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NEW WAYS TOWARDS A SERVICE-ORIENTED, PARTICIPATORY CHILD PROTECTION IN HUNGARY

Abstract. The core aspect of the child welfare and protection thought focusing on the family and channelling community resources is that in order to preserve the unity of the family, it is necessary to widely introduce from the local community the services into the family's life, thus mobilizing the internal resources of the family, and acknowledging parenting, as a social value. Integrative child protection is a multidisciplinary and multidimensional process.

The research examines how the Hungarian child protection professionals in child welfare services and centres, child protection institutions and foster care system reflect on the professional work, and on the dysfunctions identified in child protection field work. I also examine how social work training and practice can help to incorporate professional values into field work. I analyse how social assistance can be adequate in general, and how social work became asocial in the late modernity and in a rapidly changing, unpredictable service environment.

Keywords: child welfare and protection, professional mentality, social work training, service-oriented child protection system, future development directions.

1. Introduction

The aim of this study is to examine the set of values and theoretical background of the service-oriented approaches within child protection, while taking into account the current mechanisms of the Hungarian child protection system, and highlighting the dysfunctional elements in its operation as well.

The qualitative research[1] examines how the Hungarian child protection professionals in child welfare services and centres, child protection institutions

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and foster care system reflect on the professional work. I inquire the dysfunctions identified in the field work of child protection. I also examine how social work training and practice can help to incorporate professional values into the field work. I analyse how social assistance can be adequate in general, and how social work became asocial in the late modernity and in a rapidly changing, unpredictable service environment.

First, on the basis of the relevant literature, I review the vision of the service-oriented and participatory child protection approaches. This review is followed by a presentation of the main findings of the qualitative research based on 8 individual interviews with professionals and 8 focus group interviews. The interviews focused on the examination of the differences between theory and training in the field of social work, more specifically in child protection, on the mapping of the conditions of interoperability; and on the opinion of child protection professionals and people belonging to various target groups, namely students and people working in this field on the prospects of developing in Hungary a child protection practice which in principle would have an integrative approach, would be child-centred, and built on community resources. The concluding part of the study resumes these values in the light of the specialist literature and research results.

2. Service-oriented, participatory child protection

In child protection, efficient cooperation implies the sharing of responsibility and knowledge alike, since multiple actors are implied, and the stake is high: can the child remain with their biological family, or is it rather a substitute protection needed? This process implies interventions from the part of state authorities, which react to the cumulated problems of the clients in a complex manner, in many cases with the participation of several service providers. An indispensable part of this process is an adequate team of well-trained professionals with outstanding professional values (Adfam 2011). The Hungarian Law on Child Protection of 1997 specifies the role of local authorities, non-profit organizations and church organizations in relation to the national social system, or within this system, in the name of welfare pluralism, which can imply either a contract for care provision, either only service providing. In principle, we ought to assume in the case of any child protection system that the conditions of functioning have to be ensured, and cooperation needs to be a basic value, which implies the implication of volunteers and of the local community as well (Adfam 2011; Kroll, Taylor 2009). Easton et al. (2012) point out that in order to satisfy the complex needs of the clients, while pondering aspects of cost-efficiency, the state should provide integrated

services able to achieve impacts in terms of the development and well-being of the children and families on the long term. The basic assumption of the client-oriented approach is that the service providers are able to adapt to the changing social and economic context, and to react to newly arising needs. Furthermore, partnership and cooperation imply that the professionals are dedicated to providing help, are problem sensitive and look for solutions which are appropriate for each member of the family, but which are built primarily on the protection of the rights of the child, that is are child-focused. All this means that the clear goal of professionals is to get familiar with the family's structure and to understand the family's dynamics, thus identifying the attitudes needed for change. The central values of this approach are empowerment, the fact that it builds on strengths, and the way how advancement is evaluated together with the family. The strength of a family can be identified along three main dimensions: cohesion, flexibility and communication (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2016; Olsen 1999, cited in: White 2005: 22).

