

## An Understanding of Social Workers about the Perspectives of Professional Practice with Children and Youth

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### **Abstract**

*The aim of this article is to disclose an understanding of social workers that work in the sector of social services for children and youth about the perspectives of professional practice with youth. A semi-structured interview method was applied. Interview questions covered the following themes: the features of organizations that work with children and youth, the expression of informal education and preventive work in social work practice and the characteristics of the interaction of the workers with youth. The obtained data were analyzed using the method of content analysis. The practice of social work with children and youth is understood by the research participants as a sensitive assistance interaction with every separate person, as the development of opportunities of informal education for different youth groups, as the reflection on professional experience and the reception of changes, when supporting the initiatives of the organizations that work effectively, as the development of inter-professional, inter-institutional and international cooperation.*

**Key Words:** social worker; social work; child; youth

### **Introduction**

In Lithuania and Europe in the context of the economic crisis of recent years social work with youth is recognized as a very special area of work activity with youth oriented toward that part of society that reacts to various life crises, critical conditions, personal and social problems experienced in their daily routine most sensitively. Modern youth policy is developed in two major directions: one of them is securing of youth interests in the areas of education and science, culture, sports, work and employment, housing, healthcare and others; the other is the development of work with youth as a specific area of youth policy. National and European Union documents (National Youth Policy Development programme for 2011-2019, Europe 2020 strategy; European Commission 2009) note of the measures of social youth inclusion in reducing social exclusion, in solving the problems of youth leisure time, strengthening health, employment, migration and crime prevention. In recent years open work with youth, that is oriented toward "unorganized, free" youth, has been developed (Conception of Open Youth Centres and Spaces, 2010) by offering them "low-threshold services" in order to provide the opportunity for all the young people, irrespective of their social status, to spend their leisure time safely, be engaged in the activity of their interest and solve the challenges arising in their daily life. Social workers are naturally deemed to be youth workers, because they directly maintain and strengthen relationships with young people and their groups, families, the members of territorial community and society.

Lithuanian scientists (Juodeikaitė, 2012; Grincevičius, 2011; Indrašienė, Merfeldaitė, Pivorienė, Raudeliūnaitė, 2011; Šukytė, 2010; Štuopytė, 2010; Juodeikaitė, Leliūgienė, 2009; Jonutytė 2007) link the perspective of the practice of youth social workers to informal education, social and pedagogical assistance, volunteering, models of preventive complex activity and workers' competencies. The authors notice the need for an increase of the requirements for social workers as youth workers. It is thought that youth workers should acquire education in the areas of pedagogy, psychology or social sciences or have acquired the competencies of social work with youth in some other way. On the other hand, the authors note that in practice social workers working with young people encounter the vagueness of informal (self-) education, the attitude of families and society that the activity of a social worker is limited, oriented toward children or adolescents at-risk with little involvement of the community in the implementation of programs and projects for the youth.

Although when implementing the programs and/or projects of informal education for children and youth workers orient themselves toward the principles of relevance, volunteerism and partly openness, however the principles of democracy and individualization are the most difficult to implement. Social workers experience ergonomic and financial limitations when they differentiate their activity according to the age of children and youth in order to cover individual or their group needs. The lack of dissemination of good practice in work with the youth and exchange of information among different sectors of the activity, reticence and closeness of children's and youth organizations has been noticed. A. Juodeikaitė, I. Leliūgienė (2009) pointed out that workers implementing socio-educational youth activities most often work in isolation when they try to solve problems of various levels of risk autonomously, i.e. most often by relying only on the competence of the workers of their organization. The authors perceive that workers most often work limiting themselves by their own organization and taking the burden of responsibility when implementing the set objectives. A deteriorating interest of workers to search for new opportunities of cooperation and communication with the adolescent, his parents and services is detected, while recognizing more formalized functions or the regular forms of activity. O. Petronienė (2011) links the social inclusion of youth to the diversity of extracurricular activities, engagement, organization of leisure time forms and the increase of a network of day centres and the scope of services provided by them.

Other authors as D. Fusco (2012), T. Jeffs, M. K. Smith (2010), S. Banks, 2010 S. Freedberg (2009) and M. Krueger (2007) link practice perspective of the work with youth, covering social work as well, to mutual relations and interactions and the creation of relationship-friendly environments. According to the authors success is determined by the quality of relationships between the young people and the workers who work with them when communication is an essential tool of relationship creation and work from which everything begins.

