Social Work in the Czech Republic – Origin and Role in Education

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Social work is often surrounded by misconceptions and even contradictions. Over the course of history, social work has become an integral part of living in modern society. It is our goal to describe this phenomenon in this paper. We discuss the origin, content, and processes involved in social work in our country over the course of the past century. At the end we present the results of a research project focused on the support of socially disadvantaged Roma groups by means of educational programmes that help to improve their study, work, and life prospects.

Key words: *social work; basis; processual aspects; research project; socially disadvantaged groups*

Origins

The history of social work captures how the field developed, what were the milestones, and which prominent people helped shape it. Since the beginnings, its major themes have been social solidarity and helping others. Social work has developed under many different influences. Besides historical records, much can be found in religious and scholarly writings as well as works of fiction. Thousands of years ago, during the era of the first states, there were legal codes that mentioned the poor and the striving. As time passed, these people received care from the cities and states, individuals and groups, and wealthy and powerful benefactors. Since the Middle Ages churches have played an important role as well. Helping one's fellow man is the core of Christian morality and captures the essence of social work. Other churches have likewise embraced an emphasis on family, social unity, and solidarity. Besides Christianity, Judaism, with the Ten Commandments, also calls for charitable social engagement in the Seven Works of Mercy, as does

Buddhism by cultivating altruism as the most precious resource of inner strength, happiness, and achievement. The Renaissance and the modern period are characteristic by strengthening the role of the state and its institutions. The aim of the French Revolution was the freedom of each individual, his or her share in deciding about the state, a social contract in which the state is held accountable for the protection of the people by means of appropriate laws. Social work exists to help social systems to improve their functioning and protect those in need. It relies heavily on volunteering, drawing on the humane sentiment, which appeals to our instinct to improve a lot of those in need, not only as part of mutual coexistence, but also as part of the formal practice of social work, drawing on empirical findings of the field.[1]

„During the 20th century social work has transformed into a discipline that aims to uncover, explain, mitigate, and resolve social problems."[2] It has always needed a theory to describe relevant social processes, information on techniques of social work, and the condition of its subjects. Its theoretical foundations reflect its multidisciplinary nature. Much of the theory is shared with other social sciences and helping professions. „Social work as an academic discipline spans philosophy, religion, law, sociology, political science, psychology, child and adult education, criminology, psychiatry, social paediatrics, and more."[3]

Social work has a strong relationship with social education. That is a field that studies the educational impact of social backgrounds and is a source of crucial information to social work. „Social education detached itself from sociology at the turn of the 19th and 20th century in reaction to the biological and psychological theories of the time, which did not ascribe any significance to the environment and society in the process of personality development."[4]

Social education analyses the core of social phenomena and the ways how a social environment affects the life of individuals and social groups. It studies the changes that occur in the social environment and are conducive to optimal personality development. In this sense it also provides social-educational assistance to children and youths at risk. It seeks the sources of conflict between individuals, groups, and society, and administers appropriate intervention, whether direct or indirect. In other words, social education is a discipline of social science that assists with seeking optimal ways of life and facilitates enculturation and socialisation. We agree with this broader conception of social

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[1]   Gulová, L. (2011). Sociální práce. Praha: Grada Publishing.
[2]   Matoušek, O. a kol. (2001). Základy sociální práce. Praha: Portál.
[3]   Idem, p. 10.
[4]   Bakošová, Z. (2008). Sociálna pedagogika ako životná pomoc. Bratislava: Univerzita Komenského, p. 10.

education that sees it not merely as a discipline of dealing with social pathologies, but as a medium that harmonises the needs of an individual with the needs of the society.[5]

Social education has two dimensions – social and educational. The social dimension covers the social framework, social conditions, the situation in the given society. The society (or the state) also creates conditions that complicate the socialisation process. Moreover, this dimension has recently had to accommodate the consequences of rapid progress in technology, automation, communication technology, changes in forms of cohabitation, social and legal norms, environmental concerns, inter-generation discourse, issues of ethnicity and advancing globalisation. The social-educational process therefore takes place in a very fluid environment. The educational dimension then concerns the implementation of societal requirements, goals, demands, and minimising existing conflict by educational means.[6]

The structure, content, and methods of contemporary social work

Social work happens on several levels. The micro-level involves work with individual clients; i.e. casework, counselling, coordination, and mediation. The mezzo-level focuses on helping families, smaller and bigger social groups, and communities. The macro-level then deals with social welfare systems, and is part of a country's social policy and legal system. These three levels are interconnected and the actions of every party involved form a unique dynamic.[7]

