

# Developments and barriers in social work with families and children at risk in Poland in times of transition

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## Abstract

Social work in Poland has been developed for years in accordance with social work in Europe. At the beginning of the twentieth century new welfare state systems at the European level were founded that influenced the development of the welfare system in Poland. Finally, great changes of the economy and the socio-political system have been going on in Poland since 1989. The transformation from the centrally managed system to democracy has become a key issue in creating the new social policy and the new model of the welfare state. Since 1989, the process of transformation began, while bringing about visible and positive effects in the sphere of social services and professionalization of social work in Poland. Besides being focused on traditional social problems like disability, elderly, alcoholism, crime, it also addressed the new issues that emerged such as unemployment, poverty, homeless and drug abuse. The platform for social work changes has influenced the creation of local governments directly responsible for the life quality of those excluded in local communities. The article will focus on the new developments in socio-educational services for families and children at risk and barriers in that field of social work.

## 1. Introduction

The transformations in the socio-economic system in Poland for the last two decades influenced the social care system and the implementation of the new social policy. There is a growing number of different Welfare institutions

which deal with the activities supporting various categories of individuals affected by exclusion. Due to the Social Welfare Act from 12 March 2004 (the first Social Welfare Act was accepted on 29 November 1990) we have positive solutions for a variety of social institution supporting vulnerable groups of clients at the national, regional and local level: centers of social support, centers of family support, day centers for children, handicapped, elderly; residential centers for different vulnerable groups, consultation centers; local community day centers of support. Most of them work under the auspices of the public sector, some belong to nongovernmental organizations, few work as a private entity.

The reconstruction of family support and child care systems in Poland, as in other European countries, is in general related to the decentralization of care institutions and to moving the responsibility for child and family social support to local authorities. New paradigms in child care are based on the "New ethic for children", which is based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Its implications are for instance individualized approaches to a child and her/his family; ecological and holistic concepts in social practice with children and families; projecting and planning actions for children in care; looking for alternative forms of child care institutions like foster families (new types of foster families), family-type houses of care, daily support centers (Kantowicz, 2010c, p. 85).

## 2. New solutions in the social family and child care system

The new Social Welfare Act of 2004 delegates many of the responsibilities to local communities. Besides the Social Welfare Act in Poland, the Constitution guarantees the special protection to children and families (Articles 71, 72). The Family Code (*Kodeks Rodzinny i Opiekunczy*) is the basic legal document regulating family relations and child protection. Since the year 2000, the organization of child welfare services has been the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Policy. The new challenges in the family support and child care system

have been introduced by the Ministry of Social Policy in 2011 through the new Act of family support and foster care (09.06.2011)<sup>1</sup>.

According to new legal regulations related to the organisation, task and functions of the family support and child care system all social and care institutions should promote cooperation between all components of the socio-educational environment which are involved in family support and child protection.

It means that the institutions should become more of an integral element of the family's and child's environment than it was in the past, aiming for full socialization of the child under its care, and actively supporting family reintegration, including even dysfunctional families in the process of care procedures (Kantowicz, 2007, p. 941) .

New standards underline the role of social work and child care institutions in creating better conditions for respecting the child's individual cultural, ethnic and religious needs, so that he/she can maintain his/her own traditions and the habits of his/her family and environment. In accordance with the newest law, professionals should be aware of better cooperation with different socio-educational institutions which have had direct or indirect contact or which have been engaged in social work with children's families, including:

- Individual forms of social support in place of family life;
- consultative-therapeutic family centers;
- schools which the children attend now and previously attended;
- official court departments and curators looking after the family and/or the child;
- non-governmental organizations, the Catholic Church and/or other public or non-public institutions and organizations, foundations or associations which organize any kind of social support in the child's or the family's environment.

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1 Ustawa o wspieraniu rodziny i pieczy zastępczej z dnia 9 czerwca 2011 roku, Ministerstwo Pracy i Polityki Społecznej.

