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# USER INVOLVEMENT IN THE EDUCATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN SERBIA

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#### **SUMMARY**

The experience in service user involvement in the education of social workers in Serbia is very limited. This fact was significantly influenced by a medical model of social work practice which has dominated the education process. Gradually, as this model has been abandoned, the awareness on the importance of involvement of service users and their carers as partners in the education of social workers has risen. The limited experience, however, reveals numerous benefits of such an approach. The first steps, which relate to the curricular reform and the reform of the social care system, have been undertaken. However, they are not sufficient and it is necessary to continue to develop an organized and structured approach which would provide basic conditions, forms and modalities of involvement of service users and their carers in the education process.

#### Key words:

education of social workers, modalities of involvement, planning, participation.

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#### INTRODUCTION

Traditional approaches, based on medical models of social work practice, prepare the future professionals to take over an expert, value-neutral position in which the service users are considered as passive receivers of help. The application of the principles of participation, empowerment and taking over the responsibility are learned in the education process and best acquired through a direct contact with service users. The lack of involvement of service users and their carers in the education process, among other things, resulted in the domination of these principles in theory, as opposed to the practice.

The students had the possibility to realize the contact with the users within field placements, which were not sufficiently developed, and within exercises as a part of certain courses. The field placements were very often based on formal visits to social care services and certain institutions. Under these circumstances, the contacts with service users were very limited and shallow. The service users were rarely included in teaching and exercises and only if individual teachers invited them to participate.

The new *Higher Education Act*<sup>3</sup>, based on the European Credit Transfer System, requires the higher education institutions to adopt the curricula in which course objectives and outcomes are clearly defined in a way that they can be measured, encourages different forms of inclusion of professionals from the practice to the education process. The *Strategy for the Development of Social Welfare*<sup>4</sup> supports the concept of continuous education of social workers, pluralism of service providers and it emphasizes the need for an active involvement of service users in the help and support provision processes. The two mentioned normative and strategic documents contribute to a gradual development of the awareness on the indispensable inclusion of the users in the whole process, from education of future social workers to participation in assessment, planning and realization of services. The design of field placements, with clearly defined goals and outcomes, is one of the basic steps. The service users and their carers can participate in different ways in the education process. The forms and modalities of participation should be carefully planned in cooperation with the users and their institutions. An approach which is not organized, regardless of its intentions, can be counter-productive.

# INFLUENCE OF BASIC THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL MODELS ON SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION PROCESSES

The involvement of users and their carers in the education process largely depends on the understanding of roles and contents of social work.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Higher Education Act, Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia 76/05

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Strategy for the Development of Social Welfare, Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia 71/05

The medical model, which dominated in social work theory and practice, contributed to the perception of users as passive individuals, capable only of receiving help but incapable of changing their own lives. The main feature of this model is that the service users are considered as patients and the role of social workers is, in cooperation with other helping professionals, to diagnose the causes and sources of their difficulties and secure the appropriate treatment, i.e. therapy. The medical model conceptualized emotional and behavioural problems as mental illnesses, based on the position that the sources of problems should be found in unconscious processes of the individual which lead to constant conflicts, both inside their personality and in relations with the environment. The problem, i.e. illness, was thus placed within an individual whereas the solution depended on skills and knowledge of professionals (Vidanović, 1996.).

