INCLUSION OF CHILDREN FROM THE SOCIALLY DISADVANTAGED ENVIRONMENT: THE CASE STUDY OF SLOVAKIA

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Abstract. The study has theoretical, social and pedagogical character. It reflects the author's knowledge and experience with the projects of children from the socially disadvantaged environment from the point of view of Social Pedagogy. Its aim is to show the new facts: legislative, practical possibilities of inclusion of children from the socially disadvantaging environment (SDE) in Slovak republic (SR). It introduces dissimilarities in understanding the concept of SDE by specialists of Pedagogy, Social Pedagogy, legislation of Ministry of Inferior SR and Ministry of Labour, Social affairs and Family. The study is also oriented on the suggestions of how the problem of inclusion of children from SDE in some European countries has been dealt with. The attention is paid to public and nonpublic form of support for children from SR and also to application of inclusion into socially stimulating environment. The inclusion is accomplished by teachers, special pedagogues in SR and specialists of related professions such as social pedagogues.

Key words: socially disadvantaged environment, inclusion, social pedagogue.

Introduction

Not all children are born into secure family environment where they receive love, assurance, education, care and many supportive impulses from their parents. There are some children who live in the environment which does not enrich their development rather deforms it, marks the quality of their lives and so displaces them on the edge of society into social groups at school, outside on the street, in surrounding. Such children exist in every country of Europe as well as on other continents more than is needed.

The subject of our work will be children from SR born into the socially disadvantaged environment. They were born to parents incapable of raising their children and who do not know, are not able to, or do not want to provide their biologicl children with what they deserve or are entitled to according to the Family Law from 2015: to provide upbringing, care, education, the right to live, the right to play, to have fun, free time and adequate survival. We will present the way of concept determination by legislative of Ministry of Education and Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family in SR. We will speak
about possibilities provided by school and social politics regarding inclusion of these children. The paper is divided into three parts:

– the characteristics of socially disadvantaged environment,
– inclusion of children from SDE in some European countries and in SR,
– social pedagogue and his legislative possibilities in inclusion of children into schools.

1. Children from the socially disadvantaged environment in Slovak republic

According to specialists in Pedagogy, Social Pedagogy, rules and laws of Ministry of Education in SR, the notion of a socially disadvantaged environment is defined non-uniformly. In the documents of Ministry of Education in the Slovak Republic in Law no. 245/2008 in § 2 it is defined at least by one out of these criteria:

– the child’s custodial family does not fulfill the basic socializing-formative, emotional and economic functions;

– family living in poverty where a child experiences a lack of material need (Law... no. 245/2008 of § 132);

– a family in which one of the parents is unemployed or for a long time belongs to disadvantaged candidates of employment (Law... no. 36/2005 of family, § 28);

– a family where parents have inadequate education, e.g. one of the parents did not finish education (Act number 599/2003 on help in material need);

– a family living in substandard domestic and hygienic conditions, the child has no space for learning, drinking water, or using toilet;

– language learning is different from the language which the child uses in family surrounding;

– a family living in segregate community;

– a family is socially excluded from the major society.

Another document which uses the concept of socially disadvantaged environment is the document of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family in SR, especially Law no. 29775/2007 – II/I and Law no. 23609/2008 on providing benefits for food and school utilities.

Newer legislation of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, according to Law no. 544/2010 on benefits, enables donation for supporting education of eating habits for a child endangered with social exclusion. These children live in families that are provided with social benefits and their income is not more than a living minimum.

We agree with the statement of the authors from the Slovak Governance Institute (2010) that there is a chaos in Slovak legislation in using and defining this concept. To clarify this concept and define the subject of disadvantage,
social or family environment: education of parents, unemployment, economic level, health state of children, ethnic origin or parent’s manipulation of children, threatening children by any social-pathological phenomenon and combination of these factors require the clearance of notion. Therefore, we will look deeply into this term characterized by specialists of Pedagogy and Social Pedagogy in domestic and foreign literature. For example, a significant Czech pedagogue Prucha (2009: 454) defines social disadvantage in Pedagogical encyclopaedia as “a family environment with a low social-cultural status or threat by social-pathological phenomena, regulation of institutional education or placing a protective education, position of refugee or participant of regulation for granting an asylum”. Prucha considers socially disadvantaged students as those who do not have the same possibilities in education due to unfavourable social and cultural condition in family where they live.