### 3. The multi-faceted character of actions for children and families at risk in Poland

A family at risk, under a threat of becoming a dysfunctional family, has been a subject widely studied in humanistic and social sciences for many years, a fact that has manifested itself in numerous publications addressing this issue. A high-risk family is also the object of professional diagnostic, prophylactic and support actions (Kawula, 1997).

In Poland, concepts of multi-professional support and interdisciplinary teams working with dysfunctional families are a novel approach, although there are some examples of such actions found in projects performed during the interwar years. An attempt to create teams composed of representatives of different professions that would undertake research as well as educational and care-providing activities in schools was made at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s by Helena Radlińska, who diagnosed why some children in Warsaw-based schools had to repeat a year (Radlinska, 1961, p. 105).

The research into high-risk families, which are often families known to welfare services, has evidenced that living in a family at risk actually poses a threat to the successful functioning of all family members, to the development of the children and to their school achievements as well as their pursuit of other educational, professional or social ambitions. Thus, social and educational work with families and children from such a social background should take into account the context and the multi-faceted character of the problems families at risk are faced with.

Today, a multi-faceted approach is exemplified by interdisciplinary teams which are set up under various programmes, for example to prevent violence in a family, and which pursue their work guided by the concept of diagnosing and solving problems of a child and a family by taking into consideration many aspects. From this perspective, activation and integration of social institutions which support children and families in local environments is aimed at activating each family to make a change and at encouraging the relevant organization and institutions to join in activities. This dual aim can be achieved by competent professionals committed to their work. The following are examples of such institutions and people:

- welfare institutions which diagnose a child's background (e.g. unemployment, poverty, disability, single parenthood, alcoholism) and provide support;
- educational and care-providing institutions, especially daytime support centres, which organize compensatory and therapeutic workshops as well as leisure-time activities for children from environments threatened by or affected by social exclusion;
- family and juvenile courts, which through legal guardians intervene with schoolchildren's family environments that appear pathological or criminal;
- non-governmental organizations, specializing in providing care to children with special educational needs and/or families who need aid, and in giving different types of support depending on the kind of organization;
- psychological and pedagogical clinics prepared to give professional diagnosis of the following groups of children: exceptionally talented, with development deficits, socially maladjusted, etc., and other specialist counseling services for children, adolescents and adults;
- local authorities and local governments, which design a specific policy (also in the sphere of education) and are able to provide support in terms of organization and finances to institutional initiatives as well as to monitor certain projects in a given environment (Jarosz, 2008, p. 369);
- police, church and other institutions which undertake actions under various prophylactic or educational and care programmes;
- mass-media, which can undertake information and educational programmes as well as promotional campaigns, thus giving support to other institutions by raising social awareness in the field of care and education (Kantowicz, 2010a, p. 147).

Considering the above, social work with a child and a family at risk should not only account for the complexity and multi-dimensional character of the

functioning of a family but also for the context of a given child's and his or her family's situation as well as the multitude of information sources.

It can therefore be assumed that child care and social work with a family will be more effective if we take into consideration the need to perform the following: early diagnosis of dysfunctions in a family; identification of causes and mechanisms of these dysfunctions; correction of abnormalities in the family life or the social maladjustment of a family in the stage of partial dysfunction but not pathology; financial support given in advance in order to cater for the basic family needs; referral of the family to appropriate specialist institutions when a crisis appears; active participation in support activities directed at all family members, also by stimulating their own intellectual capacities, abilities, willingness to change the situation; depending on available options, activation of the immediate environment (family, relatives, neighbours, school, daily care centres, volunteers, church) in the family support process; control of the duration of services given to a family so as not to make them financially or functionally dependent on the welfare system (agreements, contracts); provision of equal educational and professional opportunities of children and teenagers from high-risk and healthy families (Kantowicz, 2004, p. 302).

