

# Working with Children and Young People as a much Neglected Area of Education within the Social Studies Curriculum in Poland

Marta Czechowska-Bieluga

**Abstract**—Social work education in Poland focuses mostly on developing competencies that address the needs of individuals and families affected by a variety of life's problems. As a result of the ageing of the Polish population, much attention is equally devoted to adults, including the elderly. However, social work with children and young people is the area of education which should be given more consideration. Social work students are mostly trained to cater to the needs of families and the competencies aimed to respond to the needs of children and young people do not receive enough attention and are only offered as elective classes. This paper strives to review the social work programmes offered by the selected higher education institutions in Poland in terms of social work training aimed at helping children and young people to address their life problems. The analysis conducted in this study indicates that university education for social work focuses on training professionals who will provide assistance only to adults. Due to changes in the social and political situation, including, in particular, changes in social policy implemented for the needy, it is necessary to extend this area of education to include the specificity of the support for children and young people; especially, in the light of the appearance of new support professions within the area of social work. For example, family assistants, whose task is to support parents in performing their roles as guardians and educators, also assist children. Therefore, it becomes necessary to equip social work professionals with competencies which include issues related to the quality of life of underage people living in families. Social work curricula should be extended to include the issues of child and young person development and the patterns governing this phase of life.

**Keywords**—Social work education, social work programmes, social worker, university.

## I. INTRODUCTION

A child brought up in a family that receives social assistance can be a direct subject of supporting actions and an indirect subject of research into social work. Quality of a child's life in the context of social activities performed for him/her is most frequently viewed in the light of the multi-problem family. Within the area of social work research, practice, and education, the child is not treated as an independent subject possessing specific resources or experiencing specific difficulties. Functioning in an exclusive environment may cause the child to develop self-stigma and social isolation. The model of the child being *different* may be reinforced by workers of Polish social assistance institutions

who differentiate the child from the rest of the society due to him/her being at risk of poverty. The way that the child is treated is often initiated by numerous adults (including those who live on the margins of society) and leads to the objectification of the child and his/her problems while also causing stereotyping processes, stigmatisation or neutral categorisation [13, p. 360]. The issues of the functioning of children in environments at risk of social exclusion or those who have already been excluded are rarely studied into by Polish researchers in the context of social activities. One can also notice that researchers are hardly interested in the preparation of social work professionals for assistance for and support of children, even though the research subject-matter in the area of social work is constantly extended and made more profound. The issues of social and vocational marginalisation of the long-term unemployed, international migration, social exclusion of the poor, marginalisation due to a chronic illness and social exclusion of the elderly are the subjects taken into consideration by Polish researchers focused on the issues of social work. The issues of the more profound care for the family, assistance and care for the elderly, as well as those of poverty and functioning of the beneficiaries of social assistance are also the basis for the analyses undertaken by those who conduct research into social work. Subject-matter within the realm of social support, professionalism in social work, and the condition of social assistance institutions are other areas of research into social work in Poland [11, p. 70-71]. To sum up, in Polish references to research, one can notice little empirical interest in the issues of educating for social work with children and young people. Therefore, due to epistemic, but mainly utilitarian reasons, the development of research in the area of social work, focusing on the quality of life of children from families which are beneficiaries of social assistance, seems to be important and necessary, while being insufficient in Polish realities [13, p. 362]. Research regarding children and young people in the light of social work is rather fragmentary, not always sufficiently profound, but, what is worth emphasising is that such research is indeed conducted in regards to the topics of life chances of young people from poor geographical areas, equalising development opportunities of children and young people at risk of social exclusion [2], street children [14] or social inclusion of children [13].

Researchers' little interest in the question of the quality of life of children from multi-problem families, which are beneficiaries of social assistance, co-exists with the minimisation of the range of issues related to the difficult

Marta Czechowska-Bieluga (Ph.D) is with the Institute of Pedagogy, University of Maria Curie-Skłodowska in Lublin, Poland (e-mail: mbieluga@hektor.umcs.lublin.pl).

childhood in curricula of social worker education in Poland to the benefit of emphasising the issues of the family [14, p. 374-375]. The current political system is also focused on supporting families with children, and, since 2001, when a new profession of a family assistant was introduced the assistance for children living in families is given higher priority than the assistance for children living outside of families [12].

The chief purpose of the assistance is to create conditions that would make it possible for the children to stay with their biological families. A child should only be separated from the family environment, e.g. be placed in educational care facilities or other, if their life or health would be endangered by staying with their biological families.

## II. QUALIFICATIONS AND SKILLS NECESSARY FOR PRACTISING THE PROFESSION OF SOCIAL WORKER IN POLAND

In Poland, the qualifications for the profession of social worker are regulated by law. They derive from the Act of 12 March 2014 on social assistance and the ordinance of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy of 25 January 2008 on the specialisation preparing for the profession of social worker realised in institutions of higher education [1].

