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Research and Paradigms
Научни изследвания и парадигми

COLLABORATION BETWEEN SOCIAL WORKERS (CASE MANAGERS) AND SOCIAL PEDAGOGUES IN THE APPLICATION OF THE FAMILY CASE MANAGEMENT MODEL

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Abstract. Parents must ensure that children can grow in safe environments; however, some families face various social risks that interfere with their children's development processes. In such situations, the family case management model is applied to ensure the child is granted the right conditions for successful socialization. The social worker (case manager) organizes the case management process by mobilizing specialists for coordinated assistance. The purpose of this article is to reveal the possibilities of collaboration between the social pedagogue and the social worker (case manager) in assisting the students in the context of the case management family. It also presents the results of the performed qualitative research (interviews with social pedagogues and group interview with social workers) that revealed that the support of the social worker, mediation between institutions, and positive mutual interaction are important for successful collaboration. Yet, it is often disturbed by mutual distrust of specialists, and different approaches to solving pupils' problems. Active cooperation between the social worker and the social pedagogue during the application of case management to the family helps achieve better results in aiding the student.

Keywords: children; social workers (case managers); social pedagogues; cooperation; case management for the family

Introduction

The family is one of the most important factors in the development of a child's personality, and it should provide for favourable conditions for the child's positive socialization and education, protect them from violence and exploitation. However, not all the families are able to ensure that the rights and needs of their children are

duly met; some are exposed to various social risks (Ratkevičienė 2018; Dirgėlienė, Alėjūnė 2020; Simoes, Lopes 2021). The consequences of living in a social risk family include children's behavioural issues, addictions, poor school attendance, lack of social skills, etc. (Anderberg 2020; Simoes, Lopes 2021). The *Law on Social Services* (current version of 2021, Amendment of Article 2, Paragraph 7) "...defines social risk as factors and circumstances that cause families to experience or condition the risk for them to experience social exclusion. This can happen due to the lack of social skills to properly care for and educate minor children (adopted children), failure to ensure children's safety in the family, abuse of alcohol, narcotics, psychotropic substances, etc..."[1]. The roots of social risk development in families can stem from various circumstances, including unemployment, family conflicts, violence, poverty, and low motivation to change one's lifestyle (Ratkevičienė 2018). In Lithuania, since 2018, case management module has been applied after identifying social risk factors in families. Case management is "a process of helping the family, during which the case manager, together with the family and experts from different institutions, solves the existing problems of the child and the family and creates conditions for the family to achieve positive changes itself and coordinates all actions related to helping the family" (*Description of the procedure for case management*, new editorial, 2020[2]).

A case manager is a social worker, so, in the following text, we will be using the abbreviation of social worker instead of social worker (case manager). The main activity of the social worker in case management is to coordinate the assistance process, which helps to ensure the involvement of different support specialists and institutions in providing assistance to the family. Support specialists, including social pedagogues, participate in case management meetings, get involved in providing assistance, inform the social worker about positive changes in the family, monitor the child in the educational institution, and inform about the current situation. Thus, it is not only the social workers who work with the family that help solve social pedagogical problems, but also the social pedagogues who work with the child, therefore, when the case management module is applied to the family, the collaboration between these two welfare specialists is very important (Dirgėlienė, Alėjūnė, 2020; Lengvinas, Klanienė, Karolienė 2020).

Research of the topic

Since the family case management module has been put into practice in Lithuania recently, it has not been analysed on an extensive level. The influence of the family environment on the socialization of the child, and family problems that presuppose the need for support to the child, were researched by M. Ratkevičienė (2018), I. Dirgėlienė, R. Alėjūnė (2020) and others, N. Schuetz, A. N. Mendenhall, W. Grube (2019). I. Vasiliauskienė and V. Kavaliauskienė (2021) expanded upon the activities of the case manager in providing social services to the family, the

process of case management; M. Ratkevičienė (2018), M. Anderberg (2020) investigated the need and forms of social pedagogue's assistance to students at school. I. Dirgėlienė, R. Alėjūnė (2020), J. Przeperski, B. Taylor (2022), D. Lengvinas, I. Klanienė and others (2020) analysed the opportunities for collaboration between specialists working in the field of child welfare. Thus, there is a lack of scholarly research on how social workers (case managers) cooperate with social pedagogues when applying the family case management module, so this leads to some questions that need to be answered: which cases do social pedagogues get involved in family case management in, what factors encourage or hinder cooperation in the context of case management, what are the results of these specialists' cooperation in the field of child support.