Another characterization is given by Ihnacík and Špitka (2002) who claim that the measure of social disadvantage is set by basic particular characteristics:

- the low level of education of parents and relatives,
- one parent family,
- low income per one family member,
- low professional status of family members,
- unemployment,
- low level of living,
- minority origin etc.,

Among Slovak authors we can find the mentioned concept at Bakošová (2012), Horňák, Šilonová, (2013), Kovalčíková (2014) and Galbavý (2008).

As regards the typology of environment, Bakošová (2012) distinguishes, within a basic notion of Social Pedagogy, a social disadvantaged environment as a type of environment which does not provide satisfied impulses for optimal development of the child. A child has few cultural, educational, economic and interactive impulses from the family. Regarding interaction and education, a child is manipulated by parents to their own image or parents go from strict education to the second extreme – neglecting the basic needs.

Horňák and Šilonová (2013) highlight the fact that the usage of the notion of social disadvantage is a concept used in statics, in fatality. Society is not changing. He moved towards the usage of the notion of a disadvantaged environment which expresses the dynamics of phenomenon, means that it is about disadvantaging at present which could be influenced and altered. In his discussion he was inspired by the authors of the work of the Slovak Governance Institute. This concept is also distinguished by a pedagogue Kovalčíková (2014). On the pages of electronical online magazine Pedagogika, she uses the concept of a socially disadvantaged environment and as she states, she presents the conceptualization of this notion.
For the creators of legislative of decisive organs such as the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family it would be appropriate to take advantage of knowledge that theoretical and empirical research conducted by specialists – university teachers, researchers and methodists brings. For our needs we will use knowledge of specialists introduced above and from the tolerating of the mentioned legislative.

After clearing the notions of SDE and characteristics of children who fall within the frame of social disadvantage it is necessary to show what School Politics in SR is doing for the inclusion of these children into schools and society. Before that we will show an inspiring impulse from abroad.

According to the British Centre for research of inclusive education, inclusion will be considered here as the process in which the ways of living with varieties are presented and how to draw from those varieties. The centre further says that the inclusion deals with removing barriers that can allow us to collect as much data from various sources as possible. Inclusion means presence, participation, success and happiness of all children. Inclusion covers up an individual attention on the target groups which face the threat of marginalization, exclusion and approaching the substandard in education.

2. Inclusion of children from the socially disadvantaged environment in some European countries and in the Slovak Republic

For the Slovak Republic it is inspiring to learn about some instances of selected countries in Europe of searching the opportunities for education and pedagogy of children from the socially disadvantaged environment (Gallová Kriglerová 2010). We have to mention that each country differently understands the socially disadvantaged environment with the process of inclusion. Some of the countries take into consideration a physical and mental disadvantage of children, other countries consider ethnic origin more. Therefore, we will focus on the variability of understanding this problem. An example of indicated countries could be an inspiration for others. For instance, in Austria a disadvantage is perceived through the physical and mental state of children. Within a school system there are special schools (SONDERSCHULEN) that include nine types of physical and mental disabilities. The first type includes children with low abilities, seven types are oriented at the physical disability and the last type, the ninth is about the children with a behavior disorder.

The children of immigrants belong to the group of children in Austria who deserve the attention of inclusion. At the beginning, Austrian people were not aware of immigrants from the ex-Yugoslavia, Turkey as a permanent but temporary phenomenon and their aim was that children of immigrants would learn a German language. Currently they understand better and are more open to this
problem. “National Operation Plan for Immigrants” (2010) initiated for the creation of “Pedagogy for foreigners” for children of immigrants. Its aim was to teach these children how to adjust to the Austrian school system. In present, the aim of the integration is “intercultural learning” and its focus is not only learning about the other countries but also to get an interest and curiosity of children due to intercultural differences.

In what way is Finland inspiring for Slovakia? The Finnish are the best even among the weakest. Namely, they have the best results in testing 15 years old children among the PISA countries. They are specific in having the smallest portion of the weakest students and the socio-economic status of the family has in Finland the smallest influence on the results in this test within OECD countries contrary to Slovakia. Slovakia belongs to the countries with the strongest bonding among the results of students and the socio-economic status of the family. Regarding the Finnish, their attitude towards the disadvantage is very human. They claim that this group should not be excluded from society. Only 2.5% of students are at special schools and the others are at primary schools. Their model demands smaller classrooms and more teachers and assistants.

