
Social Dialogue as Precondition for Social Work Professionalization in the Context of Non-Formal Education

Sociāls dialogs kā sociālā darba profesionalizācijas priekšnosacījums neformālās izglītības kontekstā

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The article analyses educational assumptions in the context of process of non-formal learning. The concept of lifelong learning enables both university professors, as well as social work practitioners to be in cooperation in finding the most innovative techniques that are involved in the process which are able to strengthen professional competencies and skills. Non-formal learning is becoming a social dialogue that provides the opportunity for practitioners to participate in experiential learning, and teachers to get feedback improving that process. The article presents the concept of the non-formal learning and innovative practices at the University of Klaipėda in the context of cooperation and counselling.

Key words: social dialogue, non-formal education, supervision, innovation.

Instead of introduction

Social worker training has been realized for only two decades in Lithuania. In a complicated socio-economic situation just after Independence declaration Lithuania has chosen a strategy – to implement the ways of solving social problems that have been used in recent decades in many modern welfare states, i.e. create a stable system of social security (social welfare) and professionalize providing social services, “amortizing” the impact and creating the models of the prevention of social problems. Thus the system of higher education institution has faced the challenge – to search for the model how to train qualified social workers who would meet the demands of changing society oriented towards citizens’ activity. Therefore, during the first decade the concept of social work was most often related to the perception of social work as a profession and was treated rather as a professional activity than science. Only in 2009, according to the Government of the Republic of Lithuania No. 1749 resolution social work became an independent study field.

Needs and aim

The common declaration of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) states that social work methodology refers to the system of knowledge based on evidence obtained by the research of practical activity and evaluation including narrower knowledge characteristics to certain contexts as well. Social work theory takes the complexity of people’s interaction with their environment into account and acknowledges people’s ability to both surrender to the influence and change the influence of various factors, including biopsychosocial, on them. Professional social work in analysing complex situations and encouraging individual, organizational, social and cultural changes apply the theories of the development of human behaviour and social systems.

Social work in the changing society is facing constant changes. Therefore, social work practitioners and Schools of Social Work can successfully solve social problems only by creating a permanent social dialogue.

The social dialogue in this context can be discussed in three ways:

1. Social dialogue as an educational philosophy – the concept of lifelong learning.
2. The social dialogue as a process – professionalization of social work based on the abilities to solve new problems of society; social worker’s abilities to act in uncertain situations.
3. The social dialogue as an outcome – the theory and practice become the basis of social work professionalization.

The aim for Schools of Social Work is to create the content of teaching and learning programme which would have a clear strategy: to train high qualified professional social workers who are able to assess multifunctional character of social work as applied activity, study field and field of science on the theoretical and practical level (Acienė & Vaičekauskaitė, 2012).

The aim of social work practitioners is to continuously improve their knowledge and skills. This aim is possible to achieve through taking part in training courses and projects for social workers and volunteers who are organized at universities and communities.

The University plans of realization idea to design the method of non-formal learning as a way of social dialog which motivates social work practitioners constantly to improve their knowledge and abilities were set for a long time. Non-formal learning addressed not only to social work practitioners who have college or university undergraduate diploma, but also to volunteers.

Universities, within the framework of EU project, developed the method, which enables practitioners and volunteers to evaluate their knowledge and practice at universities and to receive academic credits for this.

Methodological strategy

The strategy of social dialog in the context of non-formal education has to correspond to the aims and skills which are formed in the Description of the Field of Study of Social Work (2015):

1. On the level of knowledge, its application aimed that students will be able to critically and systematically analyse the newest knowledge relevant to the field of social work and apply it in social work practice and scientific research, on the basis of this knowledge they could also produce new knowledge; they will also be able to apply theoretical knowledge in social work practice, scientific researches, consolidation and development of the profession.
2. In the field of abilities to conduct research it is expected that students will learn to initiate, organize, independently perform scientific research, interpret the results in the interdisciplinary approach from national and international perspective; will also learn to apply the research results in modelling the solution of social problems, improving professional activity, implementing innovative social services, influencing the improvement of social policy.
3. In the field of social skills the tasks of studies and learning are formulated so that students will develop skills to effectively communicate and collaborate on various levels, learn to work in interdisciplinary team, organize the work of the team and create its atmosphere accepting social responsibility and demonstrating leadership skills both in national and international context; also skills to fluently and suggestively express his/her thoughts orally and in writing in the Lithuanian and foreign language, participate in discussions representing his/her activity, organization and profession in community.
4. In the field of personal skills student will develop skills to critically evaluate his/her own and colleagues' professional practice, social processes in society, systemically reflect his/her own growth as a professional, accept responsibility for his/her own and others' professional perfection; to independently make decisions in complex and undefined situations; to critically evaluate and select for use the most suitable national and international sources of information to ensure appropriate use of confidential information; to create the image of the profession of social work in society; concern about his/her professional development.
5. Special skills are related to the formation of social worker's professional skills during study process. It is expected that students will get ready to systematically assess the needs and strengths of a client, to organize, coordinate and evaluate the process of social assistance and its results, to apply specialized methods

