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REALITIES AND UNREALITIES IN THE HUNGARIAN CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SOCIAL MOBILITY

Introduction

The protection and wellbeing of children is closely linked to social mobility; yet, we dispose over limited information on how the Hungary child protection system contributes to the wellbeing and social mobility of families. Whenever in a society opportunities of mobility are open to the members of the society, especially for children and young people, and regarding their future prospects, the child welfare system applying a systemic and preventive approach to families is able to bring about positive changes in the life of families. Exclusion and the narrowing of opportunities of mobility are the result of a long process, when the affected families suffer disadvantages in multiple fields, like education, labour market, place of living, housing conditions, access to cultural products, and social network, while they transmit such disadvantages to the next generations (Messing, Molnár 2011). Opportunities related to social mobility greatly rely on whether the children have access to desegregated, quality education, whether they have established, bridge-like relationships connecting them to the majority, non-poor, non-Roma society, and whether good quality social, health and child protection support and services are accessible to the families (Váradi 2015, OECD 2018).

This study examines the way how social work with families with children can provide support to the families and enhance their wellbeing, what forms of support are accessible to families, and what clients think about these forms of providing help. It also outlines the way how professionals reflect on the functional mechanisms and hiatuses of the system. The study builds on the results of two interrelated researches: 1) The first pillar is given by the research entitled *Mobility and immobility in the Hungarian society*², from which I selected 6 interviews with child welfare professionals and a

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² The research was carried out within the framework of the project of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Centre of Excellence entitled *Mobility Research Grant*.

questionnaire-based survey among the population, respectively, closely related to this survey, short interviews with the population regarding a disadvantageous area. The interviews with professionals reflected on the functioning of the system, while the part of the research based on the questionnaire and on the short interviews focused on the services facilitating parenting the clients know about, and the views about such services of the families with children. 2) The research entitled *Child Protection Trends Supporting Children's Well-being* carried out within the Research Scholarship granted by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (2017-2020)³ presents the perspective of children and young people as well, on the basis of their views expressed in the framework of two focus group interviews, on the challenges the primary target groups of child protection are confronted with, and their views on the functioning of the system. The two researches are complementary in what concerns the topic of the present study, which analyses the results in the light of the child welfare social work and quality service providing, thus from the perspective of facilitating social mobility. However, before presenting the findings, it is important to outline those values and fears on which the implication of the families and the supporting of parenting rely on in the international discourse⁴.

The framework of recognition - positive acknowledgement - complexity, as the precondition of child welfare

An international research points out that, besides the fact that in the perception of professionals, child protection work has a low social prestige, it also entails risks, since it is impregnated by fear both from the part of the client and the professional. Fear from making mistakes and from the consequences of errors (criticism from the part of superiors and colleagues, the possibility of an official investigation, of a case going public or being distorted by mass-media) is a daily experience of professionals. On the other hand, they also fear the

³ This basic research is complemented by the research entitled *Welfare pluralism, subsidiarity, complementarity: analysis of the service functions and possibilities of volunteer work in child protection*, funded by the National, Research, Development and Innovation Office within the New National Excellence Program, code ÚNKP-19-4. The author participates in another research project focused on social solidarity related issues and the social service system supporting families with children. (Domonkos Sik: Solidarity in Late Modernity, OTKA Young Researcher Fellowship).

⁴ A detailed description of the Hungarian system see: Rácz 2015 and 2017.