From the point of view of child protection, the integrative services targeting the unity of the family can be classified in three main groups, adjusted accordingly to the increasing needs of children: 1) basic social services; 2) family supporting services; 3) services targeting the unity of the family. A series of studies highlight that intense support targeting the unity of the family or family therapy approaches in many cases focus on the weaknesses of the families, and are limitedly accessible for abusive, neglecting families confronted with multiple problems. Therefore it becomes more probable that children from such families would be placed outside their families (McCroskey, Meezan 1998). Basically family support services target families, where child abuse or neglect can be prevented, or where child upbringing can be improved through professional help. Typically, while providing the services, those social skills and attitudes of the parents or even of the children have to be consolidated, which have a role to play in the healthy functioning of the child and of the family. Professionals have to take into account that every family can temporarily experience stressful situations, which are determined by changing social conditions as well; individual or family-related new social problems or challenges may arise, like unemployment or change of residence etc. However, the efficiency of the programs is not self-evident, though there are many positive examples. Such an example is a Hungarian model program emphasizing that whenever a program ensures a direct, either common or individual experience and engagement to the child and the parent alike, the short-term change of parental attitude is substantially positive. The results point out that the parents get much more familiar with the development process of the child, they become increasingly able to invest feelings in their relationship, and this change is positive and strengthening also in terms of the parents' attitude towards care and positive disciplining techniques. The ability to solve problems, the self-esteem and the faith in parenting of the parents undergo substantial development (McCroskey, Meezan 1998; Czinderi et al. 2018).

Services aimed at keeping the family together reflect on a much higher level of risk; their goal is to help families presenting high level of risk and families in a severe crisis situation. These services are accessible typically to those families, which are already known to child protection authorities, also called families living on the fringe of child protection. Due to the extent of neglect or imperilment, or due to a possible crisis, the aim is to prevent the placing of the child in foster care or institutional care, or to contribute to the re-uniting of the family (Rácz 2016; McCroskey, Meezan 1998). It is important to note that it is extremely difficult to assess (no consistent practice exists in the Hungarian system either) which families can be restored and kept united, and what is a liminal situation when a child has to be removed from the family. Alas, the next issue which needs clarification is that if a child is taken away from the family, can the child's safety be guaranteed in child care, or to put it simply: is the state a good parent? (Rácz 2016)

A vast number of specialist works point out the so-called mysticism of child protection. The understanding of the system is especially important for the children and families, yet they still find it strange and mysterious. They do not know what would happen to them and why, while much too often the professionals do not make any efforts to inform or appease them. A research shows that information should be provided within a wider sphere, thus, for example, children should be informed in school as well about the forms of help provided by the child protection system, about the rights, the actors of the system, i.e. what is a social worker and what's their job. The research also highlighted that the child protection process as a whole is obscure for children, while meetings with professionals aren't comforting either, due to unclarified reasons and purposes. Children also found extremely threatening that strange adults enter their home (McCroskey, Meezan 1998; C4EO 2009). Successful involvement and information providing may result in successful intervention. Those children, who are involved and informed from the very beginning of the child protection process, go through this experience with much more openness and self-awareness, even if they do not agree with the necessity of the intervention. Their view about the interventions and the professionals is more positive also if these are associated with an intense help, if peer helpers and volunteers are involved, and the school community acts as a cooperating partner (C4EO 2009; Horgan 2011). Banwell et al. (2002) indicate the following difficulties when working with children: 1) creating a proper balance between intervention and trust; 2) choosing an adequate location; 3) professional support to the employees; 4) cooperation between service providers; 5) financing; 6) the need for flexibility (Templeton et al. 2006: 29). Regarding adult family members, it is of a special importance whether they can be involved, namely whether the parents can be addressed and accept cooperation; if they participate in the common work, and if cooperation is able to meet the individual needs of the family members; the supportive strength of the self-help

groups for example can have an equal importance in case of addiction or mental health problems within parental groups (Copello et al. 2005; Templeton et al. 2006: 30). It is worth highlighting also that an integrative, participatory service is a culturally sensitive service able to keep up the cooperation, since it understands and takes into account the social and cultural specificities as well (Templeton et al. 2006; Szombathelyi 2013).

In case of a protection intervention targeting substitution, it is important to note that ensuring the contact with the parents in itself cannot be sufficient, as strengthening the parent-child relationship is a much more important task. Research shows that during their meetings with the children under care, the parents – rightfully and justly – consider that they can keep their parental role, even if their right to custody is suspended; yet, in their experience, they often mean a burden to the system, and the professionals, especially the foster parents do not support them in their endeavour, moreover, they often take the control over these meetings (Rácz 2016; Ross et al. 2017). The parents are right to complain about the meetings often being supervised, even if there is no need for that, or not intimate enough, not allowing for the family to spend valuable time together and for the child to get involved. After a child is removed from the family, the parents feel powerless, their parental role is called into question, they are left out from decisions regarding their child's life, and they consider that even acquiring information concerning their child requires a struggle. Parents rarely meet with the foster parent of their child often due to physical distances too, thus one might wonder to what extent is the parent involved in decisions regarding the child's life.

