

The Perceptions of Children at a Children Day Care Centre about the Authority of a Social Worker

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The article presents the theoretical explanations of the concept of authority and its ethical implications for social work practice. It discusses the empirical findings of the qualitative case study conducted at the day care centre X. The perceptions of children, what authority of a social worker means and consists of and how to gain it, are presented. The article includes a detailed description of the specific context of the case study and indicates the selected research methods. The degree of reliability and validity of research study are also discussed. The empirical data of the case study is analysed and discussed and conclusions are presented.

Key words: authority, social worker, ethics, children day care centres, case study, the perceptions of children.

Introduction

According to Tijūnėlienė (2006), the problem of authority is a practical and scientific problem and requires scientific recommendations, how to strengthen authority in contemporary conditions. The phenomena of authority of a teacher or parents to children has been analysed and discussed by various researchers. The studies in the areas of education and psychology offer valuable insights into the phenomena of authority. Many research studies are based on the philosophical notions of authority and the relationalism perspective, which defines authority primarily not as a capacity but as a relationship (Bochenski, 2004). Bochenski (2004) divides authority into epistemic or deontic authority. The first

depends on professional training, skills and knowledge gained by specific training and skills, which are used in daily professional practice. The second category – deontic authority can be linked to power, which a person has to give orders to others and make decisions. Švedaitė-Sakalausė et al. (2014) offer valuable insights into power and social work relationships because care relationships frequently contain dependency. The power of authority occurs because a more powerful person is capable of meeting the needs of the other and such authority is based on trust (Švedaitė-Sakalausė et al., 2014). Despite observed similarities in social theories, which explore the phenomena of authority, authority remains a complex concept and has

many interpretations, and is influenced by social, cultural, political conditions of the time (Tijūnėlienė, 2006). The awareness of professional authority or the lack of it can have an influence if social workers practice ethically and effectively. A day care centre for children is a place with its own rules and boundaries (Sipovič, 2007). The role of a social worker at a children day care centre may overlap with a role of an educator and has some distinct and unique functions and values assigned only to this contemporary profession. Despite the importance and relevance of the topic to daily practice, there is a significant lack of research studies conducted to explore how children perceive authority of social workers working at day care centres. Furthermore, there is a lack of research exploring authority of a social worker in general. Therefore, analysis is required to understand better how authority of a social worker is perceived by children as the main service users of children day care centres. The conducted research explores how children attending the day care centre X perceive and understand authority of a social worker, what it consists of according to children and how they think social workers can gain authority. It is a qualitative case study and is bound by contemporary time and the context of the specific day care centre. The aim of the case study is to explore how children understand the authority at the specific day care centre X. It was achieved by interviewing and observing children who attend the day care centre X and comparing the empirical data of the case study with the theoretical concepts about authority of a social worker.

Research aim – to explore how children understand the authority of a social worker working at the day care centre X.

Research questions – how the authority of a social worker is perceived by children attending the day care centre X? How to become a social worker with authority according to children?

Theoretical background

1. Authority for Children in Social Research

According to Tijūnėlienė (2000), the concept of authority means the influence of a person in various aspects of the life on another person or a group and describes the characteristics of a person who has a strong influence on others, such as intelligence and will, and gained trust and respect. Tijūnėlienė (2006) argues that a young person is not free from authority and needs constant support of a person who can see personal opportunities, understand a young person, who respects the freedom of a young person and can help to find value in his/her life. Skarbaliėnė (2015) argues that obeying to authority should be based not on the fear of abuse, but firstly, on respect and a given right to others to make important decisions and make judgements and that authority can be linked to having strong influence on others. R. R. Robertson (2014) emphasizes the complexity and ambiguity of the concept. Nevertheless, he argues that there is a consensus among researchers that it exists in the relationships between people. He argues that the understanding of the concept may depend on particular situations and people. Care, trust, and respect are identified as the relational communication elements for authority development. The researcher argues that once authority is earned, it needs to be maintained through evidence that it is reasonable and that power and influence