members of the affected families and the threats. All this can lead them to even avoiding taking measures in order to safeguard children. To this adds the experience that in recent years, resources were significantly restricted, funds dedicated to child protection decreased, this fact being evidently reflected in the quality, moreover, in the accessibility of the services. Simultaneously, since the economic crisis, the affected families live in increasingly worsening condition and uncertainty, which is adding to the difficulties (Meysen, Kelly 2018). Due to their fear from the parents, professionals are often distrustful towards parents, they are also reticent with cooperating parents for fearing that parents might manipulate them or take over control in case management (Wilkins, Whittaker 2017). All these factors pervert the value of partnership cooperation, the experience of a trustful relationship, stretching out the ethics of the profession (Bogács, Rác 2018). When considering the other side, the parents too are wary of professionals, they fear that the interventions would not contribute to the solving of their complex and long-lasting problems, and that they ultimately would lose their child. Research shows that either the voice of the parents or of the children are not strong enough in child protection, even if we speak of basic human rights (Häkli et al. 2018, Rác 2012, 2017). It is precisely the significant group of those who would greatly benefit from the early prevention of marginalization which falls out of the range of services, and in many cases remains invisible for the system, with unidentified needs. In international discourse, beyond supporting participation, it is of outmost importance that these experiences become embedded in child protection work, and channelled into developments as well (Häkli et al. 2018). The three essential features of child protection built on multidisciplinary are the principle of *getting to know each other*, in the sense that space should be allowed for activities in which the story, wishes and vision of the child can be known; *recognition*, highlighting positive aspects, respecting the opinion of children and *ensuring complex support*, in the sense that we need to figure out which type of service is adequate and in certain life situation what is feasible and adequate. The strength of positive recognition is that it allows for children and young people to get involved more in the shaping of their own situation, while in early intervention models, on the contrary, it was the adults and especially the professionals who determined the problems to be addressed (Häkli et al. 2018). It is also important to highlight the 5 groups of protection factors in the case of children and youngsters needing support: 1) personality and temper; 2) individual abilities and values; 3) the structure and support from the family, parental attitude nurturing self-

efficacy; 4) a wider network of supportive adults and the extended family, with members who can be mobilized in case of problems or who can give advice; 5) support from wider sphere, i.e. programs targeting children, talent promotion, trainings (Fraser et al. 1999, p. 134). Kendall et al. (2010) point out that intervention displaying appreciation and reflection towards the entire family has the following important features: family-centred approach, in which the family members receive help tailored on each individual; participation of different professionals and service providers; prioritization of the needs of the family; clear timeframe of the intervention; family members are involved in assessment and thus in the follow-up of change; intervention is focused on solutions and results. It is also important to acknowledge that the professionals, organizations and authorities working with families at risk are confronted with many complex needs, associated with poverty, domestic violence, poor mental and health condition, housing crisis, unemployment, drug abuse. In case of families with complex needs, solution cannot be ensured isolated, only from one service (Kendall et al. 2010, Beckmead Family of School 2017).

Social work among families with children and social mobility

Research method

Data collection for the questionnaire-based research was carried out on a representative sample among families with children in a disadvantaged micro-region of the North-Hungarian region, living in settlements of various sizes. At the time of the research the families included persons aged 0-17 years. Data collection was based on stratified random sampling. The gathered data was weighted according to the composition of the households, the size of the sample in the weighted database consisting of 260 persons.

In what follows I give an overview on how known services are related to child upbringing and on their use⁵. Following the presentation of the results of the survey, I conclude the main viewpoints expressed in the interviews from the perspective of the quality of the services. In total 40 short interviews were conducted.

⁵ The questionnaire included questions regarding the awareness of health, educational and social services, but due to the limits of the study, we do not present these.

In order to find out the standpoint of children and youngsters, I selected two focus group interviews; members of one of the groups live in state care, the members of the other were brought up within their families, but received support from the part of the local child welfare service. A short presentation of the point of view of the professionals will follow; on the basis of the interviews with 6 professionals, we touch upon the development trends of the system as well. The interviews were made with 1 local decision-maker, 1 institution manager and 4 social workers and case managers providing support to families.

The opinion of the families with children on the services

Regarding child upbringing, we examined the extent to which 5 services are known and requested. Being aware of the availability of a kindergarten can be considered general in the settlement or in its surrounding⁶. The Sure Start Children House, a service destined expressly to disadvantaged children, is known to a high extent (71.1%), while the nursery, the educational counselling centre and especially the child psychologist are known to a very low extent.

Table 1. What kinds of services or institutions related to child upbringing exist in the place you live or in the surroundings you know about, and which ones do you use? (%; N=260 individuals)

	Percentage of individuals being aware of the service in the disadvantaged micro-region (%)	Percentage of individuals using the service in the disadvantaged micro-region (%)
Nursery	36.7	19.4
Sure Start house	71.1	35.7
Kindergarten	96.2	70.4
Educational counselling	32.4	12
Child psychologist	12.3	4.8

Source: author's own work, 2020.

