Original Contribution

PROBLEMS AND APPROACHES IN FINANCING SOCIAL-PEDAGOGICAL ACTIVITIES AT THE MUNICIPAL LEVEL

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examines the significance of social-pedagogical work at the local level as a tool for support, prevention, and social integration of vulnerable groups. Social pedagogues perform a variety of functions that enable them to have a positive impact on the social environment and the quality of life within the community. At the same time, challenges such as limited resources, a shortage of qualified personnel, and the complexity of social problems are identified. The conclusion emphasizes that social-pedagogical work is a key factor in building active, cohesive, and sustainable communities, as well as in promoting equal access to education and social services.*

KEY WORDS: *Socio-pedagogical work, Working with vulnerable groups, Municipality.*

1. Introduction

Social-pedagogical work is a modern interdisciplinary practice that combines pedagogical, social, and psychological methods with the aim of supporting the social and personal development of individuals. Its role is particularly important at the local level, where it is carried out directly within the environment in which children, young people, and families live and develop their potential.

The present paper aims to explore the role and significance of social-pedagogical work at the local level, its functions, methods, and impact on the community. Social work, regarded as a practice, encompasses the overall activity of providing support and protection for individuals and groups at risk, who are excluded to a greater or lesser extent from the system of social relations. Through it, conditions are created, and specific measures are undertaken to ensure social security and social protection for groups facing various types and degrees of risk [3].

According to I. Kusev, social work is carried out at different hierarchical levels, which in general terms are national, regional, and local. In other cases – for example, in working with children with antisocial behavior – the levels are

two: national and local. At the national level, a comprehensive legislative and regulatory framework for social work is developed, and the management, organization, and control of the respective system of national practice are ensured through executive bodies. At the regional level, the focus is on oversight, methodological guidance, and implementation within the region. At the local level, direct social work is carried out, where the social worker or relevant specialist engages with the client and manages their interactions. Regardless of whether this work takes place in state, municipal, or non-governmental institutions, it involves solving specific problems using methodologies, methods, and technologies, applying models and approaches from various sciences, and appropriately interpreting social legislation in the relevant field [3].

Social-pedagogical work is closely connected with the main approaches in social pedagogy, as it is precisely through them that targeted influence is exercised on both the individual and the environment. The approaches – humanistic, person-oriented, integrative, preventive, or corrective – determine how the specialist builds relationships, plans activities, and supports personal development. They provide not only a methodological framework for practical work but also ensure that social-pedagogical activity meets the specific needs of different social groups and facilitates their full participation in society.

2. Theoretical Approaches in Social Pedagogy

The education system in Bulgaria, as in most European countries, has undergone numerous changes over the years, yet its spirit and overall concept remain unchanged. Formal education is based on the knowledge of the teacher, who instructs students, thereby preserving the dominant role of the pedagogue. The central axis of the learning process remains: teacher – textbook – student, with the first two components exerting primary influence on the learner's cognitive activity, on the specifics of their thinking and learning skills, and on their upbringing. Educational literature provides content and structure for the learning process, but often fails to encourage critical thinking, dialogue between participants, or the evaluation of facts and events [10].

Humanistic Approach

The essence of the humanistic approach views the individual as a unique, autonomous, and valuable being capable of development regardless of social background or life situation. This approach emphasizes personal choice, self-actualization, and the individual's positive potential.

Key characteristics include:
- Central place of the individual and their needs;
- Empathy, respect, and unconditional acceptance;
- Creating a supportive environment that stimulates development.

One of the founders of the humanistic approach is Jean-Jacques Rousseau with his concept of the "natural child." Rousseau laid the foundations of modern pedagogy by introducing the idea of the child as an independent personality. He is one of the most influential thinkers of the Enlightenment, significantly impacting pedagogy, philosophy, and views on human nature.

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, a Swiss educator and reformer, continued Rousseau's line of thought but developed it in a practical direction. He created a teaching method encompassing the holistic development of the individual, which became the foundation of modern pedagogy. Pestalozzi believed that true education should be harmonious and develop the child in three main directions: "education through the heart, hands, and mind."

