

THE BEST INTEREST OF THE CHILD? - WORKING MECHANISM OF THE HUNGARIAN CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT*

The aim of the presentation is to give an overview of the situation of child welfare services and of the child protection system, from the perspective of the theoretical framework grounded on the concept of child protection as a service. The focus on services implies that the provided supports are able to decrease the disadvantages children in child protection care face and to offer a real opportunity for becoming a successful adult. Regarding parents, the emphasis is on acknowledging parenting and developing skills. By mapping the current operational context of the child protection institutional system, I examine the prevalence of these approaches in the Hungarian child protection field work. In my presentation I resume the results of the online survey conducted in the quantitative phase of the research entitled Child protection trends in promoting the well-being of children, carried out between 2017 and 2020, and supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The assessment targets family and child well-being centres and services, and children's homes and foster care networks providing specialist care. The results highlight the way how the professional approach of managers determines the principles of professional work prevailing in a certain institution, the philosophy of services and care, and the practices and attitudes all these principles and approaches produce in the social work with clients and systems of clients (children, young people and their parents).

Keywords: Hungarian child protection system, system of complex services, operational context, best interest of the child

Introduction

The aim of the present study is to examine the professional mentality of professionals with a management position in the Hungarian child protection system, within the framework of the research entitled *Child protection trends in promoting the well-being of children*¹. It looks into the views of managers about the profession, and through these views, into their opinion on the functioning mechanisms of the Hungarian child protection system. Additionally, it observes how the child's best interest principle can prevail in the actual work, and what future developments are needed in the field of child well-being and child protection.²

Families on the verge of child protection struggle with multiple problems simultaneously. Therefore, it is important that national governments answer the ensuing various and complex needs of families not only with the support by a single provider. All this largely depends on whether competent professionals work at state, local, non-governmental or religious institutions, and whether they apply the proper methods while providing support. (Adfam 2011) In order to satisfy the complex needs of clients, the governments need to ensure cost-efficient and integrated services, which exert a long-term impact on the development of children and families. (Easton et al. 2012) The intricate problems of families, their being burdened with problems and excluded, and the fear of losing their

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² The study does not go into the structure of the Hungarian child protection system; the following works by the author include detailed information regarding this: Rácz, A. (2015). Social exclusion in Hungary from a child protection perspective. *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies*, 6 (3), 458–465. <https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ijcyfs/article/view/13565/4364>. Regarding dysfunctions, you can read more here: Rácz, A. (2017). *Child Protection as Fragmented Social Institution: Interpreting Corporate Parenting in Hungarian Practice*. Kolozsvár - Cluj-Napoca: Cluj University Press. <http://www.editura.ubbcluj.ro/bd/ebooks/pdf/2164.pdf>

children often lead to resistance and insufficient cooperation. The reason behind this attitude can be that families might have negative experiences with the system in general, or with a social worker (Robb 2014), eventually with a low quality service. Efficient cooperation implies the sharing of responsibility and knowledge.

Regarding partnership cooperation with the families, a basic requirement is to have professionals dedicated to providing support, making efforts to achieve the following:

- getting familiar with the family's composition;
- understanding the family's dynamics;
- systematizing the collected information;
- identifying the attitudes needed for change;
- building on strengths;
- assessing the advancements and the process of cooperation in general with the family.

(Child Welfare Information Gateway 2016)

The following factors can be impediments to the efficient cooperation with the clients:

- conflicting relationship with the mother,
- obstruction due to drug abuse,
- issues related to availability (housing or phone),
- distrust towards the professional or service provider.

(Child Welfare Information Gateway 2016)

The international discourse puts a great emphasis on supporting parenthood, not only in the process of family centred case management, but during targeted programs or parental trainings as well. Besides listening to the parents and the child, it is important to observe

the interactions within the family, especially between the child and the parents, since these may shed a light both on strengths and the vulnerability of the family and of certain family members.

Reflections from the part of managers on the functioning of the Hungarian child protection system

The research

The aim of the research is on one hand to examine the views of professionals working in child protection (child welfare service and centre, workers at child care institutions and foster families) about the primary and secondary target group of child protection, their concept of the family and their notion of the profession. On the other hand, the research explores the opinions of the children, young people and their parents regarding the working mechanisms of the child protection system, the way how professionals are involved in the helping process and the modalities how the system reinforces parental roles.

The research is based on quantitative and qualitative methodologies:

- 1) Online, national survey (applying questionnaire) with representatives of the family and child well-being service and centre and with professionals of child care institutions and networks: in order to search out the attitudes of managers, their views of the families of vulnerable children or children taken into care, and certain child protection notions;
- 2) Individual interviews with professionals and decision-makers active in various segments of child well-being and child protection;
- 3) Focus group interviews with people working in the field and with children, young people and their parents.