Art. 116, section 1 of the above-mentioned Act states that:

1. The profession of social worker can be pursued by a person who meets at least one of the following conditions:
  - i. graduates with a diploma from a college for social services employees;
  - ii. has a higher education degree in social work;
  - iii. graduates with a higher education degree, issued prior to 31 December 2013, in the specialisation preparing for the profession of social worker at one of the following faculties:
    - a) education,
    - b) special education,
    - c) political science,
    - d) social policy,
    - e) psychology,
    - f) sociology,
    - g) family studies [1, article 119, section 1a].

Pursuant to Article 119 of the Act of 12 March 2004 on social welfare, Journal of Laws 2004 No. 64, it. 593, the tasks of a social worker include, in particular:

1. social work;
2. performing an analysis and evaluation of phenomena which cause the demand for social assistance benefits and qualification for those benefits;
3. providing information, tips, and assistance with regards to solving life issues to persons who, owing to this assistance, will be able to solve on their own the issues which cause a predicament; effective use of legal provisions while performing those tasks;
4. assistance in obtaining counselling for people in a predicament in regards to possibilities for the solution of problems and provision of assistance by government and self-governing institutions as well as by non-government

organisations and providing them with support in obtaining assistance;

5. providing assistance in compliance with the rules of professional ethics;
6. stimulating social activities and inspiring self-support activities in meeting the basic needs of persons, families, groups and social environments;
7. cooperating and liaising with other specialists with an aim to prevent and limit pathology and negative consequences of social phenomena, mitigating the effects of poverty;
8. initiating new forms of assistance for persons and families in a predicament and inspiring the creation of institutions which provide services aimed at improving the situation of such persons and families;
9. involvement in inspiring, preparing, implementing and developing regional and local social assistance programmes directed at improving the quality of life [1, article 119, section 1a].

The Ordinance of 25 January 2008 on the specialisation preparing for the profession of social worker makes the above act more specific. Pursuant to Article 116, section 1a of the Act of 12 March 2004 on social welfare, [Journal of Laws No. 64, it. 593, as amended], which defines the required skills, list of courses, minimal amount of classes as well as the scope and the number of hours of the internship for the specialisations to prepare for the profession of social worker, realised in institutions of higher education that provide first and second degree studies and uniform Master's degree studies at the following faculties: pedagogy, special education, political science, social policy, psychology, sociology, or family studies, preparation for the profession of social worker should result in the acquisition of the following skills:

- i. able to properly recognise predicaments of persons and families with an aim at defining the assistance needs;
- ii. able to analyse the legal circumstances of predicaments of persons and families which these individuals cannot overcome on their own;
- iii. able to plan the forms of assistance and an effective use of methods and techniques of social work in a given case;
- iv. able to monitor and evaluate the actions taken;
- v. able to design one's own workshop;
- vi. able to improve work organisation;
- vii. able to liaise and effectively cooperate with other specialists in order to provide effective assistance;
- viii. able to recognise legal aspects of social work, including legal aspects of voluntary and public benefit activities;
- ix. able to familiarise people with the aims of social assistance and work;
- x. able to counteract professional burnout;
- xi. methodological skills;
- xii. interpersonal skills;
- xiii. able to comply with the rules of professional ethics, including, in particular:
  - a) providing assistance to all those who are in a predicament and to those who ask for assistance,
  - b) respecting the rights of those persons and to respect their personal dignity,

- c) acting as a spokesperson for the individuals who seek assistance,
- d) reinforcing the self-reliance of persons who are beneficiaries of social assistance and preventing them from becoming dependent on it [15].

Furthermore, the Ordinance of 25 January 2008 on the specialisation preparing for the profession of social worker contains a defined list of courses which must be completed by each student, in order to obtain qualifications. These are:

1. Axiology of Social Work – 15 hours
2. Interpersonal Communication in Social Work – 15 hours
3. Fundamentals of Knowledge of Human Bio-mental Development – 30 hours
4. Elements of Organization and Management Theory – 20 hours
5. Structure and Organisation of Social Assistance – 15 hours
6. Legal System of Social Welfare in Poland: Social Benefits for Polish Citizens and Foreigners – 15 hours
7. Family and Guardianship Law in Poland. System of Family Benefits and Proceedings with Alimony Debtors – 15 hours
8. The Theoretical Basics of the Social Work – 25 hours
9. Methodology of Social Work – 60 hours
10. Social Project – 30 hours
11. Promotion of Employment, Institutions of Labour Market, and Social Employment – Legal Aspects and Organization – 15 hours
12. Public Benefit Activity and Voluntary Service– 15 hours
13. Promoting Employment and Rehabilitation of the Disabled – Legal Aspects and Organization – 15 hours
14. Organizing the Local Community and the Principles of Local Authority Functioning – 15 hours
15. Social Work Supervision – 30 hours [15].