and therapies of social work and strategies of assistance, to implement innovations; to independently organize the preparation of action plans and projects of social services, to manage their implementation, to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of social assistance, to initiate innovations attracting both national and international human and financial resources; to coordinate activities; to critically evaluate the influence of social policy on the consolidation of human rights and decreasing of social exclusion from the perspectives of harmonious development of society and social justice, initiate changes in social policy; to ensure the implementation of the principles of social justice and social responsibility in the activity of the organization, in the community, following the values of human rights, social work and ethics.

These abilities correlate with study modules of University programs. In the frame of non-formal learning method, the knowledge and practice which social workers have achieved during courses and tasks of projects are confirmed as equivalent of part of University Social Work study programme and by the accreditation of university professors are evaluated as certain equivalent of academic credits.

The academic credits open the following possibilities:

1. The credits provide access to higher education (master's or doctoral degree).
2. The credits provide the opportunity to change professional qualification (to begin studies at a higher study course).
3. The credits allow to be confirmed for a higher qualification of social worker (social work expert and etc.)
4. The credits give the possibility for institutions to receive a license to work in the certain field of social work.
5. The credits allow to establish NGOs.

Innovative cooperation (SWDC case)

The report was presented in the frame of the case study which introduced the experience of Department of Social Work, Klaipeda University: social dialog between Klaipeda University and Club of Discussions of Social Workers (the club includes teachers, students, graduates, social work practitioners, volunteers).

The main goal of Social Workers' Discussion Club (SWDC) activity is the promotion and development of cooperation of Social Work Department of the Faculty of Health Science of Klaipeda University and practice institutions seeking for higher training and qualification advancement quality of social workers and spread of social work as human support profession in society) and continuous cooperation between University and social partners created possibilities to select candidates.

General provisions:

- Social Workers' Discussion Club (further SWDC) is organization acting within Social Work Department of the Faculty of Health Science of Klaipeda University.
- SWDC continues the activity of professional socialization centre "Rėdos Ratas" established in 1995.
- SWDC includes students' caritative activity group.

- SWDC unites lecturers, students, graduates of Social Work Department, professional employees and volunteers of Social work institutions, organizations and members of the community of Klaipėda University and society members on a voluntary basis.
- SWDC cooperates with Social Workers' Association of Klaipėda town seeking for more qualitative sustainability of information spreading and activity.
- SWDC cooperates with Institute of Continuous Studies of Klaipėda University and has possibility to evaluate certain events by the certificate of qualification advancement.
- Events and meetings of SWDC are held in the premises of Klaipėda University or at Social work practice institutions and organizations.
- SWDC meetings are held twice a year – during autumn and spring semesters; activity of students' caritative group is performed all year round.

Main activity directions of SWDC:

- *research:* researches prepared and executed by the lecturers of Social Work Department of the Faculty of Health Science of Klaipėda University, scientific publications and the latest publications are presented and discussed at SWDC; final papers for Bachelor's and Master's degree are presented and considered here as well.
- *scientific-methodical:* amendments in social worker's training program are presented and discussed; modelling and content of teaching programs of practice supervisors at institutions are considered; possibility to learn about social workers' education and qualification advancement system in other countries of the world is provided – lecturers from foreign countries that are arriving under Erasmus/Socrates interchange program are invited to meetings, lecturers from the Department share their experience acquired in this program; Social workers – present the latest practice projects, making impact on the tradition of social work theory and methods in Lithuania;
- *educational:* students of Social Work Department of the Faculty of Health Science of Klaipėda University participate in SWDC events and their organization. Hence, they have the possibility to relate social work theory and practice, to form reflexive competences, to look critically at and reconsider personal value judgements as one of the most important elements of the competence of social worker.
- *educative:* SWDC provides the possibility to present Non – Governmental organizations (NGO) performing their activity in Klaipėda, both employees of such organizations and their clients participate very often in such events; Klaipėda and University community is informed about these events this way trying to change the attitude of society to persons of social risk groups, inducing tolerance and understanding as one of the most important aspects of human empowerment;
- *socio-cultural:* students' caritative activity group is within the structure of SWDC – all the year round students visit Social Security and Labour, Culture and Education, Health Care, Law Enforcement institutions and organizations, rehabilitation communities, organizing communal singing and calendar tradition evenings; the compound and traditional part of SWDC – is communal singing responding to presently relevant national, social and Christian tradition.