The terminology which has been present for years in the field of social work needs to be analysed in that context: social anamnesis, social diagnosis, treatment. The anamnesis is the term usually used in medicine and it is defined in the framework of a diagnostic procedure with the aim of gaining insight into the history and the course of the disease. The social anamnesis includes gathering information on family, professional, housing and financial status, i.e. problems that the user might face in one of these areas. The diagnosis is determined by a professional on the basis of the patient's data and observed symptoms. The social diagnosis is defined as: »a series of procedures used by the social worker in order to gather the necessary data and observations based on which he will form a diagnostic judgement or give an assessment of the case«. The treatment is implemented on the basis of diagnostic results and is aimed at the correction or alleviation of a disorder, illness or problem (Vidanović, 2006.). In the medical model, the social worker deals with individuals and their situations with the intention of measuring and categorizing the pathology and determining causal relationships and factors. Therefore, the main task within the social work practice is to determine pathological conditions and personality and environment dysfunctions in order to »prescribe« the most suitable therapy, i.e. measures and services to which the user is entitled by law. The individual should be treated, and when he is cured he can assume the place he is entitled to in the society (Howe, 1997.). Social workers are oriented towards finding imperfections and not towards determining the potentials present at the level of the individual, group or community. The research conducted with the sample of 120 so called diagnostic opinions composed by social workers at the request of a court for the purpose of evaluation of psycho-physical and social status of minors revealed that expressions suggesting the presence of imperfections and problems are used in 90% of the cases, and a positive connotation exists in only 10% (Jugović, 2005.).

In the approaches based on the medical model of social work, it is difficult to imagine the involvement of service users in any systematic education process. They are not expected to be active or to take initiatives and actions but to depend on social services. They are not carriers of changes and they can be a model of how not to act or how to accept the concept

of learned helplessness. Such an approach is harmful not only for the users but for social workers as well. In the conditions of an inadequate work organisation, exposure to physical and verbal assaults of service users, a feeling of too great responsibility for the fulfilment of the users' needs, which is not in accordance with objective possibilities, and the lack of continuous professional support, social workers are often victims of the burnout syndrome, incapable of producing the desired changes (Friščić, 2006.).

The theoretical and methodological models based on ecological systems and humanistic ideas bring considerable changes to the position of service users and thus the possibility of their better involvement in the education process.

**Ecological systems model**. This model shifts the focus from the individual and his dysfunction to different transactions which take place within a living space. The main principle of the systems model is that the quality of life depends on the system in the immediate environment (Payne, 2001.) People and the environment are not observed separately but in the processes of constant circular exchange. Unfulfilled needs and problems are analyzed as a result of psychological, physiological and environmental processes influencing and remodelling one another in a continuous time flow (Milosavljević and Brkić, 2005.).

The basic role of social work consists in the following: exchange of a disturbed communication between different sub-systems (individuals in a family, users in residential units etc.), change of dysfunctional systems and structures (families, communities, institutions), creation of new social networks (for users with alcohol and drug abuse problems, former prisoners undergoing the rehabilitation and social reintegration process) and mediation between different systems which surround the user. The systems model of social work especially emphasises the importance of undertaking various social actions within certain social structures (for example local communities), as well as representing users before social institutions (legal, political, economic).

The tasks of social workers are not reflected only in diagnosing the problems and constraints but also in assessing the needs and determining the potential and resources at different levels. In place of anamneses, diagnoses and treatments, social workers make assessments and they plan measures and services. The users are not considered as determined beings and passive receivers of help but as active and responsible partners. In order to become active, it is necessary to empower them, develop their potentials and help them gain power of decision-making and control over their own lives (Payn, 2001.). These objectives can be attained at different levels: level of emotion, level of ideas and level of action (Milosavljević and Brkić, 2005.). The users need help in order to reduce the feeling of helplessness, attain a higher level of self-respect and start actions in the direction of changing their situation, with the support of local community resources. Therefore, the focus of interest is not only on the individual, it is shifted towards the social network and community, in order to overcome isolation and create a sense of belonging and mutual problem solving (Whittaker and Tracy, 1997.). Instead of partial approach, a holistic approach to problems

and needs is introduced, which helps overcome the static and classical nature of the three-method approach in social work.

**Humanistic model**. The value and the power of humanistic model in social work lies in the fact that it is based on the understanding of the significance of human existence and the faith in the capacity of consciousness in human beings to reason, make choices and act freely. The focus is placed on the human ability to attain personal power in order to control their lives and change the ideas that shackle them. As opposed to dominating medical and "socially-controlling" approaches, this model reaffirms the faith in the capacity of people to enhance their existence and life expression. It also respects the importance of authentic human needs for an overall human normality and well-being and underlines human self-respect and self-understanding as well as the construction of human resources.