The legislator has also defined the scope and the number of hours of the internship to be 240 hours. According to the Ordinance of 25 January 2008 on the specialisation preparing for the profession of social worker, the aim of the internship is to:

- i. familiarise oneself with the specificity of the functioning of social welfare organisational units, institutions and organisations that provide assistance and practice social work for persons and families that require support, including:
  - a) structure and organisation of the institutions in which the student undertakes an internship,
  - b) type of services provided,
  - c) specificity of persons and families who are beneficiaries of social assistance in terms of demographic and economic as well as psychological and social characteristics,
  - d) needs of persons and families who are beneficiaries of social assistance,
  - e) degree of fulfilling the needs of those persons and families in institutions and outside of the institutions;
- ii. active participation in activities undertaken in the institutions, based on agreements concluded with the

- representatives of those institutions;
- iii. establishing contacts with persons and families who are beneficiaries of social assistance provided by those institutions;
- iv. cooperation in diagnosing, fulfilling and activating individual and social needs of persons and families requiring support;
- v. gathering materials that make it possible to prepare and realise social projects.

The analysis above indicates that the graduate of the social work faculty is prepared for work in most social assistance organisational units, taking into account the range of the courses in the curriculum. Therefore, social workers work mainly in regional centres of social policy, district family assistance centres, (municipal or communal) social welfare centres, non-government organisations, social integration centres, social integration clubs, crisis intervention centres, nursing homes, penitentiaries, and healthcare institutions. However, two fundamental documents governing the preparation and professional activity of social workers do not refer directly to support for children who come from dysfunctional families. The tasks of a social worker, the necessary skills and the range of courses and internships applicable during the education for the profession, focus on the family, while not relating directly to the quality of child's life. Considering the prospective workplaces of social workers, such as educational care facilities, adoption and guardianship centres, orphanages, and non-government organisations that provide assistance to adults and children in solving life problems that they cannot overcome by themselves, it seems important to extend the scope of knowledge, skills and attitudes of prospective social workers to subject-matter covering work with children.

### III. COURSES FOCUSING ON FAMILY AND CHILD SUPPORT REALISED IN SELECTED INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN POLAND

The analysis covered institutions of higher education that educate for the profession of social worker at first degree studies [licencjat - Bachelor's degree] or at second degree studies [magister - Master's degree]. Eight Polish institutions of higher education were randomly selected from all those that offer a programme in social work.

At the University of Lower Silesia, the programme in social work is realised as a first and second degree course. Graduates of the first degree programme "gain competences in diagnosing people's problems at various stages of their life, e.g. problems of persons from disadvantaged environments, experiencing violence, ill, abandoned, disabled, homeless, unemployed, and suffering from addictions. They acquire key assistance competences which are the basis of social activities which help persons covered by assistance to improve the quality of their lives and nurture social bonds in local communities and in social life" [6]. Students of the second degree programme can select from three specialisations: social assistance organiser, social work with the elderly, and individual and social support. Only the last of the mentioned

specialisations includes two courses focused on work with the family, including support for children. Students acquire the

knowledge of family support methods and protection of children's and family rights [5].

TABLE I  
SELECTED COURSES IN THE CURRICULUM OF SOCIAL WORK STUDIES WHICH ARE FOCUSED ON WORK WITH CHILDREN (INCLUDING WORK WITH CHILDREN THROUGH FAMILY SUPPORT)

No.	University	Selected courses
1.	University of Lower Silesia	First degree programme: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developmental and Personality Psychology</li> <li>• Sociology of Education</li> <li>• Psychopathology of Development</li> </ul> Second degree programme: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Methods of family support, protection of children's and family rights</li> </ul>
2.	The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin	First degree programme: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bio-mental human development</li> <li>• Upbringing of children and young people in the context of the gender theory</li> <li>• Institutions and Family Support Programmes</li> </ul>
3.	Jan Długosz University in Częstochowa	First degree programme: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Methodology of social and therapeutic work with the family</li> <li>• Concept of human forces</li> </ul>
4.	The Maria Grzegorzewska Pedagogical University	First degree programme: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developmental Psychology</li> <li>• Protection of Best Interest of the Child - Law and Practice</li> <li>• Family Upbringing</li> <li>• The Basics of Family Studies</li> <li>• Family and Institutional Care of Orphaned Child as a Part of the Social Welfare</li> <li>• Institutions and Family Support Programmes</li> <li>• Family Communication Training</li> </ul>
5.	Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin	First degree programme: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction to Pedagogy</li> <li>• Biomedical Bases of Human Development</li> <li>• Pedagogy of Family</li> <li>• Family Psychotherapy</li> <li>• Pathology of Family Life</li> <li>• Family Support Assistant</li> <li>• Family Guidance Service</li> </ul> Second degree programme: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family Support Assistance</li> <li>• Family and Guardianship Law</li> </ul>

[Source: Author's own research, unpublished documents, 2017].