SWDC membership

There is no formal membership – everybody who treats the idea, cherishing the development of the relation of theory and practice, cooperation of Social Work Department of the Faculty of Health Science of Klaipėda University and Social work practice institutions and organizations seeking for higher training of social workers and qualification advancement quality, of SWDC activity as the acceptable one, may participate in SWDC events; those wishing to learn better about peculiarities of social work as the profession of human support.

Accountability

SWDC activity plan is considered and approved at the meeting of Social Work Department of the Faculty of Health Science of Klaipėda University with participation of representatives of Social work practice institutions and organizations; at the end of academic year SWDC activity results are presented and discussed, further activity guidelines are anticipated.

SWDC organizational structure: all lecturers of Social Work Department of the Faculty of Health Science of Klaipėda University working during the current period and participating in SWDC activity on voluntary basis are the members of organizational Committee of SWDC.

Supervision as innovative method of counselling

Counselling became a very important in the process of selection. The role of the counselling service is to create favourable conditions to candidates, applying for recognition of their informally gained competences, to self-assessment of their experiences and to facilitate evidence collection. The functions of counselling:

- To carry out an initial verification, selection or brief description of a candidate;
- To identify whether the applicant is aware of the basic principles of the recognition;
- To introduce and advice on the ways and forms of recognition;
- To advise on how to structure the evidences that they constitute to a coherent portfolio;
- To advice on how to collect coherent evidences;
- To promote self-confidence throughout whole evidence collection and management process;
- To give feedback (Acienė & Dirgėlienė, 2014).

A consultant should:

- Be motivated to help, mediate to a candidate, applying for assessment and recognition of his/ her informally gained competences;
- Be willing to provide information;
- Be aware with portfolio structure and requirements for its formation;
- Know and understand social work study process;
- Know the process of informally gained knowledge assessment and recognition;
- Possess values mandatory to professional social worker;
- Master knowledge in social work practice;
- Have experience in reflective practice (Ibid.)

Supervision is applied as professional counselling method. Supervision created favourable conditions to candidates, applying for recognition of their informally gained competences, to self-assessment of their experiences, to reflect and combine studies, professional activities, and personal growth, i.e. to justify experiential knowledge. It is holistic area (see Fig. 1).

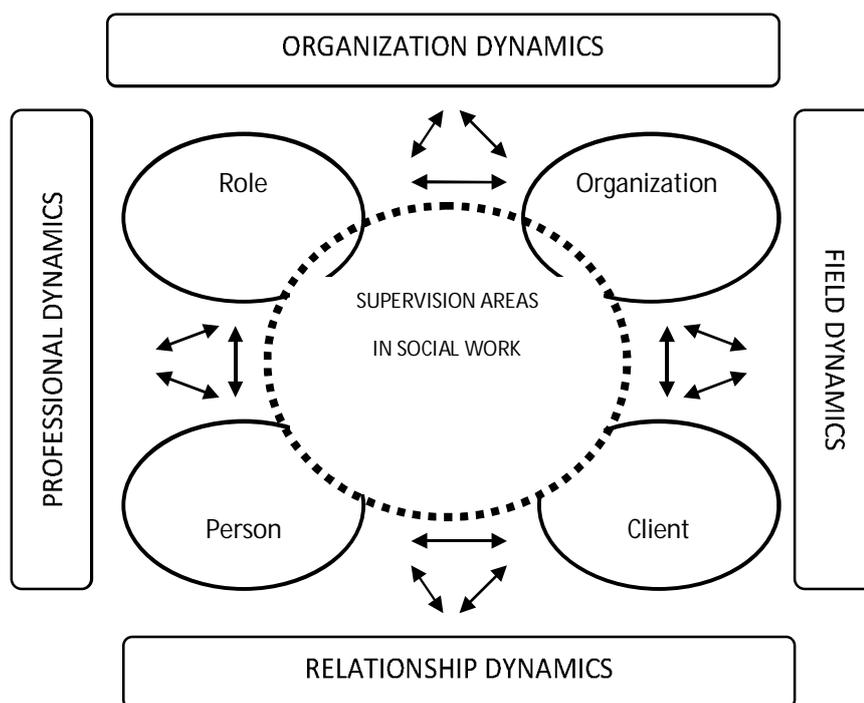


Fig. 1 Supervision Model (Münster Academy)
(Dirgėlienė, Kiaunytė, Ruškus, Večkienė, 2010)