An important aspect of this model is the fact that it emphasizes the humanistic value called »integrity«. In the social work it means that humans should be treated as integral beings, and not based on their individual social roles or parts of their personality. The social work based on humanistic ideas has the following basic objectives: defining, planning and participation in the implementation of social changes; participation in the promotion of the development of individuals, social groups and communities; creation and enhancement of conditions for fulfilment and development of comprehensive and various human needs and potentials as well as for creation of well-being for everyone (Milosavljević, 1998.).

Humans and their needs are observed as a union of biological, psychological and social characteristics and circumstances and they can be assessed only in that integral manner (Brkić, 2008.). Unfulfilled needs are a result of different events and processes source of which is in the individual sphere or in the sphere of primary groups or communities. Depending on the case, certain aspects are more prominent, but only through their interconnexion they form the whole which indicates the nature of problems and ways of dealing with them. The needs are neither assessed nor fulfilled in a fragmental manner, but integrally through a complete assessment of available resources at all levels (individual, group, community), taking over the personal and professional responsibility, mutual learning, effective team work of professionals as well as coordination and development of different services in the community (Brkić, 2008.).

Having in mind all these issues, certain key questions can be raised. Can we truly believe in the principles of partnership, empowerment and responsibility without participation of those to whom these principles should apply? How can we recognize the potentials if the students are taught to see only restraints? How to work in practice, if the study programmes allow only for shallow contacts with users, which are more like looking at the exposition of »marginalised« and »deprived« individuals than the understanding of the nature of human needs and problems? It is impossible to fully understand what a deprivation in the fulfilment of needs, marginalization, social isolation but also empowerment, responsibility, adaptability, persistence and innovativeness mean without including those who have such an experience

in life as well as the necessary knowledge and skills. As opposed to many other professions, social workers directly help people to overcome their problems, to become aware of their own potentials and the potentials in their environment and to gain control over their lives as much as possible. Which knowledge and skills do the users and their careers posses that can be used in the education of social workers? Above all, they have direct life experience which is not contained in the textbooks.

Rare are the university professors, social workers or students who know what it means to be truly marginalized and socially excluded, if they have not personally acquired that experience. Who knows what a successful interview, a good assessment or a true partnership is if not those who directly participated in the situation, whose quality of life depended on them. There are not many professionals who have personal knowledge and skills on how to survive on the street, protect themselves, participate in a life of a community without the most basic conditions, and fight for their own rights and for the rights of those who are similar to them in the context of rejection intolerance and incomprehension. The fundamental importance for the user involvement is the recognition of the value and the importance of promotion of knowledge as well as conceptual theories and models that the users develop and apply in their own life (Beresford and Croft, 2001.). Such a connexion between the theory and practice, based on the experience and real events represents only the basis for the enhancement of students' practical knowledge (Waterson and Morris, 2005.).

However, the user involvement in the education process should not be a chaotic and disorganized one. It is necessary to secure many prerequisites in order to maximize the effects and minimize eventual negative consequences. Both positive and negative experiences in Serbia can serve for the creation of a system of user involvement in the education of social workers.

## EXPERIENCE OF SERVICE USER INVOLVEMENT IN THE EDUCATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN SERBIA

In the broad sense, these experiences can be divided into positive and negative ones, which means that something has been done and experienced and that there is consciousness of the outcomes. As far as service user involvement in the education of social workers in Serbia is concerned, it is difficult to talk about any systematic experience. The reason for that is quite simple. This subject has never been seriously discussed, planned, realized or followed in the academic community. A partial experience is a result of student field placements and exercises within individual courses.