The target groups of social work are defined by the Social Services Act, which establishes a legal framework for the scope of social work. The clients are usually in adverse social situation or possess limited self-sufficiency due to age, disability, injury, poor mental health, etc. A major part consists of people whose way of life is in conflict with the law. In addition to working with at-risk individuals and groups, social work is also engaged in social prevention and screening among the socially well-functioning population. New groups of clients with specific health problems are constantly emerging (e.g. drug addicts, AIDS sufferers, etc.). Act 108/2006 Coll. on social services also introduces new terminology for these

[5]   Gulová, L. – Střelec, S. (2017). Social Education and Social Work as an Inspirational Resource of Teacher Training. Czech-Polish Historical and Pedagogical Journal, Brno: Masaryk University, Faculty of Education, 2017, 9th Ed., Vol. 2, pp. 21–30.
[6]   Kraus, B. (2000). Sociální pedagogika jako vědní disciplína a jako studijní obor. In *Sborník příspěvků z 1. mezinárodní konference na téma Sociální pedagogika jako vědecká a společensky užitná disciplína*. Brno: Institut mezioborových studií a PdF MU, pp. 68–76.
[7]   Matoušek, O. (2003). *Slovník sociální práce*. Praha: Portál.

groups. The original terminology – retirees, the mentally handicapped, or legally incompetent, which carried with it unwanted stigmatisation, have now been replaced by words such as the elderly, persons with a mental disorder, persons incapacitated to perform acts in law, persons without a shelter, etc. The humanisation of the methods of social work has also changed the attitude of the social workers towards their clients. The original authoritative approach, which was forcing remedies upon the clients, is being replaced by them having their own share in the decision-making process. They are being led by the social workers towards deciding for themselves via a more partner-like relationship. The goal is to help the clients to help themselves.

Social work in our country has several effective methods and techniques at its disposal. A method with one of the longest traditions is casework. A case is usually a person, occasionally a couple or a family. Contemporary casework typically follows this format: recommendation of a client, assessing his or her needs, determining the objectives, drafting an intervention plan, implementing the plan, summary and evaluation of the results. The client should be as active as possible during this process. The social worker usually suggests alternatives for the client to choose from.

Another important technique is counselling. It can take several forms. Sometimes it may only involve providing the clients with information he or she requires. It is an opportunity for recognising their weak points and formulating strategies to improve their life. A more difficult goal may be changing the clients' entire view of themselves or of others and furnishing them with a new set of skills. Counselling can be employed on a one-time, short-term, or long term basis. Today it is considered an integral part of a well-functioning social welfare system. This is why the state, municipality, and non-profit organisations establish counselling centres to help people to better negotiate legal and financial issues, for instance, when claiming social benefits, choosing a profession, marital disharmony, family problems, raising children, coping with addiction, or re-entering normal life after serving a prison sentence.[8]

Crisis intervention is another method of social work. This typically involves prompt psychological and social assistance to people who have found themselves in a difficult situation which they cannot resolve by themselves. This help makes it easier for the clients to communicate with others, provides perspective of the problem, enables them to articulate emotions, improves self-confidence, and engages external sources of support. The expertise involved in crisis intervention requires special education and training.[9]

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[8]   Matoušek, O. a kol. (2003*). Metody a řízení sociální práce.* Praha: Portál.
[9]   Vodáčková, D. a kol. (2007). *Krizová intervence.* Praha: Portál.

The ability to work with various social groups is essential to social work. The goal is to improve the quality of life for the whole group or tending to the needs of individual members. Groups are typically divided into homogeneous, task-oriented, psychotherapeutic, self-help meetings, and others. Depending on the purpose, there can be groups for mothers, the elderly, parents with disabled children, drug addicts, etc.[10] Relatively new, rapidly developing variants of social fieldwork are street work and community work. Social workers visit clients at home, at school, at work, or elsewhere. This kind of work also involves seeking clients who do not contact social workers on their own in spite of experiencing difficulties.[11]

Community work is also a rapidly progressing method; it takes social work directly to areas at risk with the goal to establish functioning communities that provide emotional support, nurture self-confidence, and offer practical assistance with everyday tasks. Street work is also integral to social pedagogy. Social workers visit at-risk groups, especially socially disadvantaged children and youths. Their goal is to offer a different life alternative to those who find themselves in the adverse environment of the street while growing up. Street work offers more meaningful ways of spending free time, for instance, in low-threshold facilities for children and youths living in housing estates or city peripheries.[12]

The family has a special position in the practice of social work as well. It enters into the focus when it begins to endanger the child and his or her upbringing.[13] Children may find themselves at risk by the conflict between parents who are going through a divorce or by their negligence in fulfilling their legal obligations towards the children. This is when social workers employ a technique known as family remediation. This involves support provided by a large number of workers from trained volunteers through to trained experts. Remediation consists of a set of measures of social and legal protection, social services, and various programmes provided to or asked by the parents. The goal of family remediation is to prevent, mitigate, and eliminate risk with the purpose to preserve the family and improve its quality.[14]