As mentioned earlier in the paper, it is a basic principle in child protection that it is a process implying multiple actors; thus on each level of its segments and actors it is indispensable that all of the professionals do whatever they can in order to work in partnerships and share relevant information among them, to engage parents too in the cooperation. Service providers have a shared responsibility in protecting children, on one hand against the family abusing or neglecting them, on the other hand through support given to vulnerable families. All this requires efficient communication and the coordination of services both on strategic and operational level (Ross et al. 2017). In the Hungarian practice this entails a serious challenge due to the centralization/nationalization in 2013 of the child care system (Rácz 2016).

In my opinion, the mystification of child protection has an impact in relation to failure and dysfunctionality. Clients have to confront with stigma and social prejudices, since the misconception that the presence of a professional in the life of the family indicates an improper care and bad parenting adds to the series of difficulties. The fear that children would be taken out from the family is present from the outset. If the clients are not aware of what would happen to them and why, they would become belligerent. Nevertheless, in order to achieve a trustful relationship, professionals need to make efforts. Previous negative experiences do

not trigger trust or increase willingness to cooperate, yet from the point of view of interpreting and evaluating the actual intervention this could have an outstanding significance. Here again, the attitude and professionalism of experts are drives to change. If a parent does not acknowledge what the problem is, or they are not made aware of the possible consequences of their acts or lack of action, or when they are not given sufficient time and chance to make a change, all this could lead to the weakening of family cohesion, eventually even to the disintegration of the family, as problems may escalate and become uncontrollable (Newcastle City Council 2002; Szilvási 2005; Ross et al. 2017).

Table 1. The features of the integrative, service-oriented child protection

Systemic values / aspects	Expectations towards professionals	Aspects of child-focused support to parenting
Common work with family members, involvement of fathers. Involving the child into the process, and providing them proper quality information about their situation. Preparing professionals to develop partnerships within the field and to ways of involving family members into the cooperation. Engaging community resources, displaying the role of locality. Evaluating results, publishing the research findings.	Empathic approach: understating the situation and the context, mitigating the stress among family members. Preparing for the removal, then supporting the family to keep the contact and plan the meetings, supporting the parent-child relationship and communication. Clear presentation of the ways out of the situation, appeasing the threatening character of definitiveness in order to prepare for care provided in the client's home, whenever this is a real option. Humanity, empathic attention, compassion, respectful attitude. Pragmatic planning, expectations and conditions clearly articulated towards the children and parents. Support in processing traumas, providing links to resources.	Positive reinforcement. Building on strengths. Help in learning positive child rearing techniques. Organising parental groups in order to identify common challenges and solutions. Common programs for children and parents, mapping and communicating possibilities for families. Reinforcing communication and cohesion within the family. Understanding the challenges related to childhood, and supporting the turning to one's own child. Engaging local community resources. Strengthening personal relationships (activating informal supports). Reacting to complex needs and problems through several service providers.

Source: my own editing, 2019, resuming the above mentioned writings.

All this indicates that integrated and coordinated care is needed, which gives importance to the strengthening of cooperation. The consequence of the fragmentation of services is that when complex issues arise, the parents do not

know to whom they should address, who is responsible for what. A case owner is needed, who has an overall view of the processes and puts together the information. Unfortunately, the high staff turnover does not make this any easier. Successful cooperation also requires the understanding from both parts of the approach targeting the entire family, though in many cases this approach pursues only the solution of a special situation, and is limited in time as well. It is equally important to carry out the intervention in time, and support needs to be accessible whenever requested, as social work might be disintegrative if families are given support only when there is a crisis situation. Real support for the families is the one which offers long-term solution to the problems and improves life quality (Szilvási 2005; Webb et al. 2014). The integrative interventions require a reliable and empathic helper revealing expertise during the cooperation, who displays empathy during intervention. If these are lacking, one can hardly expect that parents open up towards helpers, show confidence and cooperate for the sake of a goal which in many cases is unknown to them.