The extent of using these services is staggering: besides the nursery, all the other services designed to assist parenting are accessed to a very low rate. Nearly one-fifth of the respondents (19.4%) have recourse to the nursery, around one in ten respondents (12%) to educational counselling, and one in twenty (4.8%) has recourse to a child psychologist. The Sure Start house is

⁶ In Hungary enrolment to a kindergarten is compulsory from the age of 3.

outstanding also in terms of use, since every third parent (35.7%) indicated that they are using the service.

The short interviews with families reveal that despite the disadvantageous situation typical for the North-Hungarian microregion and the high rates of poverty, there is no social services professional effectively present in the villages to provide support to families with children. The interviewees mention the local council, where they can request material and in-kind support, and family and friend relationships, whom they can rely on in case they have problems. They indicate the local council as the authority responsible for social benefits; they are unable to identify the services of the child welfare and child protection system from the perspective of solving the problems, and they are unaware of local NGOs either. *“Well, there are people there in the office who’re in it, God forbid, with child protection too, there is this housing support and children meals.”* (family no 10 living in a settlement in the north-Hungarian micro-region)

The opinion of children and young people

Children growing up in a family do not really know what those family problems are which brought them into the purview of child protection. Often it is not really clear for them why they are participating at prevention activities, youth clubs, even if they do enjoy such events because of the company and new friends. They can hardly talk about their problems, mainly because they do not have an overall view of these, especially in the light of receiving support. Young people growing up without a family are very critical of the system, considering that it does not prepare them to autonomous life, teach them how to manage money, to assume responsibility, and in many cases they are not aware of the reasons they had been removed from their family. *“Well, money and things like that. For a kid at home, who’s growing up in a family, can see the bills and get to know, ‘cause things are more strict there [...] now, we’re asking something, then we get [...]”* (group of young people in child protection care) To this adds their feeling that the society is prejudiced against them, and it is very hard for them to overcome disadvantages ensuing from their child care history. From the perspective of our study, they expressed a harsh critique against the system, namely that outside the professionals directly working with them (carer, foster parent), any other carer or representative of supporting services are very difficult to access; for example, they very rarely meet their legal guardian or foster care counsellor, in fact they do not have an active relationship with them. All this seriously undermines the rights of the child, and substantially questions the rightfulness, established functions and goals of the system.

The views of professionals expressing criticism of the system

The professionals speak about deficient working and service providing conditions, and the interviews clearly reveal a high level of fluctuation and burn-out. The services providing for small settlements typically are unable to ensure even the legally binding services for locals. The professionals think that the present-day services do not have a positive impact fostering social mobility on the life and future of the clients. The tools available to those delivering the services are not sufficient for substantially improve the social condition of families with children. Much too often they have means and resources only for emergency situations, while services targeting development and the improvement of well-being are entirely deficient or accessible only to a limited extent. *“The centre can’t really contribute to mobility, or the local, district institutions can’t do much about the mobility of children affected with various problems, the cause to this being the lack of professionals, and the insufficient motivation of children and parents regarding education.”* (case manager in a north-Hungarian settlement) Adult family members, alike children in trouble have to deal with their problems alone. Due to its insufficiencies, the child protection system indirectly – as a non-intended effect – contributes too to the conservation of marginalized conditions.

Conclusions

It is important to stress that family and the wider society are both responsible for children’s well-being. As research results show, a structure is needed, which is built on supportive, diverse services respecting family with all its specificities, fostering individual autonomy, and relying on the work of creative, well-trained professionals. The basic feature and value of a successful intervention is that is non-discriminatory, it builds on existing individual, family and community resources and strengths, and acknowledges parental roles and rights. In all cases, intervention has to serve the best interest of the child, it has to allow for the improvement of the family’s wellbeing, for which a needs-based support has to be ensured for each member of the family. The most important abilities of a good professional are confident self-awareness and strong, stable character, straightforward communication, which allows them to maintain the focus even in complex interactions and often chaotic situations as well (CWDC 2011). In this study, we argued that social mobility has to rely on a broad cooperation and partnership, which takes into account family and community factors influencing the development of the child (see Table 2).