At the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, the social work faculty is realised as both a first and second degree programme. The first degree programme includes numerous courses focused on family support, e.g. institutions and Family Support Programmes. The second degree programme allows the candidate to acquire competences in social economy, activities undertaken as a social worker or guardian as well as competences in outreach-street work and conducting social projects [3].

A (first degree) social work programme is also realised at the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn. Here, the students gain the knowledge needed for work in nursing homes for children, family and child support centres, as well as non-government organisations that support children and families [8].

A social work faculty has also been introduced at Jagiellonian University as a second degree programme. Considering the name, none of the courses focuses on working with children and young people. The only courses the subject-matter of which includes children's quality of life are Video entitled Home Training in Social Work and Outreach. Video entitled Home Training in Social Work covers Video Interaction Training (VIT), which is applied in work with adoptive families, foster families, children with behavioural

and social issues and in work in welfare institutions such as nursing homes, orphanages, etc. The latter course, i.e. Street Work (outreach), offers students the possibility to look into the characteristics of street work both "in the light of selected categories of beneficiaries of street work and outreach programmes including children, young people, the homeless, drug addicts or sex workers, etc., as well as in the light of the underlying values such as respect, understanding, being non-judgemental and operating strategies which constitute them (focused on real needs and problems of persons at risk of exclusion, which make it possible to empower and reinforce the beneficiaries based on the model of harm reduction)" [7].

Students of first degree programmes at the Jan Długosz University in Częstochowa acquire competences in courses focused on work with families, such as: Methodology of Social and Therapeutic Work with the Family, and Concepts of Human Forces at Work within the Family [9].

The Maria Grzegorzewska Pedagogical University first degree programme offers relatively numerous courses emphasising the problems of the functioning of the child and family. The courses include Developmental Psychology, Protection of Best Interest of the Child - Law and Practice, Family Upbringing, the Basics of Family Studies, Family and Institutional Care of Orphaned Child as a Part of Social

Welfare, Institutions and Family Support Programmes, and Family Communication Training [4].

The Social Work Faculty at Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University is realised as a first degree programme. The course, considering its name, Contemporary Polish Family, aims at developing competencies in working families [10].

An analysis of the social work programmes shows that if it includes courses in social work with children and young people, the subject-matter in most cases is a component of programmes of courses dealing with family support and functioning, or they are covered in elective courses and depend on the students' choices. Incidental occurrence in the syllabuses of issues related to assistance for children and young people at risk of social exclusion may be related to the effects of education at the social work faculty (the implementation of the European Higher Education Area (the Bologna process), which began in Poland in 1999, brought a significant change in perception of the aims of the education process. Curricula of higher education programmes are to a greater extent based on the criterion of their usefulness for the graduate in his or her future role in the society. Learning outcomes (kierunkowe efekty kształcenia) is the description of qualifications to be attained by graduates of a specific faculty. Learning outcomes constitute the basis for defining the scope of the curriculum. These effects do not include such notions as the child or young people. The effects of educating at the social work faculty are located within the area of social science and humanities which, in Poland, are compliant with National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The effects of education offer the institutions of higher education a wide discretion in terms of forming their own curricula.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Educating future social workers for work with children and youths is important because they constitute a specific category of clients of the welfare network, and one that is at greatest risk of stigmatisation and social exclusion. Welfare assistance is the only option available for those children as offers from the job market, which is fully available to other children, are unavailable to them. As access to social resources is more difficult for them, their individual potential develops to a lesser extent. Those factors contribute to increasing the gap between them and other children. They miss the chances which they would have if they were growing up in an appropriate environment. Society also bears the consequences of children in poverty and of their predicaments. As a result, one can speak of the loss or failure to use social capital. Polish social work and the inclusion of children and youths into it require a new, comprehensive approach which will highlight the mechanisms that regulate contemporary social worlds of children. Inclusion of children and youths into the area of research and education in social work and into the practice of social work may manifest itself in consent to the participation of children in the process of understanding and in the necessary change of the social world of the socially excluded families. Thus, it can contribute to improvement in the quality of the lives of children and youths. This improvement will, in

turn, make it possible to adjust the methods and forms of work with children from multi-problem families to contemporary contexts of their lives.

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