Supervision appeared in the Lithuanian and global tradition as the practice of social work due to the understanding of the complexity of social work as practical activity. In supervision, the complexity of professional work is re-considered, professional knowledge, values, and skills are transferred/ reconsidered, and emotional help to supervisee is provided. From a holistic point of view, supervision covers four fields/ parts: agency, supervisor, supervisee, and client.

The culture and tradition of supervision affects social worker and the system of agency, and vice versa. Even in individual supervision, one can identify all the components of the interaction, therefore, supervision becomes a stimulus for changes in social work in a particular sociocultural environment (Dirgėlienė, 2010).

Context, i.e. space and environment in which the process takes place, is actualised in all countries, no matter how long traditions theory and practice of supervision have. Supervision develops as social work practice both in Lithuanian and worldwide tradition; therefore supervision context is close to the trends of social work process based on interactions. P. Hawkins, R. Shohet (2002), Ming-Sum Tsui (2005) analyse interaction-based supervision model.

A culture of dialogue is born in interaction process. The selected candidates represented NGOs, that's why it was very important to accompany their (self-) assessment process creating a relationship based on trust, which was one of the most important conditions for reflective practice. There is no single and fairest approach, what relationship must dominate in supervision. According to many authors, the expression of human communication is more important in supervision than artificial attempts to create formal relations, and the affirmation that personal relationships are impossible in supervision process. Especially when we talk about working in the field of one of social professions (Brown, Bourne, 1996).

Physical, psychological, interpersonal, inclusive-cultural contexts reveal and become relevant in supervision process. It is important to act creatively in a changing situation. It supports Ming-Sum Tsui (2005) idea: "Physical comfort, harmonious relations, organizational relevance, psychological security, and cultural sensitivity can determine success of supervision session". This is a necessary condition for the creative development of social worker's personal and professional competence.

Those conditions and contexts can be relevant to recognition process of informally gained competences, especially on counselling phase. That can give a candidate the opportunity to reflect about self-assessment, identify his (her) strengths and areas to be improved, getting emotional and social support.

The Lithuanian theory and practice of supervision are forming in the context of the system of social work that is intensively developing and acquiring authentic features. That is a special situation enabling creative activity by going through all the stages of experiential learning in the process of interaction. Creativity is one of the fundamental elements in the process of supervision. During the process, unpredictable and unforeseen changes and interactions take place that surprise both supervisor and supervisees. As it has been acknowledged, the experience can only be acquired in the process of autonomous, experiential learning (Dirgėlienė, 2010).

It can be stated that supervision is one of the methods creating meeting culture that encourages social dialogue in self-assessment and recognition process of informally gained competences.

Instead of conclusion

Lifelong learning is the modern lifestyle of professionals. However, lifelong learning must be continuous as social dialogue. The main condition for meaningful and effective social dialogue is the search of a new innovative forms and methods. This is able to ensure by modern management, which is based on innovation and science and practice in the context of content of quality of experiential learning.

Each country's higher education institution has its own qualitative potential, which can be successful only functioning in the form of social dialogue. This is particularly important in social work, the content of which is constantly changing process, because of social work has to answer to changes of society. The experiential learning combining science, practice and personal growth is a daily challenge for social work.

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Kopsavilkums

Raksts analizē izglītības pieņemumus neformālās izglītības un mācīšanās procesa kontekstā. Mūžizglītības koncepts dod iespēju gan augstskolu pasniedzējiem, gan sociālā darba praktiķiem sadarboties, meklējot inovatīvus paņēmienus izglītības procesā, kuri nostiprina profesionālās prasmes un kompetenci. Neformālā mācīšanās kļūst par sociālu dialogu, kas sniedz iespēju praktiķiem piedalīties uz pieredzi balstītā mācīšanās procesā, savukārt pasniedzējiem iegūt atgriezenisko saiti, kā uzlabot mācīšanās procesu. Raksts prezentē neformālās izglītības konceptu un inovatīvo pieredzi Klaipēdas Universitātē sadarbības un padomdošanas kontekstā.

Atslēgvārdi: sociāls dialogs, neformālā izglītība, supervīzija, inovācijas.



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