In what follows, I examine the presence of these views and values in the Hungarian child protection structure. In my understanding the university and postgraduate studies in the field of social work, followed by reflective practice, and in case of young professionals, mentoring have an essential role in fulfilling these approaches and values.

3. Research results: towards an integrative, participatory child protection

3.1. The methodological framework of the research

The research examines the meaning of professional integrity and the principle of the child's best interest during studies in child protection and later on, in child protection field work. The way how knowledge and practice rely on each other reveals those factors which assist, or, on the contrary, impede ethical professional work; it also indicates how the social embeddedness of child protection determines the view of future and current practitioners about the profession, and how all this impacts the actual activity of supporting the clients.

Thus the research aims at examining the views of the students in social work (BA and MA level) and of professionals working in child protection for a shorter (less than 5 years) and longer period (more than 10 years) about the operation of the Hungarian child protection system and the mechanisms of providing help. Within the framework of the research 8 focus group interviews were conducted in the capital and in other locations (4 groups of students, 2 groups with young practitioners and 2 groups with professionals carrying out field work for a longer

period). In all cases, the focus group discussion was preceded by the screening of a documentary (Vincze Artúr Máté: *Elválasztva/Separated*), which accounts in a documentary style the taking out of children from their family, focusing primarily on the standpoints and role of the biological parent and foster parent. The film was not created as a material for professionals, as its main purpose is the dissemination of information and social awareness raising. Therefore the film served as a thought-provoking example of intervention to be interpreted together and as a focus to a problem. The analysis of the answers of students and professionals had two main focuses: on one hand, general conclusions regarding the functioning of child protection and the identification and evaluation of the actors within the child protection system; on the other hand reflections on the social work education, and on issues related to the convergence between theoretical education and practical work.

Besides this, eight interviews were conducted with professionals in order to reveal operational mechanisms and systemic problems. 2 interviewees were professionals engaged also in the design and delivery of education, 2 persons are responsible for methodology development on national level, one person is an outstanding expert of the child welfare field and leader of an institution located in the capital city, one person is the leader of a foster care network, 1 of a centre consisting of several homes and institutions in a rather disadvantageous county in the eastern part of the country, while 1 interviewee is working in a professional committee in the same network.

The present study resumes the views of professionals, then examines the difference between theory and practice on the basis of the focus group interviews. I explore the conditions of ensuring transparency, and how an integrative, child-focused child protection practice can be developed built on community resources, while taking into account the training in social work, on the basis of the views expressed by professionals and people belonging to different target groups. Prior to concluding the results, I present a few statistical data (KSH 2017) revealing the multitude of problems treated by the system.

3.2. Reflections of child protection professionals on the Hungarian child protection system

From the point of view of prevention, the most important role within the Hungarian child protection system[2] has the *child welfare service*, since the service providers need to operate the child protection signalling system, thus all information indicating any threats to a child's safety are concentrated by this system. According to the Central Statistical Office (KSH) data, in 2017 approximately 180 reports were received regarding 123,000 children. The

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[2] Further details concerning this system see in: R á c z 2015; 2016.

majority of information came from public education institutions and nurses. In the year of the research, 103,000 underage children were placed in care on the basis of a cooperation agreement: 60% of them needed child welfare services due to neglect, respectively due to problems in the parents' lifestyle and child rearing, family and partnership conflicts; 16% were cases of behavioural or performance disturbances, while 10% needed help due to financial problems (subsistence and/or housing issues). In the year of the research, the number of new clients was 42,000, 20% of which requested help out their own initiative. 70% of the total number of clients have signed a cooperation agreement, the rest participated at prevention programs or assistance could be concluded following an initial interview.

In 2017, a total number of 20,948 children required *child protection care*, this represents an increase of 400 cases compared to the previous year. 12% of children under child protection care are below 3 years old, almost 100 more than in the previous year. More than half of the children belong to the 11–17 age group. 67% of the children were placed in foster care, the others living in some type of children's home.

The number of 37% of children (7,793 persons) registered in care on December 31, 2017 were registered as children with special needs (according to the definition, having a chronic disease, a disability or being under 3 years old), 2,442 of them belonging to this group exclusively due to their age. Approximately 2%, 449 persons were children with special needs, either because being addicts to psychoactive drugs, or for showing symptoms of a dissocial personality. Almost all of the children with special needs live in children's home, only 3.6% of them being placed in foster care. Likewise, a very small part of children with double needs (255 persons), around 7% lives with foster parents (KSH 2017; Balogh et al. 2018).