The article aims – to expand upon the situation of collaboration between a social pedagogue and a social worker (case manager) in providing assistance to the student in the context of family case management.

Objectives: 1) To reveal the problems of school students that are addressed by involving social pedagogues in the family case management process. 2) To explore the forms, success factors, and obstacles of cooperation between social pedagogues and social workers (case managers) in providing assistance to students in the family case management process. 3) To evaluate the results of cooperation between social workers (case managers) and social pedagogues in applying family case management modules.

Research methods: Analysis of scholarly literature and documents, individual interviews with social pedagogues, and group discussions with social workers (case managers). The content analysis method was used for data analysis.

Theoretical preconditions of collaboration between social workers and social pedagogues in case management for the family

Addressing a child's problems requires a comprehensive assessment of all circumstances and identification of the family's needs as a system. This can only be achieved by involving specialists in the case management process who can assist in resolving the daily challenges faced by the family and the student. In many cases, children from social-risk families transfer their negative experiences to the school environment, which manifests in emotional and behavioural problems, a lack of social and emotional skills, psychoactive substance abuse, learning difficulties, aggressive moods, and more (Brown et al. 2021; Finkelstein, Grebelsky-Lichtman 2022). In this way, case management can be the most effective approach to coordinating support for such children. Case management involves the case manager coordinating comprehensive assistance for the child and family and mobilizing specialists to help them overcome the difficulties they face (Vaičekauskaitė 2018). Case management takes place in several stages: assessment of the family's and child's needs, assessment of support, development of the assistance plan for the family,

implementation of the plan, its monitoring, and evaluation (Alfandari, Taylor, Enosh et al. 2022). In this process, it is the case manager who bears the most responsibility for coordinating family-oriented support (Harkey 2017). The role of the school social pedagogue also becomes very evident in the case management process. The social pedagogue provides information about the student, participates in the development of the family support plan, provides the designated assistance to the student, and evaluates the effectiveness of the support provided (Lengvinas, Klanienė et al. 2020). Thus, based on the insights of scholars, it can be stated that successful resolution of child and family problems is possible only through close collaboration between the social worker and the social pedagogue (Paquin-Boudreau, Poitras, Cyr, Godbout 2021).

The scientific literature defines collaboration as a dynamic and complex process that involves interaction in creating new rules and structures that govern relationships, as well as coordinating actions to achieve results. Human resources are essential in interaction, as collaboration between institutions is an extension of the daily functions of specialists (Bastian, Wendt 2022). Collaboration can take various forms, including direct (meetings, consultations, discussions) and indirect (communication by phone, information transfer by e-mail, sending letters) (Lengvinas, Klanienė et al. 2020; Przeperski, Taylor 2022). The social worker, who represents the family, and the social pedagogue, who represents the child, can only develop connections between different environments and support systems through collaboration. The context of cooperation and teamwork predominates in the history of successful cases of support to families and children (Vasiliauskienė, Kavaliauskienė 2021; Przeperski, Taylor 2022). D. Lengvinas (2020) confirms this in his article, where the analysis of the collaboration between social pedagogues and social workers is based on the principles of systems theory. The systemic approach model allows us to identify the client's network of relationships, recognize significant subsystems, and engage them in the support and assistance process, as well as address emerging problems in a comprehensive manner (Vaicekauskienė 2009). According to H. Wagner (2003), the problem can only be recognized in the context of the living environment of the person who encounters the problem. From a systems theory perspective, it is first necessary to assess the situation of the client's living environment and apply intervention, in which case a common communication space unfolds, allowing for the formulation of solutions. The study conducted by I. Klanienė et al. (2020): team-based assistance provided by support specialists is more effective than assistance provided by individual specialists.

While the inter-institutional collaboration process emphasizes shared decision-making, collaboration among specialists is not always smooth. As researchers point out, the reasons for this can be different: a desire to avoid conflicts with parents, the ambiguity of roles and functions, avoidance of responsibility, lack of information, and others (Baraldsnes, Vaškienė 2013; Theilmann 2021).

The challenges that arise in this process can be overcome by adhering to team principles and agreements (Lim, Wong 2018). The shared responsibility of specialists who provide support to the family during case management is crucial for achieving the long-term well-being of the child and family (Van Veelen et al. 2018). Collaboration between the social pedagogue and the case manager allows to identify social risk factors as early as possible, to organize and provide assistance to children, addressing their behavioural, communication-related, and other problems. Teamwork creates opportunities for improving the quality of their education, reducing the number of students dropping out of school, and ensuring their protection.

