienė, Varžinskienė, 2007; Prakapas, 2007; Valutis, Deborah, Bell, 2012; Verbylė, 2012).

It could be stated that ability to apply the acquired theoretical knowledge, organize social work process via relevant skills and social work values, clearly defines the content of social worker's professional competence and is based on the professional social work practice.

Peculiarities of social work with youth from the point of view of professional activity

Youth in the works of researchers (Kutkienė, 2008; Gailius et al., 2013; Kriščiūnaitė, Kern, 2014; Pruskus, 2014; Vosylis, 2014) is described as one of the main vulnerable groups of the society and is identified in the professional field of a social worker as youth (from 14 to 29 years of age) with less

possibilities (The youthpolicy law, 2003). It would be appropriate to relate youth having less possibilities to a social exclusion phenomenon determined by social peculiarities of the youth target group, i.e. youth discrimination on the ground of nationality, race, belief, gender, sexual orientation, disability etc; limited social skills of young people; critical youth situations (death of a close relative, job loss, divorce etc.); young people having various dependencies; young and/or single parents; orphans, youth from social risk families; early drop-outs from school; youth dependent on social care system; long-term unemployed or young people living in poverty; young migrants or refugees or people from refugee or migrant families; disabled young people etc. (Youth in Action - Programme Guide, 2013). It is important to evaluate that the above reasons restrict possibilities of young people and prevent them from getting efficient access to formal and informal education, becoming internationally mobile, acquiring the right to participate in the public life and getting the status of active citizen. Therefore professional activity of social workers working with youth is directed toward the promotion of social inclusion and is based on the "Description of the Activity of Youth Workers (2013), which legally defines functions of youth workers: to provide individual assistance to young people in difficult life situations; to pursue initial prevention in order to early identify risky behaviour of youth and reduce the risk of negative consequences; to communicate and cooperate with the family/guardians of young people as well as with national and municipal institutions, non-governmental organizations, religious communities in solving youth policy issues; to develop personal and social competences of young people.

It should be highlighted that youth worker is a person working with a young person, a group or community of young people, seeking personal and social development of young people and their active engagement in public life, and having relevant competences for this work (Description of the Activity of Youth Workers, 2013). Pursuant to the "Mechanism for the Evaluation of Competences of Persons Working with Youth (2012), all youth workers belong at least to one of these typical classifications (persons can be assigned to several categories): 1) „coming from youth non-governmental organizations" – persons having experience for work with youth in pursuing the activity in youth organizations or organizations working with young people; 2) providers of social services – persons dealing with specific youth problems: social risk, prevention, psychological assistance; 3) specialists of public policy fields. In this case it is important to note that social workers represent the category of providers of social services.

Social work with youth includes not only solution of youth social problems; it is also social activity directed toward public and professional integration of young people in order to reduce marginalization of youth. There

fore professional readiness of a social worker is very important and it shall consist of professional competences relevant for work with youth. "Methodology for Certification of Youth Workers" (Sakalauskas et al., 2012) indicates five areas of competences to be acquired by social workers: *personal/individual competences* (reflexiveness; ability; organizational ability; creativeness; critical thinking etc.); *social competences* (communication, work in the group/team; empathy; conflict management etc.); *subject competences* (informal education, understanding adolescence and young person's life; structural understanding of youth life context etc.); *methodological competences* (understanding the methods and their application; ability to actualize youth issues etc.); *special competences* (understanding specific youth topics; legal knowledge and information related to the work with youth etc.).

Social work with youth requires interdisciplinary understanding determined by multipolarity of the youth target group. Correspondingly professional activity of youth social workers is based on the above basic competences divided into separate five competence areas which in practical activity of social workers shall be interrelated in order to receive the expected high results in work with youth.

Research methodology

The research strategy was based on the perspective of constructivism and the approach that competences are not an automatic phenomenon, but a result of social worker's activity, i.e. constructed on the basis of experience gained by social workers (Bitinas et al., 2008; Juodaitytė, Rūdytė, 2009; Lamanauskas, Augienė, 2010; Gudžinskienė, 2011; Doolittle, 2014; Galbin, 2014). The constructus of the cognition object applied in the research, i.e. on competences of social workers working with youth, was based on the "Mechanism for the Evaluation of Competences of Persons Working With Youth (2012). Therefore the research follows the policy that professional competence of a social worker working with youth consists of personal, social, subject, methodological and special competence areas for work with youth. The research applied a qualitative survey strategy which provides for an extensive identification of qualitative characteristics and approach to the problem under analysis via the experience of respondents which helped to specify competences for work with youth. Criteria sampling was chosen in pursuing the research. The respondents were selected on the basis of two criteria: higher social work education and social work experience with youth (from 14 to 29 years) of at least two years. The research sample consisted of 7 social workers working in different Vilnius district organisations: 3 social workers work in open youth centres, 2 social workers work with youth in the streets, the other 2 respondents work in the organisations having several separate units for different target groups, and one of them solves

problems of youth from 14 to 29 years of age. The research applied a targeted – partially structured interview data collection method which systemised the interview and made it more extensive. The research was carried out on 21 January – 16 November 2015. While analysing the interview data the method of qualitative content analysis was applied. It was chosen because in the qualitative content analysis research results expressed in key characteristics (categories/sub-categories) were specified from the answers to interpretations and evaluations provided by respondents.