According to the interviews with professionals, when discussing possibilities of development, a possible starting points is represented by the differences between the changes in the principles guiding the institutional system and philosophy of care as provided by legal means on one hand, and the practical application of these changes on the other hand. In their view, although the deinstitutionalisation of the centralized institutional network consisting of large units is de facto accomplished, and in principle the client-focused service providing does dispose over the necessary legal and professional tools, yet, this structural transformation does not materialize in everyday functioning, or only partly does.

> [...] our system of care was focused on the institution, to which children have to adapt, though the focus should shift to upbringing, [...] individual educational plan should be conceived for every child, adjusted to the child's own personality and individual problems, and those plans should be realized in the institutions. Theoretically this is what is happening, but only on paper, in practice it doesn't (child protection professional working on national level, theoretician, Budapest).

They also agreed that, although it is undoubtedly necessary that on all levels of the system social work builds on a consistent methodological framework, the application of central directives, of thoroughly elaborated educational plans, crisis management procedures and other regulations cannot be strictly followed; successful and efficient case management always requires distinct work plan and methodology relying on the local context (regional specificities, institutional conditions, availability of professionals etc.), respectively, and first of all, elaborated with a view on the child and their family. Thus the task of the system should be, besides defining the trends and the framework, the preparing of the professionals and institutions dealing with the client to a flexible and creative case management.

The significance of territorial differences was also highlighted by several interviewees. The economic situation and general life conditions, the labour market of a given region, the level of complexity and accessibility of its institutional system and range of services on one hand, on the other hand the pattern of problems within the local society, the special strategies of clients reflecting local conditions also influence the efficiency of a method or procedure, in some cases even its applicability. Thus, this interpretation also points to the conclusion that in all cases the situation (respectively the child, family and conditions) in question has to be considered as a starting point when organizing the case management and service providing.

> This country isn't very big, but the possibilities are very diverse, and even within a smaller area people can have very different possibilities and problems to solve. [...] I think this is such a diverse activity, that one couldn't say that if I try here [the name of a town] something and it works fine, could be done well everywhere by everybody (leader of a family and child welfare centre, child welfare professional, Budapest).

This approach allows for a much more important role of the individual decisions of the professional dealing with the specific case; likewise, it becomes increasingly important that the professional turns toward the client while engaging their entire personality into this helping attitude. But professionals do not have enough autonomy for this, they are much to bound to rules, expectations, regulations and administrative obligations; on the other hand, the profession lacks social appreciation and prestige, and the financial rewarding of the employees lags far behind an ideal level.

> […] certainly this profession would require the development of the mentality. […] I give a special importance to the quality of staff. To the way of thinking and mentality of people working here, to what extent they are willing to accept what's around us. […] And of course, besides this it is very important that the society itself really values child protection, public education, and all sorts of work with children, that is values these much more, […] so for example the lady in the shop should know what child protection is, so nobody should be let stay away from this (leader of a foster care network, eastern part of the country).

When determining possibilities for development and advancement, several interviewees stated that any transformation has to take into account the current condition of the system, outstandingly the current characteristics of the professional mentality of people working within the system, the impediments to changing this mentality; thus, for example one needs to take into account that an overarching change of mentality cannot be accomplished in a short period of time, in a controlled, enforced and top-down manner. As one of the professionals put it, the new trends in theory (clarifications of the basic issues in the theory of care, definition of goals relieved from uncertainties, real participation of clients etc.) can be introduced through a bottom-up approach, gradually, implementing them into an organic system, followed by abstractions toward theoretical synthesis.

> […] for example basic child welfare care should start to work with parents this way. And when this is done, one could go on with methodological issues. Unless these steps are followed, […] professionals would feel that once again we invented something, something very good in fact, but something inflicted to them. So I think a bottom-up approach would be the proper way to do this. Of course, regarding children, the question is whether there are any forums where they can speak about their situation – this is a good question again (methodology expert working on national level, leader, Budapest).

According to the professionals interviewed within the research, the most important feature of an ideal child protection system is that a child is removed from their family when this intervention is unavoidable. This requires that the society and the state representing society articulate unambiguous expectations, that is: it has to be clearly defined what outcomes and results are expected from the operation of the child protection system. Besides ensuring conditions and resources, the definition of goals also requires the clear determination of the operational model serving as the basis of the system's functioning. It is equally important that expectations towards people engaged in social work should be realistic and accomplishable.