are used properly. Clark (2006) argues that professional role often encompasses instrumental and moral responsibilities and moral and instrumental relationships. Hugman (2005) emphasizes the importance of professional ethics in social work because the profession carries deontic authority and professionals exercise power in relation to service users, especially children. Švedaitė-Sakalauskė et al. (2014) explore power paradigms of social work and argue that power exists in social work relationships because care relationships contain dependency. The power of authority occurs because a more powerful person is capable of meeting the needs of the other and such authority is based on trust (Švedaitė-Sakalauskė et al., 2014). Banks (2006) claims that social work is based on contradictory aims and values, which are linked to care and control functions, which sometimes create tensions between social workers and children who use their service. The moral authority and values of a social worker are necessary to be able to fulfil ethically their formal duties and obligations and sensitively exercise power, which they hold over their service users. The researcher argues that workers who want to become moral authority for service users need to be honest, trustworthy, reliable, and dependable. It is also argued that responses to stress and crisis situations often originate in the character of the person rather than the contemplation of various regulations and codes of ethics (Clark, 2006).

Social workers of children day care centres work with various groups of people – parents of children, other professionals, community, however, they spend most of their time working directly with children who attend a day care centre (Sipovič, 2007). Therefore, it is very important to

understand how their personal and professional authority impacts children, how children perceive their authority, how social workers can gain or lose authority, and learn about the ways to become a social worker with authority. Clark (2006) argues that social work is closely related to teaching. In practice situations, a social worker not only offers practical assistance, but also is a personality, which shows how to act and do things by an example, teaches a client certain standards, values and, therefore, the profession of a social worker has a strong moral dimension. According to Clark (2006), professionals need to live a virtuous life to merit their responsibilities and trust and they cannot be value-free in their work. A social worker who works at a children day care centre, has a role which frequently overlaps with the role of an educator, because of their activities aimed to educate children. Significant amount of time is spent directly with them (Sipovič, 2007). However, a social worker is often aware of a wider social environment of the child and can offer support and work with wider circles of children – their families, relatives, neighbours, school, other professionals, etc. Children day care centres are a relatively new phenomenon in Lithuania and, therefore, social workers at children day centres do not have a clear identity and well-defined job requirements. There is a lack of research how the professional authority of social workers operates and can be used at work. However, social workers can learn a lot from the research conducted in the fields of pedagogy about authority.

Tijūnelienė (2006) emphasizes the importance of a strong moral character of practitioners working with children. The researcher states that righteousness, ability to communicate sincerely and naturally are important moral features of a person with

authority. The researcher also emphasizes the importance of authority of an adult to educate children moral freedom, creativity and independent thinking, that might sometimes clash with the functions of control in social work. However, the researcher also argues that a young person cannot be free from authority and learn without it, because he/she needs support and guidance of an adult. Tījūnēlienē (2006) claims that spiritual freedom of young people is an essential component to be a true authority. A person with authority should attract them by their moral values, so they can freely accept their power and influence. The research of Pace and Hemmings (2007) supports the argument that children nowadays do not accept the authority of adults automatically because of their position in the society, and professionals need to earn authority over them. Unfortunately, many social workers not are aware of how to earn authority over children and how their authority may influence them. Tījūnēlienē (2006) argues that pedagogical authority consists of epistemic authority and universal education of educators. She claims that it is important how educators use their knowledge in practice. The moral authority is emphasized as an important component for an educator and such qualities as righteousness, respect, pedagogical love, and strong character are emphasized as being very important in work with children. Children need to have people they can trust, learn from and follow, and people who can help them to find meaning in life through the examples of their personality (Tījūnēlienē, 2006). Educators serve as an ideal for children by setting examples by their lifestyle and values and children can identify with them. Therefore, children can be influenced, provoked and changed by educators who are accepted as being an

authority for them. Tījūnēlienē (2006) also emphasizes the importance of communication culture of an educator, his/her warmth, sincerity, openness and respect for others as important components of building authority of the educator. It is argued that it is important that an educator expresses his/her moral values and humanity in a pedagogical process with children.