#### **4. Barriers to the social and educational work with the family**

Some of the latest empirical research on social work with families in enclaves of poverty in Poland, conducted by a team led by W. Warzywoda-Kruszyńska, draws attention to certain limitations in social work with families at risk (Trawkowska, 2007, p. 46). Above all, the study demonstrated some internal differentiation in the situation of poor residents of urban housing estates, which turns into the main barrier to the adjustment of different forms of welfare work to the actual needs of these families. In many cases, poor people have very limited opportunities to take legal action due to their age, low qualifications, bad health, ambivalent attitude to employment, etc. These circumstances make people more dependent on social help.

Another aspect associated with obstacles in social work carried out in poverty ghettos is noticed by A. Karwacki who claims that passive and demanding attitudes of families stem from their focusing on survival and lack of strong local bonds and community feeling, *'where such norms of cooperation are shaped that guide the residents towards constructing shared aims and overcoming fear of being engaged in their attainment'* (Karwacki, 2007).

Studies carried out in recent years by a team of researchers from the Institute of Public Affairs (Hryniewicz, 2006; Kwak, 2006; Waław-Markowska, 2005; Rymśa, 2005) on issues related to social work with children and families uncover many weaknesses of the child and family support system now created in Poland.

Recapitulating the results of these investigations on welfare actions for children and families at risk in Poland, and comparing them with the European standards, many disadvantages of the existing support system are mentioned, including:

- lack of coordination of activities between different institutions on a local level;
- lack of continuous work with the families whose children have been placed in foster families or social care institutions;
- shortage or even complete lack of prophylactic activities, which can support families before a more lasting crisis strikes;
- lack of possible effective support to families in a crisis situation due to the scarcity of proper institutions, e.g. family counseling clinics, shortage of information about possible support, limited access to specialists and mental barriers;
- an insufficient number of foster families, especially the ones which function as emergency families and professional foster families which help children with special needs (health-related, educational, social ones) (Tarkowska, 2006, p. 47).

The following drawbacks can be added to the above list of the shortcomings of the family support system:

- lack or insufficient number of daytime institutions giving support to children and teenagers from families and groups at risk (especially in small towns and villages);
- an insufficient number of professionals specializing in work with families, who undertake everyday activities with families in local environments whenever crises surface;
- lack of belief among specialists (professional social workers) that they can successfully help to solve problems of multiple-problem or pathological families;
- lack of trust in social care institutions and lack of self-confidence among families to believe that they can manage in a crisis situation (mental, cultural and awareness barriers);
- presence of superficial, short-lived actions – limited to financial or in-kind help;
- lack of instruments to motivate dysfunctional families so as to change their attitudes to positive ones, and lack of tools to monitor use of social support;
- lack of instruments to perform relatively objective evaluation of social work with multiple-problem families (Kantowicz, 2010b, p. 217).

Due to these and certainly many other obstacles, the difficult social situation of many families persists, and the social groups on welfare will continue to suffer. Moreover, the role of social workers as persons initiating changes is less appreciated while their function as those who make changes in the social support and care system is overestimated as long as they are not equipped with adequate decision and control instruments (social work as an instrument of social support is entangled in the political and ideological context, compounded by the fact that no formal legal regulations exist ensuring, for example, regular aid to children living in families with an income below the social minimum level that could actually improve the situation of very poor families exposed to social risks). From the point of view of pedagogues, it is also worth considering potential and actual achievements and possibilities of the development of the system of support to children and families at risk of



social exclusion. One of the leading dilemmas in Poland is the fact that we create a fictitious image of a better tomorrow without ensuring that the basic needs of many Polish families are satisfied.

## 5. A family assistant as a new social profession in work with families

Among the professionals who undertake actions for the benefit of families and to solve their everyday problems in child care and education, first of all there are social workers and school pedagogues. But we could name several other professionals who support families at risk (including legal guardians, family councilors, consultants in different types of specialist clinics, personal and group therapists, therapeutic workshop instructors, rehabilitation officers in different educational, social and care-providing institutions).

A family assistant is a new occupation among welfare professions. Pursuant to the Act of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy of 9 June 2011 on Family Support and Foster Custody System, family assistants are to work directly with a problem family, they are meant to give support to families experiencing difficulties in performing child care and educational roles. The objective is to help a problem family recover the ability to fulfill these functions<sup>1</sup>.