In what follows I present the findings of the online survey along two topics: 1) features of

professional functioning, and 2) the needs for systemic development. Within the framework of the research, online surveys were effectuated on three areas of care, in 2017. There are a total number of 197 family and child well-being centres in the country; in these, 51 questionnaires were filled in, representing a 26% return rate.

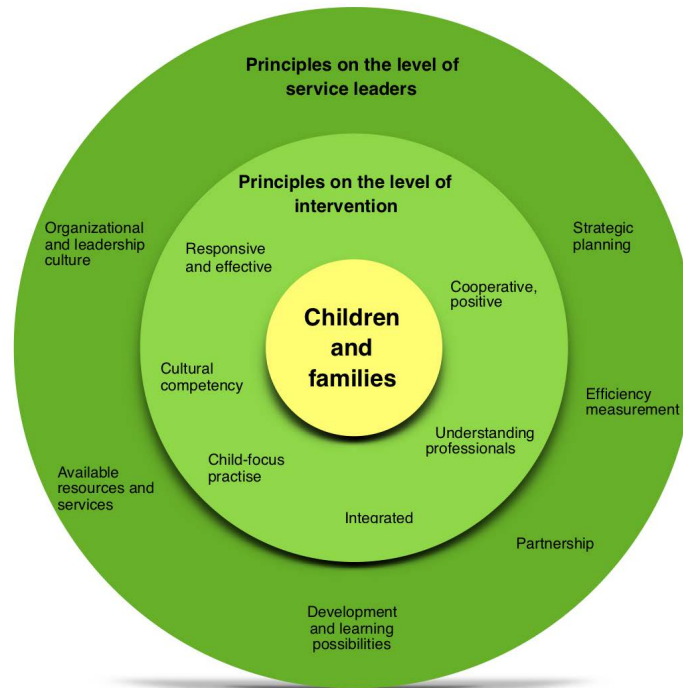
The total number of family and child well-being services is 749; a number of 244 filled in the questionnaire. The return rate is 33%. Due to the centralization of the child protection service in 2014, the questionnaire targeted only central bodies, namely the top management, despite the fact that regarding the local establishments, there are much more managers. 87 questionnaires were sent back from the centralized organisations of the child protection system, the return rate being 68%. Among the child protection institutions, there are institutions supported by the state, the church and by non-governmental organisations as well.³

In this first phase of the research, I started from the presumption that the mentality and professional approach of the managers largely determines the work of people working at the organisation, the sphere and quality of the provided services, indicating the intervention principles, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. From the level of management to interventions⁴

³ In each case, the questionnaires consisted of 2 major blocks: 1) service-related data concerning the tasks fulfilled by the institution; 2) principles and concepts of professional functioning with questions related to attitudes, and definitions given in the form of open questions. In each case, the questionnaires were concluded with the formulation of development trends. Since the questionnaires basically had open questions, we analyzed these as quasi-interviews. I performed the analysis together with my colleague, sociologist László Kiss.

⁴ From child welfare perspective, see more: Good Child & Family Research and Policy Unit (2003). Working for Children and Families – Exploring. Galway. p. 21



The features of the work of the child protection professionals

The institution leaders interviewed during the research highlighted many systemic deficiencies on all three fields of service provision. The managers rated the professional qualification and competence of their colleagues in general as good, in turn they consider that burnout and isolation in a professional sense affects them; this is confirmed by the fact that they have limited access to various forms of easing their work, given or rather due to the difficult working conditions. They think that the deficiency of professional tools, and the lack of conscious developments provided with proper financing cause the most serious problems.

The managers basically emphasize the primacy of child well-being services: the focus is on preserving the families' unity, developing parental skills, providing age-appropriate counselling and prevention solutions for children and young people, all this within the framework of a much more service-centred child protection approach, which is able to

handle complex issues.

When asked about the problems connected to themselves, as representatives of the child protection system, the managers offered the following answers:

- overburdened
- burned out
- unsuccessful
- isolated
- vulnerable
- uncertain
- lacking tools
- tired
- child protection system consisting of neglectful professionals.

Positive aspects, which can serve as strengths during work:

- dedicated
- professionally competent
- open
- flexible
- empathic professionals in field work.

Concerning the *methods* through which the system of child welfare services could render the cooperation with families *more efficient*, we received three types of answers: 1) answers touching upon services in general; 2) answers concerning service providers and social experts; 3) answers concerning families.

Table 1. Features of a more efficient work according to managers

Focuses in answers dealing with services in general	Focuses in answers related to service providers, professionals	Main focuses in answers related to families
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - widening the sphere of services - amplification of tools - amplification of prevention tools - methodological development - improving the professional cooperation between members of the report system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - lower number of cases - development of work methods - strengthening team work - ensuring supervision - hiring a higher number and qualified staff - higher wages - higher social appreciation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ensuring development programs and activities for families in a wide range - raising awareness, supporting parenting - age-appropriate programs for children
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Future development ideas on the basis of the managers' opinions

The future development trends expected to occur in the field of child welfare service and child protection are in line with the answers given by the managers regarding the more efficient cooperation with the families. This also indicates that the respondents expect such developments for the sake of a more efficient functioning of the system; yet, efficiency is closely related to development, thus these views are also an expression of a critical attitude towards the system.