In this context the following research question is raised: how do social work practitioners understand the perspectives of their professional activity with children and youth?

The research goal is to disclose an understanding of social workers who work in the sector of social services for children and youth about the content, interactions and development of professional practice with youth.

**The methods of the research:** The strategy of qualitative research was applied including semi-structured interview. Interview questions covered the following themes: the characteristics of organizations working with children and youth, the expression of informal education and preventive work in social work practice and the characteristics of the interaction between workers and the youth. The obtained data was analyzed using content analysis. This qualitative content analysis was carried out in accordance with inductive, data-based research, in which categories are logically assigned. The qualitative content analysis was reviewed for consistency (Creswel, 2009), and by performing multiple readings and analysis of data, data coding, grouping codes into categories/sub-categories, and integrating categories and analyzed phenomena into the described context. 5 social work practitioners working with children and youth have taken part in the research. Based on their own experiences, they presented perspectives on how the social work practice with children and youth should be improved. The sampling strategy involved selecting for a specific category of social workers: those who work with youth, have at least 5 years of work experience with children and youth and have a higher education degree in social work.

**Research ethics:** The qualitative study was carried out by respecting the rights of study participants and working in accordance with the principles of research ethics (Howe and Moses, 1999). The study participants were informed about the purpose of the study and research data collection methods, and they were guaranteed that they would not be harmed (such as by avoiding personal questions that could harm the subjects). All participants agreed to participate in the study voluntarily and their confidentiality was guaranteed (participants were informed that participation in the study and their data would not be used against them in the future). In order to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the study participants, their names were coded with letters.

## **Research Results**

Having performed content analysis of the responses of the research participants to the interview questions on the perspectives of social work with children and youth, twenty four subcategories emerged. On their basis seven practice categories of viable social work with children and youth have been drawn up, such as: *the perspective of the practice of social work with children and youths – a dynamic organization functioning in a progressive way; practices of work with volunteers; practices of work with youth who belong to social risk groups; practices of work with youth with disabilities; practice of internationality in work with the youth; practice of preventive work with youth and construction of interventions in social work with the youth.*

The category “*the perspective of the practice of social work with children and youths – a dynamic organization functioning in a progressive way*” consists of two subcategories the content of which is linked to the search for innovative workers' approach towards the system of social services, an institution that functions as an attraction center for meaningful youth activity and experience sharing when working with the youth in a progressive way (Table 1).

**Table1. The Perspective of Social Work with Children and Youths – a Dynamic Organization Functioning in a Progressive Way**

| Subcategories   | Proving statements  |
|---|---|
| The search for an innovative approach in the system of social services                                    | <i>When thinking about the children and youth, there is necessity to search for an innovative approach in the system of social services .... What is going on social work is not static, but dynamic, you have constantly to discuss changing situations of clients, as well as society and the opportunities of the institution and react to them properly (L)</i>   |
| Institutions (organizations) as an attraction center for meaningful youth activity and experience sharing | <i>... in order that they would have where to meet, would have an attraction center, that they would be able to do something meaningful. X center is a very nice example to me. There are adolescents from positive families and adolescents from at-risk families. The adolescents from good families want to share the good they have, they want to help discover a meaningful leisure time, discover different, positive relationships...(J)</i> |

The research participants link *the search for an innovative approach in the system of social services* to the practice of social work with children and youth which is not static, but recognizing the dynamism of workers' activity, when practitioners reflect on the changing situations of clients, institutions and society and opportunities to react to them properly.

*Institutions (organizations) as an attraction centre for meaningful youth activity and experience sharing* is understood by the research participants as the efforts of the organization to bring together different families for joint activities, invite adolescents from positive families and adolescents from at-risk families in order to help them discover meaningful leisure time and maintain mutual relationships and acquire positive experience.

*The practice of work with volunteers* covers the content of three subcategories: *informal youth education through volunteering, the cultivation of the competencies of the youth “through volunteering” by accompanying and the development of the competencies of work with volunteers* (Table 2). Youth volunteering is understood by the research participants as a viable area of social work with youth.

