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STRUCTURAL POSITIONING AND PRACTICAL DIMENSIONS OF VOLUNTEERING IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIO-PEDAGOGICAL WORK WITH DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN

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***Abstract:** The current challenges before the socio-pedagogical work with children and youth, who are in a state of inequality, require the appropriate consideration of the existing strategies and approaches for the implementation of the supportive activity, oriented to the considered target groups. Key in this regard is the issue of clarifying the positional determinism of the so-called secondary levels of support and especially of those related to the voluntariness and free initiative of members of civil society. The report presents the main definitive aspects of volunteering as a conceptual construct. The most important parameters of the structural positioning and the practical dimensions of volunteering as an aspect of the helping activity are analyzed. Such a research perspective is needed in order to find appropriate solutions to the problem of intensifying the processes of social cohesion and achieving the necessary synchronization and effectiveness in the actions of formal social support systems, informal structures and individuals engaged in activities in the field of socio-pedagogical work with specific target groups of adolescents.*

***Keywords:** Volunteering, Functional aspects, Definitive markers, Practical dimensions, Structural positioning, Supporting socio-pedagogical activity, Children in disadvantaged situations.*

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century is characterized by social and technological changes, which necessitate a redefinition of the learning model, especially in the aspect related to the use of information and digital technologies. Modern children, the 'generation Z' or 'digital generation', as they are called, are born and raised surrounded by technologies - smartphones, tablets, TVs, computers, and others, which they handle with ease in early childhood. They are faced with the need to improve their skills and competencies, because of the use of information technology and equipment, multimedia and multimedia applications (Ivanova, 2017; Rashkova, 2020(b)), the Internet, animation, videos and more, are the future of our time. As *J. Doncheva* emphasizes: 'At the beginning of the 21st century, the new digital technologies provide humanity with the historical opportunity to make fundamental changes in children's education. Digital technologies change not only the way children learn, but also affect the content and subjects of the educational process and adds that: 'Introducing young children to the reality around them can also be supported by modern technological advances' (Doncheva, 2015: 71-73).

INTRODUCTION

The current challenges before the socio-pedagogical work with children and youth, who are in a state of inequality, require the appropriate understanding of the existing strategies and approaches for the implementation of the supportive activity oriented to the considered target groups. Such a research perspective is needed in order to find appropriate solutions to the problem of intensifying the processes of social cohesion and achieving the necessary synchronization in the actions of formal social support systems, informal structures and individuals engaged in activities in the field of social work with specific target groups of adolescents. Key in this regard is the issue of clarifying the positional determinism of the so-called secondary levels of support and especially of those related to the voluntariness and free initiative of members of civil society.

EXPOSURE

Volunteering is rarely conceptualized in itself - it is not an isolated area, but rather seen in the context of other phenomena and in terms of broader social phenomena such as work, leisure and social inclusion. Such a focus tends to localize volunteering in different spectra of social reality. Researched in this way, volunteering becomes part of broader social (and professional) activities and actions (Todorova, K., 2013).

The definitive aspects of volunteering as a conceptual construct are characterized by multivariate and structural fragmentation. During their construction, three basic positions are outlined /Fig.1/:

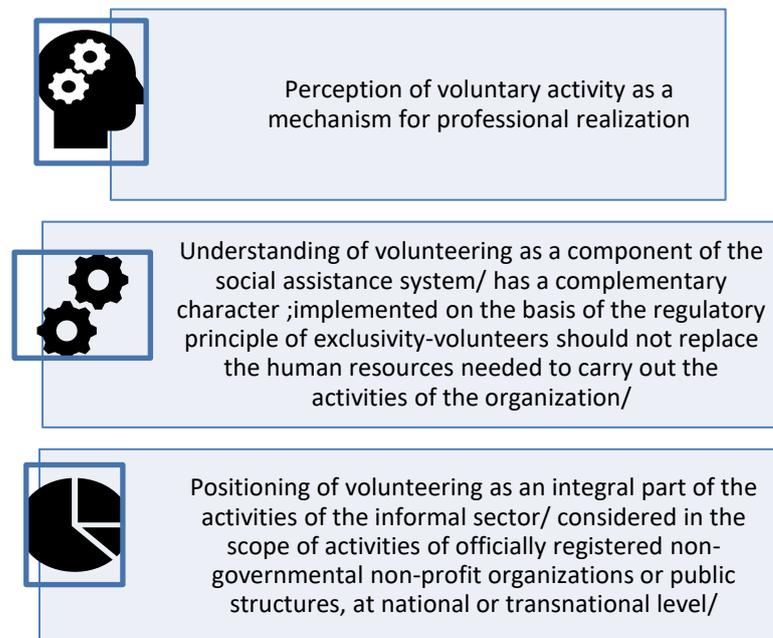


Figure 1. General definitive markers in clarifying the component nature of volunteering

From the point of view of the activity-content characteristic of the considered concept, it is in the general case defined as:

1. Various types of voluntary commitments with the following distinctive attributes: open to all, unpaid, executed of their own free will, with added social value (Bulgarian Center for Non-Profit Law., 2002).

2. Activities related to the provision of free time in order to benefit the environment, individuals or groups (other than / or apart from the family) (Paine, A., Hill, M., Rochester, C., 2010).

Regarding the definitive characteristics of the subject performing voluntary activity, the following generalized positions stand out:

1. A volunteer is anyone who, in his spare time, carries out activities for the benefit of others without claiming financial remuneration, and who volunteers as a result of his free will.

2. Volunteering is an activity in which the volunteer offers help to a specific group of people within a specific period of time.

Modern definitions emphasize the possibility of this type of activity being carried out within formal or informal organizations and thus define the wide scope of volunteering. (Todorova, K., 2013).