> […] the task of the state would be to make it clear what it expects. […] It is wrong if the expectation is not to have any problems in child protection, not to have any child starving, not to have any child being harmed, or not to have any tragedies. It will occur. Of course our endeavour is to prevent all of these, but it is a big deal of burden to have such an expectation towards professionals. The expectation should be to do whatever it stays in your power to avoid any of these. If you did whatever you could, and it still happens, you should be certain they wouldn't hang you for that (methodology expert working on national level, leader, Budapest).

The professionals also stated that a do-it-yourself approach in child protection is not able to bring about real change in terms of improving the life quality of clients and in facilitating the successful social integration of children and young people.

> […] the way how our child protection system works, and what is legally provided, I simply consider it a completely useless heroic effort […]. The heroic endeavour of the ministry to

continuously refine the child protection act and its related implementing regulations, and its increasingly detailed revision. Yet this does not answer or solve the issue […], they need to think outside the box, it can't be solved with the same means […]; gradually, or not gradually, but rather as soon as possible we should start to collect the specificities of how people live today, of what we call a family […] (child protection expert working on national level, theoretician, Budapest).

Thus, according to the interviewed professionals, in order to achieve the advancement and development of the child protection system, namely its efficient functioning reflecting on current social relationships, besides addressing issues related to the institutional, legal and human resources conditions, substantial change of attitudes is needed both in terms of the employees directly working with the clients, and in terms of methodology and philosophy of care.

4. The encounter of theory and practice

4.1. The view of professionals

One of the basic issues addressed by the present research is whether young professionals who have recently completed their studies in social work do dispose over the adequate professional skills to cope with challenges faced during field work; whether there is a gap between qualification and practice, and if there is, can this gap be surpassed; what can be done and what tools can be used to fill this gap.

I could clearly delimit a common statement from the answers of the interviewed professionals to questions regarding social work curricula, respectively regarding the professional skills of people who had studied social work and their abilities to cope with issues in everyday work, namely that there is a significant hiatus between training and practice.

One of the aspects when reflecting on the quality of training highlighted the situation of young professionals with respect to the workforce market. Chronic labour shortage which is typical for all professions providing assistance creates a situation which is not favourable to keeping up with and demanding high quality content. On one hand, the employers do not enjoy enough freedom of decision, and are constraint to choose from the available applicants with a much higher tolerance than would be optimal; this means that they can't keep professional expectations on a high level. On the other hand, the quality of professional work is further diluted by the fact that employers often have no other choice to mitigate the workload but to hire people without adequate training.

[…] they allow people in even without qualification […], thus qualified, good professionals become the minority. This is a huge problem within the system, […] we keep fighting against it, but it is very difficult not to hire without qualification. I can accept that for example people with a pedagogical training are hired, but not to expect from them to pursue adequate training within, let's say, 5 years, I can't accept that (expert in training, university teacher in social work, Budapest).

The definition of the optimal balance between theory and practice, more precisely the proper extent of the embeddedness of practice in the training typically determined by theory is a basic issue of the scientific and professional discourse of all times. Experts agree that delivering practical knowledge needs to start during university studies; moreover, a high number of practical courses need to be part of the education. Nevertheless, in their opinion, the training of a social worker should not come to an end when obtaining their diploma, since experience acquired during field work should be an integral part of becoming a professional. According to them, professional training is delivered on two levels: one is the theoretical education reflecting on conditions regarded as an optimum, the other puts the focus on methodology deduced from practice. However, the institution delivering the training is constrained to carefully select from the latter, as answers given to tense situations, in lack of a systemic guidance and control, often mean a bad practice, a dysfunctional modus operandi, and humiliating treatment, which of course should not be embedded into training, since they entirely refute the basic values of social work and social policies.

> […] when we invented this type of integration, the main problem for us was that a presumably well and decently functioning practice has to be correlated with an adequate theory […]. Nowadays it isn't that simple, since practice is deficient. So there are many things I wouldn't like our student to integrate with the theory we're teaching, since it's impossible, they reflect two different worlds. But then again, what am I preparing them for? So we have a twofold task: we need to tell what we believe is optimal, and we also need to tell that what's going on here is not what we are teaching. »I would like to ask you to try to work in a way not to betray the Ethical Code, your profession, but try to improve it« (expert in training, university teacher in social work, Budapest).