Table 2. The model of child development in the light of social mobility and welfare pluralism

<i>Family factors influencing a child's development</i>		<i>Community factors influencing a child's development</i>
Background factors	Family functions of key importance	Community functions of key importance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Family structure / dimension - Age of the mother at first child - Education of parents - Income level, poverty level - Employment, unemployment - Equipment and features of the household - Features of the settlement, transport 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Quality of parenting - Dedication towards the upbringing and caring for children - Mental health and well-being - Physical health condition - Addiction in the family - Crime, prostitution in the family - Quality and range of family relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Infant care of good quality - Extended network of health visitors - Family support system - Prevention programs of the child welfare system for every child aged 0-18, in each settlement - Reactive services of the child welfare system (family care, intensive family care, parents' clubs, youth clubs) - Desegregated, good quality education - Programs for talented and disadvantaged children - Opportunities to pursue postgraduate and university studies - Job opportunities and satisfactory wages - Good quality health care - Good quality leisure and recreational opportunities - Support from neighbours and other informal support - Services delivered by the state (local council), church and non-governmental organizations in the local community

Source: author's own work 2020 on the basis of CWDC (2011) and the presented research results

Successful child protection intervention is able to recognize situations representing risk, whether it concerns a child, or the vulnerability of an adult

client. A professional cannot be left alone in such situations; it is important that they have the possibility to ask help from their colleagues and be able to connect the client to community resources (Rácz, Bogács 2019; CWDC 2011). It is equally important that the professionals work with the family even for a longer period in a way that the trustful relationship established between them does not curtail the autonomy of the family or cause their dependency from the system. Successful intervention means that we work with the family on the basis of a clear plan, which includes goals, expectations, possibilities, rewards and eventual sanctions as well. It aims to make the family able to use efficiently the available services, thus improving the well-being, social integration and mobility opportunities of the family members (CWDC 2011).

Our research results show that the child welfare system is almost invisible for families; even if they have heard of the services, they have recourse to these to a low extent. The few hours a social worker is spending in a settlement is not enough for their presence getting embedded into the life of the locals; it would not result in the locals relying on the supporting services whenever they face a difficulty in everyday life. The fact that those people are left out from social services who need assistance is very revealing of the extent to which underfunded social sector struggling with the insufficiency of professionals can react to the problems of people living in a certain settlement. It is a basic problem that in lack of different services advancing well-being, the existing services delivered with very limited capacities and therefore in a poor quality implicitly block the chances to mobility of children and youth. It is a startling fact that the children and young people often do not even know why they are in the purview of child protection, and in what ways they can expect real support and council. Due to their tumultuous family situation, the professionals take into consideration their situations and the support suitable for them independently from the family (Rácz 2012, 2017). In order to induce any substantial change in the present situation, the quality of child welfare and child protection services has to improve significantly, which definitely requires commitment from the part of decision-makers.

On the basis of the results, and taking into account the views of the youngsters as well, we have the following *main conclusions*:

- Systemic approach is lacking from the support to families;
- Information is scattered, case management entails lengthy procedures;
- Services are accessible to a limited extent, any new method and service can hardly be adjusted to the state sector;

- Since preventive approach is lacking, the child protection system is built on a reactive functioning, and is able to handle typically only emergency situations;
- Specific mental health services should be ensured to children, parents and professionals working with them alike.

On the basis of the above conclusions, the following *development ideas* are suggested:

- Acknowledging the child as a value for the society;
- Supporting the family system, including the target groups of the service in planning and execution;
- Wider implication of volunteers, supporting mentorship and other types of programs aiming to promote talented children;
- Collecting the services of NGOs and channelling them into local child protection;
- Partnership, open communication between the child protection actors and representatives of connected sectors;
- Diversity, openness, complexity, vision in order to promote successful growing to adulthood and social integration (Darvas 2018; Rácz 2017; Rácz – Bogács 2019).

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We have limited information about the relationship between the quality of the social and child protection system and the chances of social mobility, on how the social system can contribute to improving the well-being of the clients, and on how the system limits it with exclusionary procedures in Hungary. The aim of the article is to examine how the children, young people and parents themselves see the interventions targeting the wellbeing, protection of children, the way how professionals get involved in the helping process. Taking a critical approach to analyse the mechanisms of the system's functioning and the forms of solidarity manifested in child protection, I also overview the unreal elements in the reality of child protection, which on a systemic level harden social exclusion. The study indicates the new directions in the renewal of the child protection system, aiming at the increase of the quality of life and opportunities of social mobility of the clients, in the spirit of welfare pluralism.

Keywords: social mobility, child protection, quality of life, future developments, welfare pluralism