The Department of Social Work and Social Politics was established in 1974. at the Faculty of Political Science in Belgrade. Up to the academic year 1977./1978., the graduated student acquired the tile of the Politologist in the field of study of Social Work and Social Politics. In that year, a study programme was adopted for the first time as well as the academic

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title of Graduate Social Worker. At that time, the programme offered a modern, systematic and organized approach to field placements with clearly defined outcomes. The field placements were compulsory during all the years of study, it was planned for them to take place in different social care services and institutions and the tasks and the modalities of student engagement differed in accordance with their professional maturation. The completed field placement was a requirement for the exam within the courses Methodology of Social Work with an Individual, Methodology of Social Work with the Group and Theory of Social Work. The problems related to the realization of field placements arose at the beginning. Who are the field instructors? In what way will their work be encouraged? Who is directly in charge of the realization of placements and follow up of students? Besides general guidelines, is it necessary to develop a placement plan for different services in which it is realized and for different expected outcomes? Should the users be included in the realization of student field placement and in what way? Unfortunately, the answers to these questions have not been found up until the present. This situation resulted in the fact that student field placements receive attention only at a declarative level.

The reform of the curriculum which took place after the Higher Education Act was adopted (2005.) resulted in the fact that greater interest is shown for student field placement. The placement is compulsory in all study years and is attributed the appropriate number of credits. The students cannot pass to the next study year nor acquire the title of Graduate Social Worker without having completed their field placements. The objectives, obligations, outcomes end evaluation modalities have been defined for the first time. However, the ways of engaging and motivating field instructors, i.e. a concrete responsibility for the realization of placements is the issue which is still not clarified and represents a potential problem.

The participation in the action research projects is one of the possibilities of inclusion of students in the direct work with the user. Action projects are aimed at provoking certain changes and are based on subject-subject relations and active participation of all interested parties. Their principles are very close to the ones in modern social work. Due to their character, action projects are ideal for constructing the process of mutual learning, participation and partnership. From time to time, social work students have a chance to participate in the realization of projects based on the mentioned methodology. The project Older Brother, Older Sister is one of the rare ones to have been realized continuously. It was led by a civil society association Let's Cherish the Children and, on the basis of a field instructor's work, the students were enabled to help children and young people without parents to acquire social skills. It was based on direct and intensive relationships and students had a chance to gain direct insight into the needs and problems of children and young people without parent care, practical ways of overcoming these problems, principles of empowerment, partnership, responsibility and most important, into their practical application. Unfortunately, due to lack of financial resources, this project is about to be completed. The students have also been included in the realization of other action projects such as the following: Integration of Young Law Offenders into the Local Community or Development of Social Protection Function of the Local Community in the Fulfilment of the Needs of Roma Population. The main disadvantage was the fact that a limited number of students were included and that the project implementation depended on financial resources. However, these examples have undoubtedly demonstrated that action projects represent a valuable means of including the users in the education process and mutual learning.

In the end, engaging service users in exercises within certain courses also represents an experience. The least structured and organized modality consisted in inviting service users at the faculty so they could talk about their problems, needs and experience. This means of inclusion revealed to be also mutually useful: the students had a chance to gain new and structure old theoretical knowledge in the direct conversation with service users and the service users were enabled to build their self-esteem and feeling of importance. One should not forget that "empowerment can be the outcome of a partnership, even when it was not the primary goal« (Barnes, Carpenter and Bailey, 2000.).

The inclusion of professionals from the practice in the education process has a much longer tradition. Each year, at the proposal of the Department, the Faculty Council for Education and Science, approves of a list of professionals who will be engaged for teaching. Although its importance is unquestionable, this aspect of student education has certain disadvantages. Namely, the professionals mainly reproduce theoretical knowledge learned at the faculty enriched by the examples from their practice and though this is positive, the problem is that the examples are mostly based on an out-of-date methodology, which puts the professional in an expert, value-neutral position. The user's voice is not heard and others talk on his behalf which can contribute to the development of biases and stereotypes on passive, helpless, sometimes funny persons, who are grateful if they receive any help.

A positive example of service user involvement in the social welfare system is the elaboration of a draft of the *Standard for Personal Assistance Services*. With the support of the Ministry of Work and Social Politics, the Centre for Independent Living of the Disabled Persons proposed a draft of the Standard. It is currently in the pilot phase, but it is important that the opinions and knowledge of users have been taken into account as well as the fact that they assume a part of the responsibility for the implementation of this document<sup>5</sup>.