2. The Description of the Case

Children day care centres are institutions that offer social and educational services for children from social risk families. The first day care centres for children were opened in 1994. At the moment, there are around 150 day care centres for children and 24% of children from social risk families are attending them. Communities in partnership with municipalities establish day centres for children to spend their leisure time in a meaningful way and offer help with their homework. Day centres offer care for children during the day and additional services to fulfil the main needs of a child, which cannot be fulfilled by their families. At the same time, social workers support parents to improve their parenting skills. Various preventive programs are offered to seek integration of kids from social risk families into schools, environment, society, protecting them from abuse, bullying and preventing them from being taken to institutional care. Volunteering is well-developed at day care centres and social workers work alongside volunteers (Sipovič, 2007). 58 percent of practitioners at children day care centres are social workers (Sipovič, 2007). They often work alongside other practitioners, such as psychologists and social pedagogues. According to legal requirements, an un-

qualified worker cannot work at a day care centre (Social Security and Labour Ministry, 2013). A role and authority of a social worker is confined by certain legal regulations and general requirements for a day care centre setting and the policies and values of the specific organisation. The legal requirements set certain boundaries, expectations and powers for the role of a social worker and might impact how social workers understand and use their professional and personal authority at work.

The perceptions on authority of a social worker were explored at the particular children day care centre X. The day care centre is managed by the NGO 'X' and is partly funded by the Ministry of Social Security and Labour and private funders. Currently, there are two permanent social workers responsible for organising day care centre activities. Currently, it is attended by 25 children from 7 to 14 years-old from "social risk families", "families lacking social skills", experiencing difficulties or living on benefits. There are various routes how children can come to the day care centre X, some are referred by state social workers or social pedagogues from schools, others come because their parents hear about a day care centre or their friends are attending it. There is a selection process and a waiting list to attend the day care centre X. Therefore, families are attending interviews, fill in questionnaires. The evidence is needed that family needs support for a child to attend the day care centre X. The priority is given to children from the local area to increase cooperation with parents and to work with local community. Children and parents get services for free. The attendance is voluntary and children are not obliged to participate in all activities. Children come after

school and get help with their homework, get snacks and attend various activities that aim to develop their social and practical skills, increase their emotional awareness and coping skills. Social workers try to work not only with children, but also to cooperate with their families, school and other agencies. Qualified social workers work together with psychologists, social work practice students and volunteers. The NGO X is guided by Christian values and principles. However, not all workers or children are practicing faith, but all staff members are familiar with the values and principles of the organisation and adhere to them. The methodology of the organisation is an educative approach based on the recognition of the inherent value and dignity of every person, on his/her treatment as an integral person, on building a strong relationship and nurturing it through time and persistent work seeking his/her empowerment. When designing the activities, the attention is drawn to peculiar needs of a person. Workers and practitioners have daily reflections about their work and weekly team meetings and monthly supervisions. There are legal requirements and documents that describe the role of a social worker working at the day care centre X and describe rights, duties and powers of a social worker. Also, the authority of a social worker at a day care centre might be formed by the values of the organisation and personal values of social workers working at the organisation.