American psychologist Carl Rogers, one of the founders of humanistic psychology, developed the client-centered therapy theory, which has had a profound influence not only on psychotherapy but also on pedagogy, social work, and counseling practices. Rogers places the individual and their resources at the center, believing that in a proper environment, a person discovers their own path to development. According to him, the role of the teacher is to create a supportive environment, not to provide ready-made solutions.

Ecological Approach – Urie Bronfenbrener

Urie Bronfenbrener's ecological approach (the ecological systems model) examines child development within the context of interacting environments. It is closely related to the sociological approach, as it emphasizes the influence of the social environment and various societal levels on the individual.

Bronfenbrener's ecological systems theory identifies five interconnected systems-microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem-that influence individuals throughout life, often depicted as nested circles. Each system plays a crucial role in shaping behavior and well-being. Bronfenbrener's theory highlights that the individual does not function in a vacuum but is surrounded by direct and indirect factors affecting behavior and well-being [6].

Social Learning Theory – Albert Bandura

Albert Bandura's social learning theory (or social-cognitive theory) asserts that people learn through observation, imitation, and modeling. Key factors include not only external stimuli but also cognitive processes such as expectations, self-regulation, and self-efficacy. The main idea is that learning is not solely the result of experience or reward (as behaviorism claims) but also involves observation and cognitive processes. Children and adults learn by observing the behavior of others and its consequences. Bandura's theory emphasizes that socialization and education are not only the result of external control but also of internal beliefs and self-regulation.

Bronfenbrener's ecological approach explains where and in which environments a child develops, while Bandura's social learning theory explains how the child acquires behavior within those environments.

Critical Pedagogy – Paulo Freire

Critical pedagogy is one of the most influential movements in contemporary educational theory and practice. Its founder, Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire, developed ideas emphasizing the liberating role of education and its connection to social justice and democracy. Freire's critical pedagogy offers an alternative to traditional education, promoting awareness, dialogue, and social engagement. Its goal is not merely the transfer of knowledge but the formation of individuals capable of critical thinking and changing the world toward greater justice.

Freire's ideas also highlight the role of social workers in the public sphere and their engagement with marginalized groups. For Freire, the social worker cannot remain neutral regarding processes of dehumanization in society. Their role must be connected with the ongoing process of humanizing social relations at all levels. He even emphasizes that a social worker who chooses change identifies with the people they work with, recognizes societal challenges together with them, and seeks solutions collectively [10].

Socio-pedagogical work at the local level ensures real access to support and education, as it is closely connected to people's everyday lives [7].

2. Significance and Functions of Socio-Pedagogical Work at the Local Level

Socio-pedagogical work at the local level is particularly important because it is closest to people, their daily problems, and the social environment in which they live. It aims to support the individual, the family, and the community, as well as to create conditions for full participation in public life.

2.1 Support for Children, Youth, and Families

One of the primary functions is to provide emotional, social, and educational support for children and youth, as well as for their families.

As noted by E. Sapundjieva (2013), the social pedagogue performs functions related to the emotional and social support of children in the educational environment, with particular attention given to preventing social isolation and school dropout [8].

2.2 Prevention and Early Intervention

Socio-pedagogical work is a key tool in preventing social problems. Various programs are implemented to provide early intervention, minimizing negative consequences.

According to N. Yoncheva, research on a family-mediated early intervention model helps improve parental competence and social interactions. Family-mediated early intervention requires training parents to apply strategies and actively participate in the process to increase the frequency of intervention during children's natural routines [2].

2.3 Working with Vulnerable Groups

Working with vulnerable groups is an essential part of the activities of social pedagogues at the local level. They support children with disabilities, children from socially disadvantaged families, and migrants in processes of social integration and educational adaptation. Kolev (2018, p. 145) emphasizes that "the social pedagogue plays a key role in working with vulnerable groups, facilitating their social integration, supporting the educational process, and creating conditions for equal access to social services" [4].