Regardless of the parametric scope and the nature of the volunteering activity, for its effective realization it is of special importance to coordinate the supporting activities with the basic principles that determine it, namely /Fig2./:



Figure 2. Basic determinants and guiding principles for the implementation of volunteering (Strategic plan of the Social Assistance Agency 2019-2021).

The indicated content-definitive markers and principled dispositions of the considered category of supporting social work are fully conceptually relevant and practically compatible with the main directions of the activities for realization of social-pedagogical interaction with disadvantaged children.

The functional parameters of the voluntary support provided to the different groups of children in a state of disadvantage can be differentiated in the following generalized areas:

- ❖ Regarding institutional care;
- ❖ In connection with the provision of types of social services for disadvantaged children and youth;
- ❖ In the field of non-formal education;
- ❖ For effective implementation of preventive and anticipatory social work;

From the essence and the specifics of the separate functional parameters derive the specific practical dimensions of the activities concerning the voluntary inclusion in the sphere of social and pedagogical work with disadvantaged children. The technological parameters of this process concern aspects of support such as:

- ✓ Socializing, resocializing and correctional work;
- ✓ Assistance in the implementation of medical and social care for children;
- ✓ Involvement in initiatives oriented towards educational mediation;
- ✓ Cooperation with pedagogues, specialists, structures, organizations and institutions involved in the problems of children with unequal social status;
- ✓ Participation in events that offer solutions or new approaches to problems that already exist in terms of the effectiveness of working with disadvantaged children;
- ✓ Initiation of activities as part of the process of changing public attitudes on issues of interaction with disadvantaged children;
- ✓ Providing organizational support to public and non-governmental institutions and organizations in their efforts to overcome barriers to the process of active social inclusion of disadvantaged children.

The success in the implementation of this type of altruistic helping activity is largely determined by the presence of the necessary personal, moral and social qualities and competencies of the voluntary participants / Table. 1 /. It is also determined by the ability of the non-formal

education system to prepare through specialized training courses and programs the persons who wish to participate / regularly, short-term or long-term / in volunteer events and initiatives related to support for disadvantaged children / Table 2. /.

Table 1. Personally significant qualities, skills and competencies needed by volunteers to work with disadvantaged children

Personal qualities	Skills and competencies acquired during the preparation and participation in preparatory programs for training of volunteers
Communicativeness	Active listening skills. Knowledge of the basics of communication.
Leadership capabilities	Experience in working with groups
Curiosity and insight	Practical habits for providing support
Empathy and benevolence	Skills to predispose the interlocutor
Patience, correctness, tact	Organizational abilities
Motivation to work with adolescents	Knowledge of the characteristics of children at risk and disadvantaged as specific subjects of socio-pedagogical interaction
Positivity, optimism, tolerance	Good orientation in the field of practical social work with children
Self-criticalness	Ability to make decisions
Confidence in one's own abilities	Self-presentation skills

Table 2. Stages of the system for training volunteers to support disadvantaged children

Stages of preparation	Technological, methodological and formal-organizational parameters of realization
Primary preparation	Seminar, training
Training in an additional general education program	Specialized training course
Empirical preparation	Volunteer practice

The technological process of the activity for training of the persons - volunteers is connected with the realization of three consecutive mutually conditioned stages, which in their entirety create the necessary conditions for efficiency and expediency of the considered segment of the system for work with disadvantaged children.

At the first stage, the future volunteers receive the necessary informational, motivational and methodological training. This is also the stage of getting to know the participants in the volunteering activity and forming teams, groups or couples for further joint work.

The second stage of the technology of preparation presupposes the inclusion of the persons in programs for additional general educational training with social-pedagogical orientation. Within the framework of specialized courses in the form of training in various modules, the most important aspects concerning the general theoretical awareness of the candidates regarding the implementation of effective socio-pedagogical interactions with the target group of disadvantaged children are mastered, namely:

- ❖ Providing information on various issues concerning the type, nature and specifics of risk factors suggesting the emergence of a state of inequality in children.

- ❖ Getting acquainted with the types of active methods for working with a group, with the basics of individual interaction with a client, as well as with the specifics of humane-personality-oriented and subject-subject socio-pedagogical technologies.

- ❖ Explaining the scope of volunteering; discussing cases and identifying situations in which it is necessary to seek help or consultation with specialists.

❖ Formation of skills for assessment of risk situations and for implementation of activities related to the prevention and propaedeutics of the state of inequality in adolescents.

The third stage of the volunteer training system concerns the practical-applied determinants of the support activity. At this stage under the supervision of a supervisor / social pedagogue, qualified specialist, experienced member of the volunteer team / the candidates for volunteers develop, prepare, test and conduct trial / theoretical, pilot / and practical / in a real environment / activities, consultations and activities with representatives of the target group.

The fundamental orientation of the system for preparation and organization of volunteering with adolescents with unequal social status is aimed at mediation and assistance in ensuring synchrony in the efforts of all parties involved to achieve success in socio-psychological adaptation and integration of adolescents in risk or in a difficult life situation.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The complex and multifaceted process of integration of groups of disadvantaged children should not be seen as a unilateral pursuit of social inclusion in which only the institutions, pedagogical teams and the relevant authorities authorized for such activities are involved. For its effective and adequate course, an active complex interaction between them and the society is necessary, part of the support of which is the voluntary activity in the field of social work.

2. Volunteering in the field of social and pedagogical work with disadvantaged children is a complex process that functions in many areas related to solving complex problems of support activities.

3. The structural positioning of volunteering in the support system for disadvantaged children is objectified by the importance of the activity in the context of the leading concept of social work in this direction, namely support and assistance to adolescents in the process of socialization, reintegration and personal development.

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