3. The Research Methods

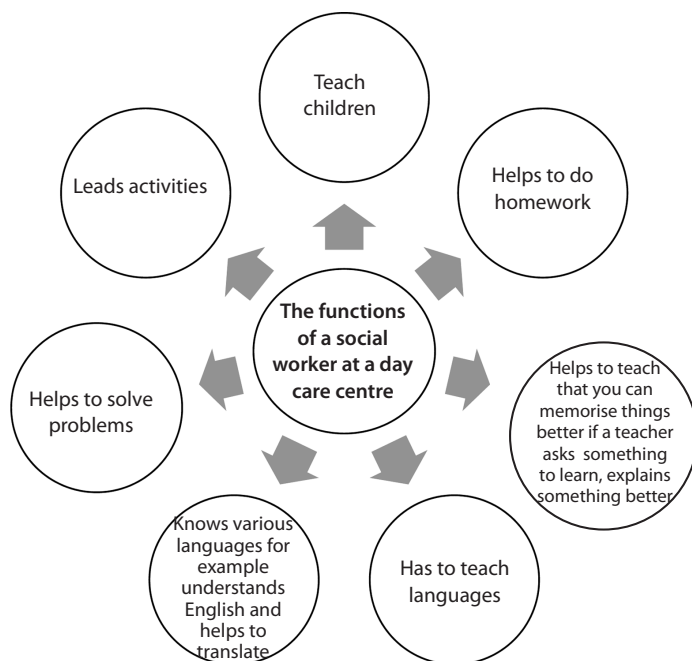
A purposefully selected site, which could help to understand the research question in more depth, was chosen. The choice was based on good access to participants and

opportunity for a researcher to be actively engaged with service users – attending children – a convenient sample. The case study protocol was developed. 6 semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with children attending the day care centre X to explore how they perceive a social worker, which they admire and want to follow as an example, what qualities such social workers should have and what the ways to become such social workers are. Observational data of interviews were also used for data analysis. The open-ended, emerging data was collected and coded and themes were developed and compared with theoretical concepts. The conducted case study is context-bound and perceptions were limited to children attending the day care centre X and reveal the perceptions limited to the specific context of the organisation. However, the case study allowed to explore the concept of authority of a social worker to produce deeper understanding how the phenomenon might operate and can be perceived by children. The grounded theory approach was chosen to analyse data because the aim of the research project was to produce theories grounded by research data. Useful concepts and key phrases were marked in the chunks of transcribed text and categorized to thematic groups. Coded categories were linked together in theoretical models around the central category of authority of a social worker. The constructed categories were compared with pre-existing theories if they match them or new theories were searched to explain them (Creswell, 2003). Observational data were used to complement verbal data.

4. The Perceptions of Children about the Authority of a Social Worker

The interviews were conducted with six 9–12 years-old children who agreed to participate in the research study and are attending the day care centre X and whose parents had signed the written permission to participate in the research project. Children were asked a similar set of questions; some of their responses were explored in more depth. Most of the interviewed children were not familiar with the concept of authority and were not able to define what the concept means. Only one child told that she knows the concept but was not able to describe it verbally. Therefore, taking into account the age and development of children, it was chosen to speak about the authority using the theoretical or identified by practitioners terms that were familiar to children and that were not so difficult to grasp. They were asked “what a social worker does”, “how an ideal social worker should act”, “are you perceiving him/her as an example and why”, “what qualities ideal social worker should have”, “is a social worker example for you”, and “what can help a social worker to perform well or hinder him/her from that”, and etc. It was important to explore what social workers do according to children because it was important to understand the context in which their authority operates, because it links to limits and power, which social workers have according to children. Their responses are presented in the graph below.

Even though a social worker performs various tasks and functions at the day care centre X, similar functions and qualities were assigned to a social worker as are



Picture 1. The Functions of a social worker mentioned by children

usually assigned to a teacher. These functions were the first that children identified and remembered and were mentioned by all 6 interviewed children. According to a child A, social worker “helps to do homework”, a child B identified that they “teach children”, a child C expressed that a social worker “has to teach languages”, a child D suggested that it is important “that they teach children, so they can reach the same level as they have”. A Child E explained that “the teacher gives homework and a worker helps to do it”. The interviews revealed that pedagogical function is very significant for children and they really value epistemic authority of a social worker related to various pedagogical skills and their ability to educate and explain things to them. They see “a good” social worker as a professional who is knowledgeable