The Swedish school system proclaims a thesis “school for everybody”. It does not create individual conditions for children from SDE but they are integrated into public schools. A specific point is that, for example, in northern Stockholm there are independent schools free of charge with their own curriculum. Teachers prepare an individual plan together with students which differs in the level of advance. Students learn according to their own timing choosing from the content only what is necessary and interesting for them. Teachers check their fulfillment of targets and monitor the personal progress of every student.

What about disadvantaged children in Hungary? According to the Law on Public Education a child from the socially disadvantaged environment is considered as the child whose parents receive regular benefits for a security of the child. Family and social disadvantage is verified and confirmed by the notary. There is also a category of multiplied disadvantaged children as a subgroup. Those are children whose parents or legal guardians reached the highest education maximum to the eight grade at primary school by the time their children had reached three years of age or were schoolable.

Hungarian Law from 2003 on equal treatment and support in equality of opportunities is a legal document for equal opportunities. It gives a duty to the districts to map a situation of marginalized groups and recommends the inclusion of results into the Area Program of Equal Opportunities where it should also be used to improved the situation together with aims in the field of education. The basic ideas of the “New Hungary” document which provides drawing from the
European sources for groups of children such as antidiscrimination, segregation limitation and equality of opportunities. The Ministry of Education publishes particular arrangements for districts on how to claim the equality of opportunities in practical life. According to the regulation from 2009, the Ministry of Education in Hungary will give the financial reward to those pedagogical employees who will include themselves into the integrating pedagogical system. Hungarian understanding of children living in the socially disadvantaged environment is for Slovakia the closest among mentioned countries. In Hungary, communities are also taking part in helping and supporting children from the socially disadvantaged environment. Specialists help at the local level.

Hungary in cooperation with Great Britain implemented a project of fighting against child poverty and inclusion of marginalized children. The project was called “Certain Start”. Its aim was to stimulate social and emotional development of children and to provide health protection. The other prevention program is for instance “Program of second chance” whose intention was to prevent an early interruption of children studies and to improve a school attendance. In connection with it is suggested for teachers to make an individual study plan and to motivate children to study and duties through after-school activities. All these precautions should lead to the support of inclusion of children from SDE into society.

What instances of inclusion are introduced in Great Britain? According to Horňák and Šilonova (2013), the education politics of the so-called extended schools is enforced. As the attention is drawn to the weak results of children from the socially disadvantaged environment by the Ministry of Education in Great Britain, extended schools were established in Scotland. Projects focused on entering socially disadvantaged children into school received big support. The intention of the school system as regards Gypsies immigrated from the Slovak and Czech Republic is to integrate these children into schools. Supportive organizations that help with the integration of Slovak and Czech Gypsies into society are:

- Traveller Education Support Service,
- Ethnic Minority Achievement Service,
- Services traditionally provided to the members of Gypsies communities and travellers in the main education.

This project is about the support of children whose main education language is not English. In Great Britain it is considered to be as another educational need for children.

In France, children are included into Zones of priority education and treatment according to objective discoveries by sociocultural environment in disadvantaged zones. They are offered impulses, stimulation, and opportunities for understanding.
In Belgium, children from the socially disadvantaged environment are offered additional resources for schools under the name Zone of positive actions and priority education. They are regulated by a principle to receive more quality than quantity for those children who do not have treatment, stimulating impulses and happiness from learning in their own family environment.

In Spain, there are the Centres of Community Development which focus on children from SDE and Gypsies. The aim of the program of the Centres of Community Development is to coach students and provide social-educational activities for children, programs to support their education, programs for prevention of discrimination at school, programs to support personal progress of Gypsy women and others.

In the Federal Republic of Germany, for children mentioned earlier there are organized schools with an all-day education system. For children who are not prepared enough to start school there are preliminary schools organized for them.

Establishing the all-day education system (Holoimero) in Greece is similar to the one in Germany. Within the school reform they are trying to enforce preliminary classes for children from SDE.