Evaluation of competences of social workers working with youth

The research aimed to identify strengths and weaknesses of social workers working with youth from the point of view of competences. Following the analysis of interview data, the categories of strengths of informants' competences were obtained: *professional competences* and *personal competences.* It was defined that in the block of professional competences social workers give particular attention to the development of professional interrelation in the work with youth based on trust, which is their strength. This is proven by the recurrence of this category during the entire interview with informants in the answers to different questions: „*Relationship…Without any doubt when you work with young people, the most important thing is to develop relationship”* <...> [7]; „*<…> the main function of social worker is somehow to make contact with youth, to develop relationship and gradually increase mutual trust”* [6]; „*Development of relationship is most important <…> through communication, time spending together and organization of common experience”* [4]. The analysis of the informants' database showed that ability to work in the group is one of the most important aspects for social workers with respect to competences. Social workers highlight that while working with youth they focus on group processes which are related to the organization of informal education of youth. To this end social workers give main attention to understanding of their own role, i.e., the role of a group leader, as well as to understanding the principles of youth group interaction: „*Then you yourself <…> can see how groups are functioning, including the group dynamics and your role as a person working with a group <…>"* [7]; *We use and base our activity on group dynamics <…> [4] <...> I learnt everything through leadership, through certain processes in the group <...>* [6]. The research revealed that empathy as a strength of social worker's professional competence is determined in the work with youth by the ability to understand young person, his/her behaviour and experiences based on youth-related personal experience. Ability to understand young person's situation is a strength of social workers when it is based on

actual experiences: „*Because we are young <...> we are open to innovations, and we understand youth problems <...> Therefore there is no major difference between youth and workers <...>*" [2]; „*When you simply want to know how this young person feels <...> you start speaking about your own life, for instance, that I did feel the same when I was your age; I was also an object of bullying, and people said bad words to me* [1]. The research revealed that young age of social workersis a possible assumption to reveal empathy as a strength of social worker's professional competence. This is explained by the ability of social workers to get into a young person's situation by using actual experience, i.e. own experience and problems in young age. Personal competences as strengths of social workers working with youth are specified by the following sub-categories: *ability to take initiative (<...> I am active, young people like this, for I don't sit in one place but suggest trying something, I also initiate certain activities.* [3]; *<...> I am able to suggest something interesting so as to make them be active <...>* [6]) and *ability to flexibly and creatively respond to situations (<...> I always have plan B <...> I can change things immediately and improvise so as to motivate them <...> I have various ideas and I really comply with the young people's needs.* [5]; *<...> of course, creative, you should thing of multiple methods.* [1].

According to social workers, young people are often passive and this makes social workers take the initiative and activate youth: „*<...> they are not the young people/adolescents who want to do something and participate <...>*" [5]; „*<...> the major problem is that young people are passive <...> I am active and young people like this, I don't sit in one place but suggest various activities, urge youth do/try something*" [3]; „*<...> quite often I extend an interesting proposal, suggestion so as to make them move/do something; this is very important in our work with youth* [6]. The analysis of social workers' experience in work with youth showed that ability to flexibly and creatively respond to situations at work with youth is an additional strength of informants in the block of personal competences: „*<...> when I organise some activity to the group I always have plan B; it is always completely different and I can switch to it very quickly and improvise so as to make youth interested <...> Nearly one hundred eighty degrees upside down to make it happen and to make young people interested <...> when you prepare programmes and lessons, they are not eager to take part, usually this is problematic youth*" [5]; „*Therefore you have to be <...> creative and think of various methods. We can suggest multiple activities to youth and all of them might not be interesting to young people <...>*" [1].

The research revealed that ability to understand the role of social worker and professional margins in work with youth is one of the informants' weaknesses with respect to competences. The category *understanding of social worker's role and professional margins* is specified by the conflict of the

defined subcategories – *roles (Here we face role conflict, as a specialist you want to say*

<...> but need to be a friend to a young person [1]; *I often receive questions: where is specialist and where is friend – they are young people* [3])*, clearly specified personal and professional interests* content *(<...>) when I work with young persons in the street I know my personal limits, because I have many problems with this.* [4]; *<...> I respond to all situations sensitively; this prevents from effective work because in certain situations I feel pity for them <...> this prevents from making the right decision <...>* [2]).