and prudent in many areas. The child A identified that a social worker “needs to know everything”, child B explained that such social worker “knows English language and can translate”, and child C thought that a social worker “knows many things, which children do not know”. The interviews revealed that children really value pedagogical support, which is offered at a day care centre. The child A expressed that “if they do not teach, children will not know anything and will not be able to study at the university”, child B thought that “it means a lot to children that they help us and explain very well”, child C suggested that “they help to remember things and explain something better”. Clark (2006) also argues that social work is closely related to teaching. In the social work role, as in teaching, a social

worker needs to model ways of life, teach not only skills, but also values. The perceptions of children reveal also certain problems related to authority of a social worker because there is no clear distinction between functions of a teacher and a social worker in the perceptions of children. Therefore, that may create confusion and sometimes decrease deontic authority of a social worker to intervene and set certain social norms at a day care centre. The biggest number of qualities of a social worker with authority that were mentioned by children during interviews were related to a positive relationship of a social worker with them and other people and their skills of communication. It was suggested that he/she “knows how to communicate with children”, is “friendly”, “honest”, “pleasant”, and “behaves nicely with people”. It confirms the argument of the philosopher Bochenski (2004), who sees a relationship as a key element of the authority phenomenon. Authority is related to desire to be acknowledged by other person and children may seek to be acknowledged by a social worker, whom they perceive as authority (Švedaitė-Sakalauskė et al, 2014). Then children were asked if a personal relationship with them and a social worker is significant, all respondents confirmed that it is very significant. The power of authority is significant in pedagogical relationships because children can change their behaviour if they acknowledge the authority of a social worker (Švedaitė-Sakalauskė et al, 2014). Nevertheless, several children identified that they do not see a social worker as a friend and expect them “to be a little bit strict if children do not listen”, “show an example by their behaviour to others”, he/she “can ask us to do things”. It really corresponds to the definition of au-

thority developed by Bitinas (2004), who argues that the authority definition can be linked with being an example for others. He argues that people who educate children can be positive examples for children only if they have authority to children and their personal life matches with the requirements that they have for children and if they do not only demand, but also truly care for children. The interviewed children also emphasized the importance of a social worker being a positive example for them and whose behaviour they could watch and follow. One child suggested that “it is important how he/she communicates with other workers”, other suggested that “if a social worker would behave badly beyond boundaries of a day centre, he/she will not be able to change so much at a day centre”. It was indicated that the standards that they have at a day care centre should match with the ones they have in their daily life. The child claimed that “they respect us and we respect them, it is very good that they want to help us themselves, so that we become such children, youth”. They also want that social workers “act respectfully and not use various swearing words”. Therefore, the positive relationship with the worker and them being an example for a child are very significant for children and can be identified as the key features of the authority of a social worker at the day care centre X.

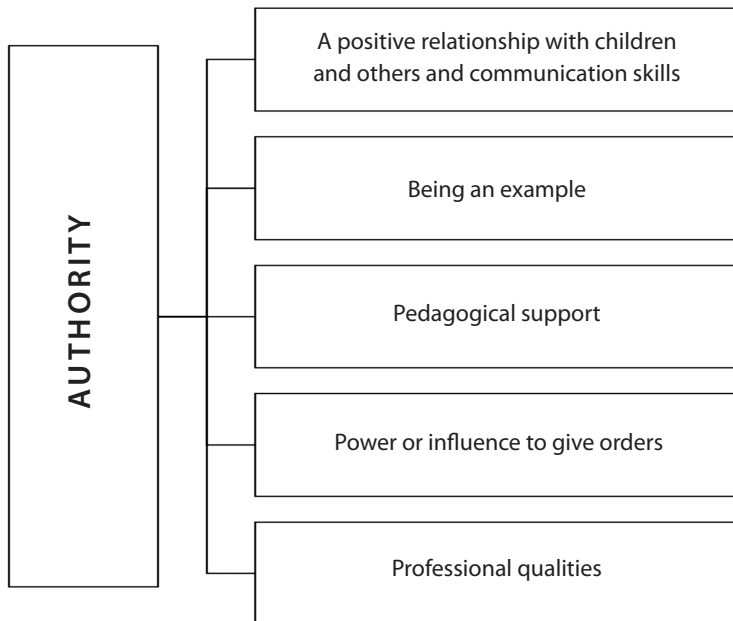
The categories of authority identified by Bochenski (2004) are also very important to understand how authority of a social worker is perceived by children because children value highly their professional qualities, when a social worker “knows what he/she needs to do” at a day care centre, “knows more and is more experienced than volunteers”, “organise

camps and activities for us to work, act, play, clean”, “knows many languages”, what can be identified as their epistemic authority, which is related to the skills and professional qualities of a social worker.