Research methodology

Case management for families is a relatively new approach, hence a qualitative research strategy was chosen, employing the following methods: interviews and focus group discussions. This allows for a deeper understanding of the possibilities of student support by analysing the experiences of social pedagogues and social workers (case managers) in implementing the family case management module.

Research sample. The research involved 7 social pedagogues from general education schools in different cities and 5 social workers working at the Family and Child Welfare Centre in X city. The criterion sampling method was applied to select the study participants. Two criteria were applied to social pedagogues: work experience of at least 3 years and experience in the family case management process – must have participated in the case management of at least 5 families. Two criteria were also applied to social workers: at least 3 years of experience as a social worker and 2 years of experience in case management. All social pedagogues who took part in the research were female, ranging in age from 37 to 62, all holding a degree in higher education and professional qualifications as methodologists or senior social pedagogues. The specialists had extensive work experience, ranging from 11 to 21 years. Social pedagogues are coded: SP1, SP2, SP3, SP4, SP5, SP6, SP7. Social workers who participated in the study are also female, ranging in age from 34 to 53, and hold a degree in higher education. Their work experience in these positions ranges from 2 to 3 years. Case managers are coded: AV1, AV2, AV3, AV4, AV5.

Two data collection methods were chosen for this research: semi-structured interviews with social pedagogues and a focus group discussion with social workers. Interview topics selected: student problems addressed by the social pedagogue, forms of collaboration, success factors, obstacles, and results. The following topics for the focus group discussion with social workers were given: demographic data, forms, and areas of collaboration with the school social pedagogue. Qualitative content analysis was chosen as the method for analysing the research data.

Research results

To understand the collaboration between social pedagogues and social workers, the study first investigated the types of student problems addressed through case management. Analysis of the social pedagogues' responses revealed a category called "Student Problems" with five subcategories: *school attendance problems, behavioural problems, lack of social skills, harmful habits, and learning difficulties*: 5 informants mentioned addressing issues related to student's school attendance: *"Everything related to school, truancy <...>" (SP1)*. Another problem identified was inappropriate student behaviour: "<...> inappropriate students' behaviour: *"inappropriate students' behaviour, problems during lessons, swearing, idleness during lessons, conflicts, fights" (SP3)*. Social pedagogues also face a lack of social skills among students: *"Students do not have social skills, we need to help them" (SP2);* 3 informants expressed concern about students' harmful habits: *"<...> children use drugs" (SP4)*.

Student and family problems define the areas of collaboration between social workers and social pedagogues in case management. Social workers were asked in which cases social pedagogues are involved in family case management. Having summarized their responses, a category called "Areas of Collaboration" was identified with two subcategories: *addressing student problems related to behaviour and learning difficulties in both the family and school settings, and Implementation of the family support plan.* 4 social workers mentioned that they collaborate when addressing complex student problems related to student behaviour and school absenteeism: *"<...> it could be changes in the child's behaviour, deterioration of behaviour, deterioration of school attendance" (AV4).* Another area of collaboration is the development and implementation of the family plan: *"<...> also the development or revision of the support" (AV5).*

Understanding the collaboration practices between social pedagogues and social workers was a crucial aspect of the study. Analysis of the responses from both groups helped to identify the category called "Collaboration Forms" with five subcategories: *telephone communication, participation in meetings, sending official letters, participation in joint activities, and face-to-face meetings.* Four informants (SP1, SP3, SP7, AV3) mentioned using telephone communication most frequently: *"<...> we discuss over the phone about the change in the student's behaviour" (AV3).* Other informants (SP1, SP3, SP5, AV2, AV4) stated that they participate in case management meetings where family support plans are developed, revised, and feedback is provided on student progress: *"<...> invites to meetings to review the plan, and discussions take place about helping the student<...>"* (SP5). Other informants (SP3, SP6, AV1, AV3) indicated that collaboration occurs through sending official letters "<...> *receive inquiries in writing, and we inquire <...>" (AV1);* though joint activities: *"When the nature of child behaviour is criminal or when child rights violations are observed, we organize*

meetings with other institutions together with case managers at the school" (SP5). Informants indicated that case managers participate in school and municipal Child Welfare Board meetings: "by *Child Welfare Board meeting, I mean the municipality's, and we are often invited to school CWB meetings as well" (AV4)*. One informant (SP2) stated that they have meetings with case managers: "*<...> planned and unplanned meetings as needed" (SP2).*