2.4 Community Engagement and Activation

At the local level, socio-pedagogical work promotes civic engagement and social participation through events, campaigns, and various projects. These initiatives strengthen dialogue between institutions and citizens and enhance mutual support within the community.

2.5 Collaboration with Institutions

Successful socio-pedagogical practice relies on close cooperation between schools, social and health services, as well as non-governmental organizations. A multidisciplinary approach increases the effectiveness and reach of the support provided to those in need.

At the local level, socio-pedagogical work functions as support, prevention, and a means for social integration. Through its main functions-educational, preventive, instructive, supportive, mediatory, and integrative-it becomes a key instrument for addressing social problems and for building active, cohesive, and resilient communities.

3. Methods and Forms of Socio-Pedagogical Work at the Local Level
3.1 Individual and Group Work

Social pedagogues use both individual approaches and group sessions that develop social skills, self-esteem, and empathy. Individual work is particularly effective for addressing personal problems, while group work facilitates socialization and mutual support.

3.2 Educational and Preventive Programs

Through early identification of issues such as school dropout, poverty, violence, and social isolation, socio-pedagogical work reduces the likelihood of

deepening social problems. Trainings, workshops, sports, and cultural events are organized, aimed at personal development, promoting a healthy lifestyle, and preventing risky behaviors.

In Bulgarian practice, the role and position of the social worker within the educational system are still not well-established or widespread. Their responsibilities often overlap with those of the school counselor, without clear differentiation between the roles and functions of the two positions.

Amendments to the Pre-school and School Education Act in recent years allow schools and kindergartens to include additional specialists in the educational system to support personal development according to the individual needs of children. Consequently, support for personal development in kindergartens and schools aims to ensure an appropriate physical, psychological, and social environment for developing children's abilities and skills [5].

According to Section II, Article 176, Paragraph 3 of the aforementioned law, specialists who may be involved in general and additional support for children and students include psychologists or school counselors, speech therapists, social workers, and resource teachers [9].

Although the position of social workers in the Bulgarian educational and social reality is not yet fully established, school social work has solid traditions, experience, and practice in the international context. One notable example is the German model of school social work, which has been firmly rooted since the late 20th century [5].

The German experience also faces challenges, mainly uneven distribution of social workers across provinces and schools, insufficient funding in some regions, the need for better integration of social work into the curriculum, and administrative burdens on social workers. Despite these challenges, the German model demonstrates the importance of a systemic and multidisciplinary approach to social work in the educational system, promoting the welfare and educational opportunities of all students. It provides valuable lessons and models for other countries seeking to strengthen the role of social workers in schools [5].

3.3 Socio-Pedagogical Counseling and Mediation

Through consultations, families and individuals are supported in finding solutions to social and educational problems. Mediation between different parties contributes to conflict resolution.

Addressing social problems requires interventions tailored to the specifics of the local community, where the social pedagogue acts as a mediator and resource activator [1].

3.4 Mobilization of Resources and Networks

The social pedagogue acts as a mediator between people's needs and the available resources-financial, social, and educational. They create and maintain networks of partners and volunteers who provide additional support.

At the municipal and regional level, socio-pedagogical specialists face several challenges, including:

- Poverty and social exclusion – lack of access to resources and services;
- Unemployment and low qualifications – limited opportunities for employment;
- School dropout – particularly among children from vulnerable groups;
- Domestic violence and child neglect – need for protection and support;
- Health and psychological problems – lack of prevention and services in the community.

4. Impact on the Community and Challenges

Socio-pedagogical work at the local level has a positive influence on social integration, the reduction of social problems, and the improvement of quality of life. However, challenges such as limited resources, a shortage of qualified personnel, and the complexity of social problems still exist.

Conclusion

Socio-pedagogical work at the local level is a fundamental element in building inclusive and supportive communities. Through preventive and supportive measures, work with vulnerable groups, and the activation of civic participation, it contributes to social development and stability. For it to be effective, consistency, adequate funding, and institutional support are essential.

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