The interviewed children have also suggested that deontic authority is significant and it is important that a social worker has power and influence to give orders – according to them, it is important “to be a little bit strict if children do not listen”, “show an example by their behaviour to others”, he/she “can ask us to do things”. It can be related to power paradigms of social work that are explored in the research of Švedaitė-Sakalausė et al. (2014) and dependency, which contains in care relationships between children and social workers. Nevertheless, the main aspect of authority as identified by children was a positive relationship with them and other people and qualities attached to it. The picture below represents the main concepts constructed

from the responses of children to describe authority of a social worker. The picture below represents the responses of children.

When analysing the responses of children, it became obvious that authority of a social worker is conditioned by the authority of parents because in the majority of responses children identified parents as a source of support or the ultimate authority, deciding how a social worker should behave. Child A suggested that “parents can help and say that they should behave good, work well”, child B thought that “parents can tell how to do things right and he/she can change from this words”, child C suggested that he/she can “learn from the examples of friends and parents”, child D responded that “parents of social workers can help and explain what to do or not”. Therefore, the majority of children emphasized the importance of parental authority. Therefore, the responses encouraged to explore the question in more



Picture 2. *The concepts of authority constructed by the researcher from responses of children*

depth and children were asked whether it is more important for them if a social worker asks something or their parents. 2 children replied that it is “parents” and others that “both – a social worker and parents are equally important” and that “it seems that they help all together”. None of the children replied that the authority of a social worker is more important than the authority of their parents. Furthermore, all children, when asked if it is important that a social worker cooperates with their families, replied positively. The child A expressed that “they can tell to each other if children succeed or not, in this way they could understand each other better and offer more opportunity to help” and that “it is better when parents know everything”, child B thought that it is better that a social worker “communicates with a family more”, child C expressed that it is important to communicate “as good that he/she does not say bad things about parents, does not get angry at them, always calls them and somehow meet them”. It is argued that parents regulate moral and conventional issues as long as their authority is appropriate and they do not demand something unfair or immoral (Smetana, 2005). Therefore, the authority of parents is more significant than the authority of social workers to most children and that affects practice and decreases authority of social workers if there is tension and misunderstanding between families of children and social workers. The data illustrate that cooperation, information sharing and a positive relationship between their parents and social workers is very significant to children and can increase the authority of social workers.

Most of the interviewed children claimed that social workers can learn how

to be good at their work and become authority. They suggested various ways how they can become authority. The child A suggested that “if he started to do something wrong, can correct himself” and can learn “from various teachers and people who behave respectfully”, child C said that they “need to train and study”. The child B expressed that a social worker can learn from “the examples of friends and parents”. The child A also expressed that every social worker can work better if “he/she communicates well with others” and “wants himself to work well”. The child C thought that a social worker “understands himself better and what he/she does or teaches” and that social workers “do not count their time, they care about children more and that they learn and they reach the same level as people who help us”. Therefore, it can be argued that own motivation to change and do better and to learn from various positive examples and good communication and behaviour with others, being an example and devoting time and care for children and cooperating with their parents is the best way for a social worker to become an authority at the day care centre X, according to children.