It was established that in the work with youth social workers can hardly separate (and coordinate) between the two main roles: the role of social worker as a specialist in work with youth and the role of social worker as a „friend" on the basis of which professional relationship with youth is developed on the basis of trust: „*When I want to know feelings of a young person I act as a friend, tell more about my personal life, for instance that my feelings were the same when I was his/her age <...> In such a case you cannot ask formal questions because they are immediately distracted*" [1]. Therefore social workers start facing role conflict: „*They will share their problems only when you are their friend; if you are just a worker, they will not say anything <...> Here we encounter the role conflict; as a specialist you want to say what is appropriate and what is not, but in order not to lose contact, you have to be friend with young person*" [1]; „*I am often asked: where is specialist and where is friend*" [3]. According to informants' answers, social workers' role as a friend in creating trust-based professional relationship with youth is their strength, but problem arises when social workers are not able to coordinate this with the professionally organised work: „*<...> how to break this relationship into assistance relationship? What should be done in order to achieve a breakthrough to make a young person treat you as one of the people who wants to help*" [7]; „*<...> if you don't understand and cannot provide professional explanation why in a certain moment you behave like this, it looks like you don't move and nothing happens*" [4]; „*There is no clear picture of a worker I should fit in, therefore I have to manipulate*" [1]. The analysis of interview data revealed that social workers face problems in managing their emotions in the work with youth and, consequently, are not able to distinguish between personal and professional interests: „*<...> I respond to all situations sensitively, this prevents from effective work, because in some situations I feel pity although this shouldn't be the case; this hinders my work and decision-making. If a young person is hungry or doesn't have clothes, I want to prepare a package of food and clothing... It would be better to direct him/her, say something and not simply give*" [2]; „*<...> when I work in the street with youth, I know my personal restrictions, because I have many problems with this: I even invited these people to my home <...> I and my colleagues borrowed*

money" [4]. It should be noted that ability to understand own and other people's emotions and manage them adequately, is called management of emotional intellect (Kušlevič-Veršekienė, Pukinskaitė, 2009). According to answers of respondents, the knowledge and attitudes of social workers on how to work with youth do not comply with social workers' emotions and this prevents from following social work principles. The weakness of social workers' emotional competence is also actualized by the problem of "burnout syndrome": " *<...> I feel somehow that sometimes and especially now I am on the verge of burning out, that I overworked <...> And motivation starts shaking*" [7]; "*I want to rest a little bit, and then I will again be able to set the goal*" [4]. This means that insufficient abilities of social workers to manage negative emotions and stressful situations in work with youth prevent them from setting new goals related to professional activity.

Professionally organised work of social workers working with youth is based on problem-solving skills which serve as the basis of two sub-categories: *dilemma situations* and *distrust in the taken decision,* specifying the weakness of informants' competences. The lack of informants' problem solution management skills in the work with youth is reflected in the *dilemma situations*, where social workers do not know which problem solution alternative to chose in order to achieve the best change in the youth situation:

"*One day, I remember, I found gas pistol in a young person's room. In such a case it is not clear how to behave in order not to take wrong actions*" [6]; "*Sometimes I really don't know how to behave in certain situations <...>*" [3]. According to B. Švedaitė-Sakalauskė & V. Gevorgianienė (2011), in social work dilemmas are inevitable, they are determined by the specific nature of profession, but they have to be solved, and this depends on professional actions of social workers. Another sub-category – *distrust in the made decision* – is another fact demonstrating that social workers lack decision-making skills which was identified during an interview with one respondent: "*I would say that one of the weaknesses is trust in the decisions made, because adolescents, especially senior, feel this (between 17-19 years of age). They feel when I doubt before making decision <...> and then they simply don't want to listen and hear me. I have to be strong, and in order to be strong, I have to know that I am right. And this is my weakness*" [5].

Conclusions

Social work with youth is based on the integrated youth issues which determines vulnerability of youth as a social group. For this it is necessary to ensure targeted social worker's activity based on the perspective of social inclusion of youth which determines not only solution of youth problems but

also enhancement of youth capacities to manage own situation. In view of this social worker follows informal education principles, i.e. executes activity together with young people and according to their needs, and this enables young person to independently solve problems and successfully integrate in the society.

The research revealed strengths of social workers working with youth: development of trust-based professional relationship, ability to work with a group of young people, empathy, ability to take the initiative, and ability to flexibly and creatively respond to situations. Yet some weaknesses of social workers solving youth problems have also been identified: understanding the role and professional restrictions of social worker and problem solution skills.

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