Table 2. Development needs and efficiency

Expectations related to the development of human resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - enhancing the competences of colleagues, professional trainings - methodological developments, supporting professional work - team building, supporting team work - enhancing appreciation in financial terms - enhancing moral and social appreciation - enlarging the included professional fields (i.e. psychology, child psychology, social work in kindergartens and schools) - development of HR, decreasing fluctuation - mental health support for colleagues
Expectations regarding the functioning of the system and the development of the institutional structure

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - decreasing the number of cases per professional - ensuring a higher number of professionals - the specialization and differentiation of the institutional system - more efficient support to the foster care system - ensuring more places according to needs - more accurate and standardized protocols - more efficient reporting system - less administrative work, more professional work (help instead of control) - predictable financing - more close cooperation between basic care and specialized care
Expectations regarding services
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - developing a complex system of services - introduction of new tools and methods - ensuring intense support to preserving the unity of the family - enhancing prevention - care system adjusted to needs and to the complexity of problems
Expectations related to families in the light of professional developments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - raising awareness among families, supporting parenthood, skills development - increasing the motivation of families in connection with the solving of problems and cooperation with professionals

Conclusion

According to the views of managers, the trade and the professionals themselves become introverted, and due to fluctuation and burn-out, the leaders aren't able either to transmit these professional values towards field workers. The lack of tools can be detected especially in the case of families living on the verge of child protection or included in specialist care; concerning such cases, it is an inertia factor that on one hand the managers of both basic and specialist care stress upon the utmost importance of strengthening the relationship with the family, on the other hand they feel that the success of case management typically depends on the attitude of the family, while the practice relying on strengths in reality perishes. What is this supposed to mean in specialist work? It should mean that the professional identifies how and when the child or the family

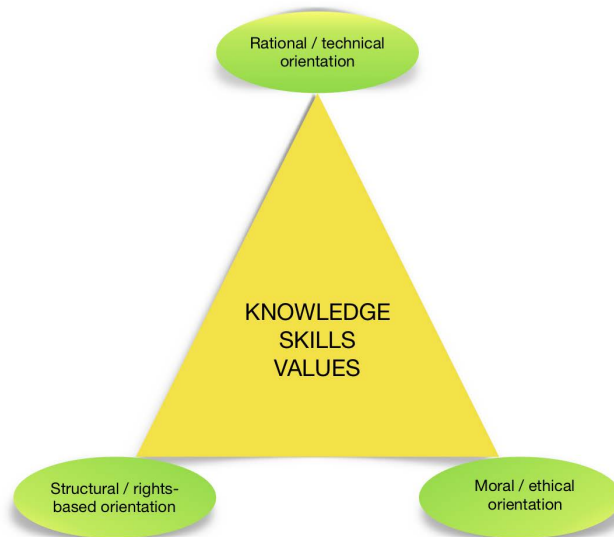
functions properly, what their personal resources are, what the family members themselves consider as strengths, which can be used during cooperation. Communication is positive, and everybody has the chance to express their opinion. In order to reveal the strengths, the professional attempts to explore and surpass structural and personal barriers; for this, the professional identifies the key persons, who may offer support to the child and to the family, contributing to the shaping of a positive vision of the future built around realistic targets. (Queensland Government 2013: 4-5)

On the basis of the answers offered to the survey, the managerial attitudes and professional mentalities indicate a reflective practice, in the sense that in terms of competences and set of values, the professionals represent the mainstream child protection practices, but the service providing and in general the social environment, in which child protection is practiced, respectively becomes fragmented (Rácz 2016), does not allow space for this approach.

In the following phase of the research we will examine the professional mentalities and the reflections on child protection work of the target groups on the basis of individual and focus group interviews. The research entitled *The stages of professional integrity and the implementation of the 'child's best interest' principle*, as a continuation of the present research, examines with a qualitative methodology the way how training and practice influence the becoming of the professional.

One of the greatest challenges in Hungarian child protection is to discover how the service providing environment can be enhanced; how professionals can adapt in this environment to the emerging economic and social challenges in terms of professional methods and problem sensitivity alike; what new ways they would find in the cooperation with the clients, and what kind of new knowledge, skills and competencies are needed for this. It is also a challenge to discover the place of professional ethics built on the values of social justice and the protection of human rights during professional work, in the practice of social work.

Figure 2. Developing a right-based social work practice



Source: <https://www.scie.org.uk/publications/guides/guide13/law/>

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