According to the professionals, the professional training and theoretical knowledge delivered at universities – completed with practical training – should mean a sufficient ground, but only experience acquired in field work can adequately prepare recently graduated people to actual work. Although norms and protocols regulating work in theory ensure a framework for this type of postgraduate training, but their application, for example the thorough knowledge and consequent application of the Ethical Code cannot be considered as an unquestionable basis, and its automatic application and interpretation should not be regarded as self-evident, especially in lack of locally available professional support and guidance.

The professionals share the view that the declared aim of university studies could be that beyond ensuring a theoretical background, it prepares the students to be able to assess any divergence of the system's functioning from an optimal mode, and to be able to reflect on such divergences. This undoubtedly requires that young professionals have the possibility to continue learning while working next to colleagues with a solid professional knowledge and vast experience; in short field work is an essential part of professional socialization.

4.2. The views of students and professionals

The unanimous opinion of students participating at the focus group is that higher education should be regarded as one providing theoretical background; they can become real professionals only after starting to work, following experiences gained on field and guidance received from more experienced colleagues. This opinion is shared by young people who have recently concluded their studies, young practitioners at the beginning of their career and professionals with several years of work experience alike.

Students and already trained professionals alike think that this quantity and quality of field work is not enough for them to be prepared; moreover, the efficiency of practical training is questionable from several aspects, which can be attributed on one hand to the dysfunctions of the system, on other hand on the differences of the expectations towards students coming both from the teachers and the employers. According to students pursuing university studies, the professional competence and/or motivation of professionals mentoring practice do not always meet up with standards. This issue entails dilemmas regarding the burn-out of professionals as well.

> I tell them my own motivation, that I would like to work. Are you nuts? They project on us their own failure. […] I'm always confronted with this negative attitude, I have a great impetus in me, I want to save the world, and I presume that's where the possibility to do this lies. But then my fieldwork teacher asks me if I'm nuts (BA social work, countryside).

Postgraduate students have similar views on the issue of the convergence of training and practice. Their congruent opinion is that the university studies, even coupled with practical training do not prepare them for real situations, the knowledge needed to handle them can be acquired only through experience gained during actual work, and mentoring support during this process from the part of more experienced colleagues is indispensable to this.

> […] many get the first shock only at their workplace, when the biological parent shouts on them, what are you doing with my child, and they hold you liable. So you're standing there with your brand new diploma, you're not allowed to upset them, since you're supposed to be respectful, but you have to be able to explain to them, without using big words, since they won't understand, so in a simplified manner to make them understand that you want to help (professional at the beginning of their career, countryside).

Colleagues with vast experience also think that the biggest problem in social work training are the deficiencies in practical training, the gap between training and practice. In their view this could be improved first of all through a better cooperation between the actors of the educational system.

> There should be a much closer relationship, a living, functional professional relationship between the teachers assisting field work and the teachers of theory. In many cases, at least that is my experience, theory sometimes has serious misapprehensions regarding practice. […] We don't meet textbook cases (experienced professional, countryside).

5. Conclusions

On the basis of the interviews one can conclude that there is a significant difference between the optimal condition as formulated by the curricula of social work studies, and the actual practice. In the view of the professionals, the constantly updated syllabus and the system of practical training do provide a proper basis, but the acquirement of the effective practical knowledge, namely the conclusion of the training of social workers cannot be ended when handing over the diploma. At this point the interviewees formulated an important critique regarding the system: there isn't any consistent method in place in order to surpass or handle the gap between theory and practice, training and fieldwork. Attempts to manage crisis situations are carried out – adequately or inadequately – incidentally, depending on the professional and human qualities of the colleagues, and in different ways, depending on the specific location. The idea of a mentoring system is an initiative to be supported at the beginning of one's career. In the professionals' opinion, there aren't professional organizations, or if there are, they are not efficient, since there isn't any dialogue and methodological discourse. This communicational field and motivation needed for the exchange of experience though should be created by the professionals for themselves, namely the desired development trend should imply an internal/institutional professional need and professional self-development. The impediment to this though are the low wages, the overload, the low social prestige of the profession, which, due to impossible working and caring conditions, can easily lead to the burn-out of the employees. In order to surpass the gap between training and practical work, a more overarching, systemic intervention in needed, built on 3 pillars: *reflection, self-reflection and advocacy*.