As regards children from SDE in the Slovak Republic, academic specialists of pedagogical, socio-pedagogical orientation, methodological centres and Ministry of Education in Slovak Republic reflect needs for children from SDE and inclusion. Academic specialists focus mainly on various aspects of disadvantage: according to the ethnic origin, socio-educational and cultural level (Bakošová 2008; Selická 2009; Hroncová 2011), pedagogues, special pedagogues are oriented at the inclusion (Požár 2007; Seidler, Kurincová 2005) of children with special educational needs and different types of disabilities – mental, auditive, and combined. The aim of academic specialists who prepare future specialists for their profession is to fulfil the definition of Law of school pedagogical employees 2009/no. 317 due to which the mentioned specialists should work on elimination of various types of disadvantages (Bakošová 2012).

Therefore, it is a pity that Ministry of Education in SR in the long-term conduct projects for support of education for children from SDE with particular institutions (methodological centres, the Office of Authority Representative for Gypsy community) instead of using the potential of specialists who educate and lead Bachelor, Master, Doctorate theses concerning the mentioned target groups of children and the youth at the university level. The Marginalized Gypsy Community project (MRK I. and II.) established an all-day education system at two hundred primary schools in SR. The intention was to include students into the afternoon education system at school with the purpose of preparation for learning and participating in the spare-time activities to ensure the preparation of starting the primary school.
This project was followed by the Project of Inclusive Education (PRINED). A basic intention is to focus on marginalized gypsy community and on the inclusive education and bringing the all-day education system, enlightenment programs, pedagogical assistants or didactical packages to schools. Specialists such as social pedagogues, terapeutists, psychologists and speech therapists worked with children and their parents before starting the primary school. Another aim of this project was to avoid illegal inclusion of children from SDE into special schools. Children at public schools undergo tests and have good results that are deteriorated by the results of children from SDE who are not able to reach overstandard goals so they fall into the position of social exclusion. Critical opinions on testing all children are given by Rosinský and Vaníčková (2014) together with education and inclusion of children from SDE and as he truly said that giving a chance to all children means watching their personal success and comparing them to their own possibilities and abilities instead of their objective norms. If we follow the international measures, it means that the work at school will change into the competition. We agree with Rosinský and with his suggestion that inclusive school develops due to the functional self-evaluation. Inclusive school cannot function under the pressure of school inspection and directors. The aim of inclusion should be set according to the author who we identify with: to reach the personal maximum growth of the student.

Establishing schools with the all-day education system for children from SDE is already popular in some countries (Romania, Bulgaria). The experience of foreign experts may be concluded into the inspiring models and particular barriers which must be avoided.

Developing barriers of the school model with the all-day education system are seen as follows:

- a high number of students in classes,
- limited competencies for teachers with the special educational needs,
- low motivation for teachers to work with children from SDE,
- lack of pedagogical assistants,
- deprivation of the material and technical equipments at schools,
- lack of special pedagogues, law dimension of support and service in consultancy,
- reluctance of pedagogues, prejudices against children from SDE,
- opinions that ethnicity does not belong only to the non-formal education.

Inspirations for establishing schools with the all-day education system:

- building up the community schools as the place for pedagogical-educational, consulting and cultural centre,
- school should accept variability,
– school should be attended by children of different nationalities,
– building up the inclusive schools based on diagnosing needs of children,
– accept the fact that ethnicity does not say anything about educational needs of students,
– if the conditions for inclusion are created at schools then there are also created conditions for individual approach to children from SDE.

Recommendations of an expert team that visited several countries with the all-day education system at schools are as follows:
– experimentally verify the position of inclusive pedagogue,
– effectively use partnership among schools and universities,
– support peer programs at schools and among them,
– open schools for volunteering program.

Those are impulses which could be the subject of discussion for specialists at our schools who are in favour of the inclusion of children from the socially disadvantaged environment into schools with children from major society.

3. Social pedagogue in SR and his/her legislative possibilities of the inclusion of children from schools

Although many supporters of the inclusion of disadvantaged children into schools in the Slovak Republic prefer working with these children at the level of formal education, foreign experience proves that it is possible to work with these children even at the level of informal education in their free time after school (Ihnacík, Špitka 2002). Here we can see a possibility of the social pedagogue in SR to work with it. Legislative – Law 317/2009, § 24 on pedagogical school employees allowed to work with children of various target groups. As it is stated in the Law, ‘a social pedagogue accomplishes professional activity with children from the socially disadvantaged environment”, “fulfils the functions of social pedagogy, supports prosocial, ethnic behaviour, sociopedagogical diagnostics of environment and relationships, and sociopedagogical consultancy”, and accomplishes expertise and enlightenment”.