Conclusions

1. Although a positive relationship with a child and good communications skills were identified as the main components of the authority of a social worker by the interviewed children, the important finding of the case study is that children placed a lot of importance to epistemic authority of a social worker related to pedagogical skills and pedagogical support offered at the day care centre X. According to children, a social worker needs to have knowledge in

- various fields, be prudent and a good educator, capable of explaining and teaching them. The interviewed children also emphasized the importance of a social worker being a positive example for them, whose behaviour they could watch, follow and the importance of being authentic and honest with them.
2. The authority of a social worker at the day care centre X was connected not only to epistemic, but also to deontic authority of a social worker. Children valued not only professional skills and qualities of practitioners, but also expected them to have power and influence to give orders and set boundaries to them; what can be related to power and dependency in care relationships of social work. A social worker is frequently in a more powerful position because he/she is capable of meeting the needs of children and giving them acknowledgement.
 3. Children emphasized the cooperation with their parents and a positive relationship with them as very important components of the authority of a social worker. Cooperation, information sharing and a positive relationship between their parents and social workers is very significant for the interviewed children. Therefore, an increased collaboration with parents is likely to increase the authority of social workers at the day care centre X.
 4. The interviewed children suggested that social workers can improve their practice and gain authority if they train and learn, have their own motivation to change and do better, learn from various positive examples, devote time and care for children. Therefore, the authority of a social worker is seen as being dynamic phenomenon by children and it can be gained if social workers are willing to learn and follow positive examples of people with authority.

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VAIKŲ, LANKANČIŲ DIENOS CENTRĄ, SOCIALINIO DARBUOTOJO AUTORITETO SUVOKIMAS

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S a n t r a u k a

Šiame moksliniame straipsnyje atskleidžiama socialinių darbuotojų autoriteto kritiško vertinimo svarba. Išsamiai aptariama autoriteto problema ir įvairios reikšmės, priskiriamos vaikų dienos centro socialinio darbuotojo vaidmeniui. Įvardijamos pagrindinės autoriteto sąvokos ir aptariamos įvairios dilemos, susijusios su socialinio darbuotojo autoritetu profesinėje praktikoje. Taip pat atskleidžiama teikiamo tyrimo praktinė ir teorinė vertė, pristatomi įvairūs teoriniai autoriteto sąvokos aiškinimai ir aptariama autoriteto įtaka socialinio darbo praktikai vaikų dienos centruose. Straipsnyje detalios diskutuojami empiriniai vaikų dienos centro X atvejo kokybinio tyrimo duomenys ir pristatoma, kaip vaikų dienos centrą lankantys vaikai supranta šiame centre dirbančių socialinių darbuotojų autoritetą, kokias sudedamąsias dalis priskiria jų autoritetui, kokias vaikai įvardija autoritetingo socialinio darbuotojo savybes ir būdus, kaip tapti autoritetingu socialiniu darbuotoju. Tirta vaikų dienos centro atvejo kontekstas detalios aprašomas ir pristatomi naudoti tyrimo metodai. Be to,

pateikiama išsami ir iliustruota tyrimo duomenų analizė, kuri atskleidžia, kaip apklausti vaikai supranta dirbančio vaikų dienos centre socialinio darbuotojo autoritetą, kokias socialinių darbuotojų savybes labiausiai vertina. Straipsnyje pristatomos tyrimo išvados, kurios apibendrina pagrindinius socialinio darbuotojo autoriteto, vaikų dienos centrą lankančių vaikų akimis, tyrimo atradimus, atskleidžiama, kad vaikai vertina ne tik santykius su socialiniu darbuotoju, bet ir jo kompetenciją ir pedagogines žinias, gebėjimą mokyti. Vaikai taip pat atskleidė bendradarbiavimo su savo tėvais svarbą ir kaip tai gali padidinti socialinių darbuotojų, dirbančių vaikų dienos centre, autoritetą. Tyrimo duomenys gali praturtinti teorines ir praktines žinias apie autoriteto vaidmenį socialinio darbo praktikoje ir jais remiantis būtų galima gerinti konkrečios įstaigos darbo kokybę ir stiprinti darbuotojų autoritetą.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: autoritetas, socialinis darbuotojas, etika, vaikų dienos centras, atvejo analizė, vaikų požiūris.

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