According to the underlying assumptions, this new professional in the realm of social and educational work, namely a family assistant, is a person who has experience in working with families in crisis, with addicts and with disabled persons. The goal is to help a family promote better life attitudes in all its members. Cooperation between a family and its family assistant should take place by the family's consent, and during the initial meetings the assistant is expected to find out as much as possible about the family, the children, the problems the family is facing and their expectations. Together with the family the assistant should then try and determine the way to overcome the difficulties, to evaluate the family strengths and to establish the type and sequence of actions to be undertaken. Above all, the assistant should support the family in

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1 Art.2.pkt 1 ustawy o wspieraniu rodziny i systemie pieczy zastępczej (Paragraph 2, item 1 of the Act on Family Support and Foster Care).

solving everyday problems. When the tasks of a family assistant are formulated as above, it becomes obvious that a person who desires to work as a family assistant is expected to possess certain qualifications and skills, such as: experience in working with families (as a social worker or a pedagogue), knowledge of legal regulations which govern welfare and family support organizations, good work organization and planning skills, commitment to his/her work, being trustworthy, possessing very good communication skills, being independent and able to work flexible hours.

The professional tasks undertaken by a family assistant should comprise the multi-faceted nature of the problems that families are challenged with, and this means they should: diagnose problems of a given family from the relevant documentation including an interview, make a social contract with the family and together identify the main problems and needs of the family as well as planned actions in order to overcome the problems, make a plan of support actions dedicated to the family including methods consisting in direct work with the family, organize the support by the family's environment inviting representatives of services and institutions to cooperation, engage the whole family in the performance of the plan, organize the support for the improvement of the family's situation, especially the help to remove obstacles to the personal upbringing of the children (solving basic social, psychological, educational, problems, helping to acquire good housekeeping skills, supporting the family in finding employment and gaining better qualifications), support the family in overcoming problems, forming and strengthening the feeling of self-confidence among the family members, counsel and educate families in difficult life situations, including advice on the available sources of help in solving problems and information about the support offered by state and local government institutions, cooperate with proper non-governmental organizations and institutions as well as other groups and specialists engaged in the work for the benefit of children and families and in order to counteract and limit the consequences of negative social developments that affect the family, monitor and support the changes, give feedback and show to the family its own achievements, create an active approach to life by the family.

## 6. Final remarks

Despite very ambitious assumptions and very good legal solutions in the realm of social work with children and families at risk which have appeared in Poland over the past decade, we will not be able to speak about opportunities for successful work with multiple-problem families until firm and lasting cooperation is undertaken between the institutions which deal with children and families and until the trust of families at risk to social institutions is stronger.

In the welfare services for problem families in Poland, it is noticeable that work with such families and children should account for the context and multi-faceted character of the problems that such families struggle with. More successful work with problem families will be possible if the professionals specializing in work with children and families (a social worker, a school pedagogue, a family assistant), next to their individual direct work with the families, collaborate with each other on a regular basis. Another condition is that high-risk families themselves should have more trust in social family support organizations.

When analyzing the results of some studies on families on welfare, and on barriers to social and education work with such families, it is worth considering the major goals of the pro-family policy, such as: identification and implementation of the rights of a family; support to families in order to become financially self-sustainable; improved living conditions; development and improvement of the family infrastructure; bringing incomes of families to a more even level; preparing children and adolescents to play family and social roles; counteracting the negative trends towards more pathological family life; instilling respect for the marriage and family (Dyczewski, 1995, p. 32). But it is even more important to take into consideration the individual, environmental and institutional context of the support providing process and the actual possibilities of giving support as well as the extent to which a given family is engaged in this process. Social work practice shows that goals of the active pro-family policy are mostly declarative in nature, and at present forms of multi-professional child and family support often remain mere hypothetical projects because they require more financial resources and employment of more professionals prepared to work with children and families.

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