This is by no means an exhaustive list of methods that have enriched the repertoire of social work during the middle to late 20th century. The last few

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[10] Gulová, L. (2011). *Sociální práce*. Praha: Grada Publishing.
[11] Řezníček, I. (1993). *Metody sociální práce*. Praha: Slon, Sociologické nakladatelství.
[12] Bednářová, Z. – Pelech, L. (2003). Slabikář sociální práce na ulici – supervize, streetwork, financování. Praha: Doplněk.
[13] Střelec, S. (2013). The Family as an Agent in Children's Upbringing and Changes to the Conditions under which it Operates. *Czech-Polish Historical and Pedagogical Journal*, 2013, roč. 5, č. 2, s. 16–23.
[14] Bechyňová,V. – Konvičková, M.(2008). *Sanace rodiny*. Praha: Portál, str. 18.

decades brought marked progress in social work, which is reflected in the variety of new methods and the emphasis on improving their effectiveness.

Volunteering is a major component of social work. Volunteers can be environmental activists, nuns, people who go to play with children in hospitals or visit patients in hospices, or those who travel to areas struck by natural disasters, etc. Volunteering is not an act of self-sacrifice, but a natural display of civic maturity, providing help to those who need it while rewarding the volunteers with a sense of accomplishment, teaching them new experience and skills, and improving their understanding of interpersonal relations. Volunteering in the Czech Republic has its modern tradition. Various societies and their charitable work in the 20th century were built upon the 19th century tradition of various societies to promote art, culture, and science, e.g. Mánes, Sokol, Hlávkova nadace [Hlávka's Foundation], etc. After the formation of independent Czechoslovakia, charitable work progressed even further. The spectrum of activities now included private, municipal, religious, and state initiatives, as well as the work of organisations with broader competence, The Moravian Youth Programme, Czechoslovak Red Cross, The Masaryk Anti-Tuberculosis League, and others). Volunteer organisations became more structured, gaining a network of smaller cells and branches. However, their development was interrupted by the occupation and formation of the socialist state. After 1948 all these organisations were either taken over by the National Front or abolished. The anti-religious campaign also targeted all church charities. Small hope for improvement appeared in 1968, but was soon stomped out by the normalisation period. The development could begin again after the revolution of 1989 when people were looking for new ways of applying themselves spurred on by the newly born idea of a free society and personal identity. Some organisations were re-established (YMCA, Sokol, Junák – Czech Scouting) and many other non-profit organisations appeared, which drew on the enthusiasm of its members.

Summary of the results of a research project

The last part of our paper discusses a real-life example that captures the interplay of social work with other educational complexities. Between 2009 and 2012 the Department of Social Education at the Faculty of Education MU, implemented a project aimed at improving the study and work prospects of socially disadvantaged children and adolescents. The project did not start from nothing; it was in fact a continuation of work from the previous years, which employed a team of researchers (initially from the Department of Education and later from the Department of Social Education) in a long-term investigation into the education and activation of Roma children and adolescents and the children of migrants.

The primary impulse for creating the whole complex of programmes was the initiative of several teachers and doctoral students from Faculty of Education, MU, who created the first university course for Roma assistants (today teacher's assistants) in 2000. This course was the outcome of qualitative research carried out at the Roma support centre DROM. The analysis culminated in the question of whether and how the Faculty of Education could be involved in the integration of the Roma minority. Examples from narrative interviews follow:

„... *one of the biggest problems the Roma are facing is the overall low level of education and ensuing unemployment...*"

„... *the Roma will not be integrated unless the white majority wants it...*"

„... *the Roma must go all the way to Prague to get certified as assistants...*"

„... *even Roma adults now want to get their education, mainly because of their children; they don't want them to grow up relying on social benefits...*"

„... *if children do not see their parents to go to work, they lack a role-model for their professional future...*"

The research examined the lives of many Romas from Brno to show what their living circumstances are and how they could be changed. The findings served as a stepping stone for the first training course in education and psychology for Roma assistants. The first trainees were found with the help of three key organisations that work with the Roma population in the Brno area; i.e. DROM, the Moravian Roma Society, and the Children's Home in Zábrdovice run by the Reverend Jiří Rous.

This first course and its successful graduates primed all other efforts to improve the education of Romas. Its success and the graduates' hard work revealed more options of coexistence between the Roma and the majority population and ways of spanning their cultural and social differences.

The course started with twenty participants who were trained in psychology and teaching methodology for three months. Most of them enrolled in the course to become teacher's assistants, while others considered it a gateway to furthering their education. And it was this course that started off for many of these people their future studies.