We develop social pedagogy in SR according to this legislation, the history of social pedagogy and impulses from abroad (Walancik 2011). The author who initiated social pedagogy, Baláž, as well as his followers Hroncová and Bakošová, and the younger generation Emmerová, Határ, Selická and Niklová, Galbavý, Kamarášová, Zemančíková, Liberčanová, and Lohynová focus their research also on children from the socially disadvantaged environment.

For instance, Galbavý highlighted in his research the consequences of the disadvantaged environment and its effect on the school failure, socialization problem and social exclusion of children from families of alcoholics, from one parent families, from families with a health problem of one family member.
Selická manifested the necessary way of work with Gypsy children, namely in the family and school environment to secure the process of inclusion.

Social pedagogues have drawing competencies as main tools of their work. They found the exertion also in the school environment (Radziewicz-Winnicki 2008; Kraus 2008). As our discoveries state, most using competencies at school are counselling and prevention competencies (Határ 2010). Even though we have partial results of particular types of disadvantages in SR in the form of research published by mentioned authors, many social pedagogues work with inclusion of children from SDE at school too. However, we are aware of the absence of compact concept of inclusive education which should be accomplished by social pedagogues, special pedagogues and other specialists from the profession. This study could be a challenge for creating this kind of concept. We would recommend that in the process of inclusion of children from SDE into life specialists of various professions should be present to create systems and they should be respectful of following facts:

- understanding the notion of children from the socially disadvantaged environment in broader and narrower sense. In a broader sense, we talk about children from SDE who come with a disability based on presence/absence (poverty, education, absence of pedagogical education, bad living conditions, ethnicity – Gypsies, multiculturality – children of different cultures);
- in a narrower sense, we talk about children who have physical and mental disability – a field of special pedagogy. Children who are mentally disabled, with sensational, auditive, body, lingual and combined disabilities (Požár 2007; Lechta 2011).

Both groups of children need to be involved into major society among healthy children. Therefore, we wanted to contribute with internal as well as with foreign knowledge to avoid notional, systematic and professional chaos in mixing competencies, divisions and in preferency of specialists who are “about to” participate in programs that are “in”.

Pedagogy deserves full acceptance, then existing traditional divisions (special pedagogy) deserve respect and quality appreciation and latest divisions deserve to have an opportunity (social pedagogy). It could be seen that fulfilling program statements of school and social politics together with respecting EU needs and possibilities of participating countries is possible only to qualified specialists. We should preserve the system and tolerate existing possibilities. It would be nice to accept new inspirations with precise cognition and their implementation into existing ones. This is the way we could be right when saying that our social and special pedagogues live also here in our country as inclusive pedagogues.
Conclusions

The study of social pedagogy in theoretical and analytical orientation highlighted the broadly perceived problem in the Slovak Republic. Through the notion analysis of social disadvantaged environment, legislation of the Ministry of Education and notion analysis by social pedagogy specialists we manifested a neccessary inclusion process in particular European countries, specially in the Slovak Republic. The broad comprehension of SDE by decisive authorities qualified the broad comprehension of inclusion as the process of integration. We focus on the instances of inclusion abroad as well as in the Slovak Republic. Aa emphasis was put on the implementation of the inclusion process by specialists of social and special pedagogy. It is neccessary to consider pedagogy at the legislative and conceptual level for its practical purposes. We suggest that the notion of SDE should be understood in a broader and narrower sense. Also, it is important to focus the inclusion process in terms of social pedagogy particularly on children from the poor environment, children whose parents achieved low educational level or do not have a job, children from little stimulating environment for pedagogy, education, treatment, and children of Gypsies and immigrants. As regards special pedagogy, it is suggested to respect the running system of children with physical and mental disabilities. Inclusion is neccessary to ensure the quality of childrens' lives at the higher level, also to avoid social inequalities, social exclusion and to learn how to live in diversity, maintaining and respecting specific characteristics (Seidler, Kurincová 2005).

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