However, according to the participants to the thematic focus groups, the issue is not merely the crisis of the profession itself or of the child protection system, but we should rather talk about the crisis affecting the entire society. This phenomenon entails the existence of serious disturbances in the quality of public thought, in the identification and handling of the set of values and priorities, in general among human relationships and communication, which have a devastating impact on all levels of society, in all forms of social policies, thus, inevitably, in the everyday functioning of the child protection system as well.

In order to have an efficient, participatory child protection facilitating social integration, we need to consider simultaneously multiple factors: the existence of public will manifested in policies, the multitude of social, economic and cultural development trends, how political decision-makers think about childhood, what services do they associate to childhood (in terms of services supporting the families and the unity of families), how child welfare and child protection relate to each other, namely how professionally the system as a whole reflects to increasing risks and children's needs. The connections between systems aiming to provide support to children and other social policy sub-systems (i.e. education, child health) should also be considered (R á c z 2012; 2016). The most important values

of an inclusive practice tailored to the clients' strengths are *cohesion*, that is the interconnectedness of services; *flexibility*, which is intricately related to the role of a bridge and connection to resources of social work; and the efficient and honest *communication* between all actors participating in the child protection process. This triple unity is further nuanced and consolidated, if case management is built on a trustful relationship, if clients are given adequate information, if children are informed according to their age and maturity, if the entire family is involved in decision making, that is, if participation is considered a fundamental right. The existence of coordinated care and services and a stable team of professionals are equally important elements of an inclusive child protection practice. The reverse of these aspects consists of fears (both of the professional and of the client), the anger from both parts, the previous negative experiences of the clients and the stigma reflecting the attitude of the society. The service-oriented practice aiming at preserving or re-creating the unity of the family has to annihilate these negative aspects or even certain specificities acting as the consequences of a dysfunctional operation. Service-oriented, integrative child protection – while resuming the theoretical background of child protection – builds on community resources and support, is embedded in the local context, where social values and norms are settled around the protection and promotion of the child's rights.
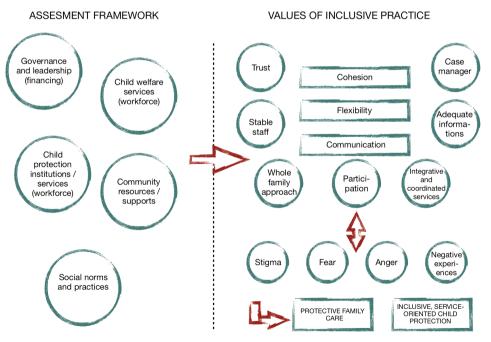

Figure 1. The values and theoretical framework of the inclusive child protection
Source: own editing, 2019, based on: Ddumba-Nyanzi, Li 2018: 13; Rácz 2016;
White 2005; Webb 2014

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NOWE FORMY ZORIENTOWANEJ NA USŁUGI, PARTYCYPACYJNEJ OCHRONY DZIECI NA WĘGRZECH

Abstrakt. Podstawowym aspektem dobrostanu i ochrony dzieci, który skupia się na rodzinie i ukierunkowaniu zasobów społeczności, jest to, że w celu zachowania jedności rodziny konieczne jest powszechne wprowadzenie ze społeczności lokalnej usług w życie rodziny, mobilizując w ten sposób wewnętrzne zasoby rodziny i uznając rodzicielstwo za wartość społeczną. Integracyjna ochrona dzieci jest procesem wielodyscyplinarnym i wielowymiarowym. W badaniach przeanalizowano, w jaki sposób węgierscy specjaliści w dziedzinie ochrony dzieci w ośrodkach opieki i opieki nad dziećmi, instytucje ochrony dzieci i system pomocy zastępczej myślą o swoje pracy oraz jakie dysfunkcje identyfikowane są przez nich w obszarze ich pracy dotyczącej ochrony dzieci. Badano również, w jaki sposób szkolenia i praktyka społeczna mogą przyczynić się do włączenia wartości zawodowych do pracy w terenie. Analizowano, w jaki sposób pomoc społeczna może być w ogólnym sensie odpowiadająca na oczekiwania i jak praca społeczna stała się aspołeczna w późnej nowoczesności i w szybko zmieniającym się, nieprzewidywalnym środowisku usług.

Słowa kluczowe: dobrostan i ochrona dzieci, mentalność zawodowa, szkolenia w pracy społecznej, system ochrony dzieci zorientowany na usługi, kierunki przyszłego rozwoju.