The personal interest and initiative of these students opened a great many educational programmes for the Roma population. It was an opportunity for teachers to discover how interesting and meaningful this form of education is for everyone involved. Suddenly, there was a group of Romas at the Faculty who were eager to study and proved the importance of education in integrating the Roma minority into the rest of the population. This course and the fact that it became a regular part of the Faculty's study programme, paved the road for multicultural education and other educational initiatives aimed at migrants.

The Faculty environment proved to be well suited for educational courses for the Roma because the combination of its expertise in education, teachers

willing to take part, and available facilities provided plenty of room for undertaking more and more activities. Within two years the three-month course of Roma assistant training evolved into a one-year programme of teacher assistant education. Currently, teacher's assistants may continue their studies in the Social Education Teacher Training bachelor's programme or the study field Social Education.

This fact led a team of teachers and doctoral students to start preparing the first few applicants for bachelor's programme admissions. In 2001 there were four Roma applicants, with this number increasing steadily over the following years. The first group of applicants was being prepared by the Faculty's students in rather makeshift conditions, e.g. in the school corridors.

Vocational and study guidance counselling proved to be an essential part of the expanding study options available. It is provided by the Centre of Multicultural Education at the Faculty of Education and serves parents with children, as well as youths and adults, and most notably Roma assistants who lack secondary education or wish to obtain it.

As the programme was reaching completion, it was important to establish contact with Roma children and youths and combine this idea with multicultural education. This gave rise to another powerful educational body; the „Home Teacher" programme, which provided tutoring for Roma children at home, involved families in education, and encouraged school and preschool attendance of Roma children. At the beginning of this programme, the first tutors (the Faculty's students) wanted to work with the children in a classroom, however, the demand for home tutoring grew steadily. This programme represents an important strategy in terms of teaching children while involving the family. The tutors also communicate with the children's regular teachers and take part in supervision sessions and evaluations to make the teaching as effective as possible. Last but not least, the tutoring is also a valuable source of learning for the students since they get to work with socially disadvantaged children and parents very early into their studies, giving them something to draw upon in their later practice.

As these programmes gained momentum and expertise, other courses began to emerge, for instance Roma language and Roma studies, and gave a new dimension to working with minorities, raised awareness of intercultural coexistence, and contributed to inclusion.

All these activities (and more) kept growing to a point where they began to require some institutional backing. This is when the Centre of Multicultural Education was founded and began its operation on November 20, 2002, on the occasion of a seminar on multicultural education within the school system. The Centre is open to all the above-described activities and it is fortuitous that it is located in a university building where teachers are being trained.

Currently it offers the following courses and programmes:

- The „Home Teacher" programme, which provides active tutoring for Roma children at home, involves families in their education, and improves the school and preschool attendance of Roma children.
- Teacher's Assistant I (students have graduated and mostly work as teachers and social workers).
- Teacher's Assistant II (open for the past few years, most graduates aspire to continue studying social education in a bachelor's programme).
- Teacher-assistant cooperation training.
- Leisure-time activities for Roma children and youths organised by students of the Faculty of Education, MU.
- Multicultural lessons at schools focused on inclusion.

Educational assistance for youths and adults:

- Computer literacy
- English for beginners and pre-intermediate learners. Available to the Roma population and Roma assistants.
- Czech for foreign nationals
- Roma language and Roma studies
- Preparation for high-school admissions
- Preliminary year – preparation for university admissions for members of at-risk groups, mostly Romas and minorities
- Counselling[15]

Conclusion

Social work is undergoing rapid development and facing new challenges. The notion that the near future holds prosperity for nations worldwide is misguided to say the least. Today, humanity is spiritually and materially richer, better informed, has better access to technology in all walks of life. However, there seem to persist and even grow new social problems, which individuals and groups are incapable of resolving on their own. Aside from standard issues, new social pathologies emerge and affect life in families and entire communities. There is also a degree of disillusionment ensuing from the disappearance of the traditional family and communities, which used to be enough to provide guidance to those who found themselves in need. On the other hand, we are optimistic about the fact that care for those who need it is becoming much more professionalised, and there are more volunteers engaged. Social work also receives more attention in the media and in

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[15] Gulová, L. (2012). Vzdělávací programy zaměřené na aktivizaci sociálně znevýhodněných skupin. In *Gulová, L. et al. Aktivizace sociálně znevýhodněných skupin v pedagogické praxi a výzkumu*. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, str. 8–11.

state legislation. There are more study fields focused on training in social work, academic bodies dealing with the issue are able to form and exist, and the social prestige of social work is growing. This is also a source of hope for all existing and future clients of social work.