The experience on service user involvement in Serbia is very limited. However, these isolated examples show that this approach needs to be developed for the benefit of both students and users. In order to introduce a system which gives the desired results, principles on which it is founded need to be defined and the process itself needs to be gradually and carefully planned.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Available online at: www.minrzs.sr.gov.yu.

# TOWARD A DEVELOPED MODEL OF INVOLVEMENT OF SERVICE USERS AND THEIR CARERS IN THE EDUCATION PROCESS

A prerequisite for the construction of an organized model is that the academic community becomes aware of the necessity of service user involvement in the education process as well as the appropriate system support. For example, every accredited social work faculty in England receives an amount of 6.200 pounds from the GSCC (General Social Care Council) for programmes of service user involvement in the education process (Levin, 2004.). Certainly, it is not realistic to expect such a support in Serbia in the near future. However, a more realistic expectation would be that the State, faculties and teachers support this process. In that sense, the Government, as a founder of state owned faculties, should fulfil its obligations as regards the financing of the equipment and the facilities for the disabled students to be able to study<sup>6</sup>. The fulfilment of these obligations has a great significance not only to the disabled students but also for involvement of service users with the same needs in the education process. The law stipulates the possibility of engaging teachers to teach special skills. They have to fulfil the following conditions: they have obtained a graduate degree, published scientific papers and they proved to have acquired the skills needed for teaching<sup>7</sup>. It is one of the modalities of formally including the users and their carers in the education process. The most common biases and stereotypes about the service users are that they are not educated enough, i.e. that they do not fulfil legal obligations in order to be formally included in the education process. However, the reality is completely different. There is a large number of disabled persons who fulfil the required prerequisites and most importantly they have personal experience with social services. Furthermore, in the framework of the students' total workload within a study programme a possibility is foreseen for them to be included in voluntary activities in the local community. "Voluntary work is performed without remuneration, it has credits assigned to it and it is organized by a higher education institutions on projects important for the local community"8. It is one of the modalities for the students to be included in action projects with multiple benefits. They have a direct contact with the users, they acquire practical knowledge and skills which are evaluated in the framework of a particular course. The faculties are independent in creation of study programmes as well as in defining the ways of course organisation so there are no legal obstacles for organizing modules in which the service users and their carers will be included. Similar experience exists in the School of Social, Community and Health Studies of the University of Hertfordshire, in the United Kingdom. With the aim of preparing second-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Higher Education Act, Article 59, Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia 76/05.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Higher Education Act, Article 68, Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia 76/05.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Higher Education Act, Article 29, Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia 76/05.

year students for participating in field placements, a module entitled Working in Collaboration with Service Users was organized in the duration of 5 days of block classes. The users, supported by teachers, transferred their knowledge to students. For example, they taught them how to conduct a successful interview, what questions to ask and in what way, how to encourage a partner relationship. During the evaluation, the students emphasized that such an approach was very useful for them in a practical sense and that they entirely understood the concept of working in a partnership with the users (Waterson and Morris, 2005.).

Such an experience can be implemented in Serbia as well since the existing regulations, although not directly encouraging it, do not create obstacles in the service user involvement in the teaching process. More careful planning and adequate preparation are of a great importance for the creation of a systemic approach to the service users' involvement in the education of social workers.

### THE MAIN (PRE)REQUISITES FOR SERVICE USER INVOLVEMENT IN THE EDUCATION PROCESS

In order to create an organized and systematic model of service user involvement in the education process it is necessary to fulfil the following basic conditions:

- **1. Securing minimal resources**. Includes customization of infrastructure which enables functioning of the users who have difficulties with mobility and covering the cost of their engagement.
- 2. Defining the volume and the modality of the involvement of service users and their carers in study programmes. It is necessary to clearly define the reasons and outcomes expected from the involvement of users. The curricula should clearly contain outcomes and reasons for service user involvement. Manthorpe identified three levels of the involvement of users and their carers: personal testimony, participation as co-coaches and use of experience which they have in providing and receiving help (Manthorpe, 2005.). The users and their carers can also be included in the activities related to practical courses and student assessment. In that sense they can be field instructors if the field placement is realized in a non-governmental organization. There are different ways in which they can be included in the assessment of student knowledge and skills. Mentoring is one of them, but we can also mention assessment of student projects, seminars and essays. There are examples where users or their helpers, in cooperation with the teacher, evaluate interviews that students conduct with the users. It is impossible to mention all the examples but the main requirement is that they be transparent, comprehensible to everyone and based on clear indicators.
- **3. Defining the users and the carers.** Although it seems clear at first glance, there are opposite opinions on this issue. A traditional definition determined the user as a person who had in the past received social care services or receives them now and thus has a

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direct experience with them. Broader and more comprehensive definitions include those persons who determine themselves as potential users, either anticipating their future needs or because they have chosen not to use the services which are currently available to them. Who are the users? Are they individuals who currently receive the services? Or are they also those who received them in the past? Can we consider users those persons living an independent life, not depending on social care services, pertaining to a certain group which is frequently a service user and who have experience in collaborating with social services? The organizations of users criticize the term "service user" because it suggests that they are passive receivers of help (Shaping Our Lives National User Network, 2003.). They underline that every individual has a right to self-identification and a right to be considered as actively participating in providing and receiving services in all other aspects of life as well. Moreover, they define themselves in the terms of allies and helpers to social workers. It is much easier to identify caregivers. They are usually defined as close persons from the environment (family members, friends, neighbours) who secure a practical help and emotional support to those who need it. Many faculties in the developed countries have accepted a broader definition, which means the notion of a user largely depends on how the particular person defines himself, which again enables individuals and organizations to decide for themselves if they should be included in the process of education of social workers.

- **4. Each organized activity is based on a clear division of tasks**. Who is/are the person(s) in charge? Who will take care on securing indispensable infrastructural organizational and other conditions for the user involvement in the education process? It can be a person in charge for organization of students' field placements, if such a person exists. If not, the best possible solution is that a teacher or a teacher assistant is responsible for the realization for this part of the programme as well.
- 5. Experience has important practical implications but is often not sufficient in order for the knowledge and skills to be transferred to others. Due to this fact, it is necessary for service users and their carers to receive an appropriate training where they will learn about ways and methods of active teaching. The participation of users does not include only personal testimonies but also implies active participation in teaching and assessment. Thus an appropriate certificate on the required teaching skills is mandatory.
- **6. Securing adequate remuneration**. It is common for individuals who teach certain education programmes to be remunerated for their work. The service users or their carers should not be an exception. The remuneration means that their knowledge is being respected and it is a contribution to the development of their self-respect. In other words, they are placed in the same position as other teachers of education contents. This concept has been widely accepted in many places. There are different modalities of payment but it is important that the work should be valued in an appropriate way.
- **7. Identifying the partners**. Who are the users/carers included in the education process? Should the choice be left to the person in charge or should an appropriate formal

cooperation be organized? Most authors dealing with this issue support the second concept. By signing appropriate protocols or cooperation agreements with the associations of users, it is secured that legitimate representatives are included in the process, a possibility of improvisation is diminished and greater are the chances of making an adequate choice of individuals possessing required teaching skills as well.

#### CONCLUSION

The service user involvement in the education process is very important for attaining social justice, participation, de-marginalization and comprehension of the social concept of the disability. It is based on empowerment, as opposed to social isolation and passivity. This process needs to be planned and structured, based on a true partnership of the faculty, service users, their carers and other interested participants. It includes active participation of service users in planning of curricular segments in which they are directly involved. All other solutions lead to improvisation and quasi-participation because they support the approach in which there are experts, those who decide, and passive executors of pre-defined contents. The user/carer involvement is a requirement in a modern education of social workers and a natural and logical way of acquiring missing knowledge and skills from those who have them, because "if you wish to learn how to drive a car, you will learn from someone who drives, if you wish to learn English, you will learn from someone who knows that language, and if you wish to learn about the disability, you will learn from someone who lives with it" (Branfield, 2007.).

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