The research investigated the factors that encourage social pedagogues to collaborate with social workers in addressing children's behaviour related and other issues. The summary of the informants' responses helped to identify a category "Collaboration Encouraging Factors", with three subcategories: Support provided by case managers, mediation, and close communication. Informants indicated that case managers' support encourages collaboration: "*<...> when it would get too difficult, I always turned to them, we would talk it over, and there, we would find a solution to the problem <...>" (SP3).* Another informant (SP4) indicated that case managers mediated in providing support to students: *"In case of failure, they react quickly, mediate, and seek help from additional specialists" (SP4).* Two informants (SP6, SP7) stated that constant, close communication influences collaboration with case managers. It was also important to assess the factors that hinder collaboration. In the category "Collaboration Obstacles" there were three subcategories identified: *miscommunication, control, and lack of trust.* Meanwhile, one informant (SP1) identified different perspective on problems as an obstacle to collaboration with case managers: *"The case manager doesn't see the problem, even though we tell them" (SP1).* Other informants indicated that control and a lack of mutual trust from the case manager's side hinder collaboration: "*You feel like you're being controlled <...> there's no trust in collaboration, while it seems we're working towards the same goal <...> " (SP3).*

The interview aimed to determine what results can be achieved in solving student problems through case management. The research data allowed us to identify one category, "Results of collaboration in case management" and 6 subcategories: *improved student learning motivation, change in behaviour, improved school attendance, closer connection with the student, more active parental involvement, and no improvement in results.* Analysis of the informants' statements revealed that social pedagogues who provide support to students within the framework of family case management achieve positive results in the areas of learning, behaviour, and attendance. 3 informants (SP5, SP6, SP7) stated that they achieved positive results in the area of student learning: *"<...> homework completion has improved <...>"*. 4 informants stated that students' behaviour in school has improved and their emotional state changed: *"There have been fewer instance of inappropriate behaviour <...>" (SP5*). 5 informants stated that *"Providing social and pedagogical support helped to improve school attendance" (SP6).* 3 informants (SP2, SP3, SP7) stated that a bond develops between the student and the social pedagogue, and the student begins

to trust this specialist more. 4 informants observed that the assistance provided by social pedagogues to students influences parental involvement in the children's life: *"<...> parents become more involved in the child's education <...>" (SP5).* Two informants (SP1, SP2) indicated that results cannot be achieved due to long-standing problems in families, as case managers are not able to empower parents to change their lifestyle: "*<...> if case management does not empower parents to change their lifestyle, then the situation remains the same" (SP1).* In summary, it can be stated that it is very important for social workers, while implementing family case management module, to involve social pedagogues in this process, as such collaboration can significantly improve the resolution of student behaviour, school attendance, and learning problems, and actively involve the family in the child's education process.

Conclusions

School students living in social-risk families lack favourable socialization conditions. In order to help the children, it is necessary to eliminate social risks in families with family case management approach. Case management is coordinated by social workers in collaboration with various specialists. Interviews with social pedagogues helped to understand that the social pedagogue is actively involved in the family case management process in addressing problems faced by students, such as managing emotions and inappropriate behaviour, as well as issues related to learning motivation, school attendance, substance abuse, etc. Case managers also engage social pedagogues in the case management process in creating, implementing, and adjusting the support plan for the child and family.

The results of the qualitative study identified essential forms of collaboration between social pedagogues and case managers. These specialists communicate both directly (during meetings, gatherings, and joint activities) and indirectly (by sending official letters and communicating by phone). The following factors enable and facilitate successful cooperation: support of the social worker for the social pedagogue, mediation between institutions and specialists, and close relationships between professionals. The most significant obstacles to cooperation include a lack of trust from the side of social workers in social pedagogues and differing approaches to addressing student problems.

Collaboration with social workers in the family case management process allows social pedagogues to achieve better results in assisting children. The research results show that the family case management approach helps to correct and improve student's behaviour, as well as learning achievements, and to more effectively address learning motivation and school attendance problems. It also increases students' trust in specialists and enables them to more successfully involve parents in the educational process. However, social pedagogues acknowledge that it is not always possible to achieve positive changes in the child's situation due to parents' unwillingness to change their lifestyle.

NOTES

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