**Table2. Practices of Work with Volunteers**

| Subcategories   | Proving statements   |
|---|--|
| Informal education of youth through volunteering  | <i>...the way of youth (self-) education through volunteering....<br/>... they come as volunteers and through volunteering activity they seek to educate themselves (T).<br/>..informal youth education through volunteering activities – they volunteer at various organizations and acquire valuable experience (N)</i>  |
| The cultivation of the competencies of the youth “through volunteering” by accompanying | <i>The youth cultivates competencies through volunteering, find themselves, realize themselves, in other words, they educate themselves through work with others by accompanying them...(K)</i>  |
| The development of the competencies of work with volunteers                             | <i>...for a social worker it is the cultivation of certain competencies of work with volunteers ... .<br/>If you work in the institution where many young people come to volunteer, then one of the competencies is to be able to work with volunteers, motivate them and give feedback...(J)<br/>Volunteers empowered by a worker are proactive; they suggest initiatives on their own about what they can do or offer something new. (T)</i> |

The content of *informal education of youth through volunteering* subcategory reflects that social work practitioners have acquired experience to act together with the young volunteers coming to their organization in pursuit of self-education. The organization of voluntary activities is understood as the perspective of informal (self-) education of youth and social work.

*The cultivation of the competencies of the youth “through volunteering” by accompanying* is a constituent part of social work of the practice with youth when the choice of the methods of operation is linked with the characteristics of a volunteer group.

The research participants also link the implementation of youth volunteering in the organization with the group of academic youth, i.e. students who after performing learning practice tasks volunteer at the organization "...*a student stays to volunteer very often...*". Volunteering as the perspective of informal self-education of youth is also linked to the cultivation of youth competencies which help a young man to know himself and realize himself. The youth acquires competencies by operating together with others when they are accompanied by a professional youth worker.

The practice of social work with children and youth covers *the cultivation of the competencies of work with volunteers* linked to the experience of learning through cooperation and abilities of a volunteer and his accompanying practitioner-supervisor. Ability to work with youth volunteers is understood as worker's effort to motivate young people for the activity and give feedback on the acquired experience. Volunteers empowered in such a way are able to take initiative to create new activities.

The practice perspective of social work with children and youth is linked by the participants of the research to the development of youth volunteering (by involving academic youth as well) which is based on informal learning from experience that cultivates social competencies of all the participants.

The category "*Practice of work with youth who belong to social risk groups*" is concretized by the content of four subcategories: "*dragging out*" of exclusion, *creating a safe space for staying and growing*, *accompanying a young man* and *cultivating a mature personality* (Table 3).

**Table3. Practice of Work with Youth Who Belong to Social Risk Groups**

| SUBCATEGORIES                                 | Proving statements  |
|---|---|
| "Dragging out" of exclusion                   | ...youth at social risk with who there is a need to work in order to drag them out of that exclusion and bring together with different youth. To discover meaningful leisure time, help to solve relationship problems. It is important to involve their parents as well. In fact, it gives parents great joy to get involved, be together, fellowship with their children, whereas adolescents also find it joy to be able to spend time together with their parents (K) |
| Creating a safe space for staying and growing | ...where they would have a space in which they can be safe and grow, because the space at home is unsafe... (N).  |
| Accompanying a young man                      | ... it is important for youth at risk to have a man who would accompany them, especially during the period of adolescence ...<br>...a young man needs new authorities, not only his parents, a man whom he would be able to ask questions and trust him.... (L).  |
| Cultivating a mature personality              | ....in order that they would grow up a conscious and mature personality able to react critically to challenging environments (J).   |

"*Dragging out*" of exclusion of youth at social risk is acknowledged by the research participants as the perspective of social work practice linked to discoveries of meaningful engagement activity and leisure time which help bring together and involve groups of different children and youth and families to clarify together current issues of communication and mutual relationships, and to experience the joy of being together.

*Creating a safe space for staying and growing* for work with youth groups at-risk for whom home space is unsafe can be treated as a challenge of social work practice requiring professional solutions or perspectives.

One of the perspectives of professional practice with youth at social risk is *accompanying a young man* which by the participants of the research is linked with the authority known, accepted or recognized by the young man to whom he can address arising questions and whom he can trust. It is relevant for practitioners to constantly consider about what it means to be an authority accompanying a young man. One of other perspectives of professional practice with youth at social risk, namely *cultivating of a mature personality*, has not been developed by the research participants, but an insight can be made that practitioners acknowledge the challenge to cultivate a mature personality linking it to the (self-)development of young man's abilities to react to the challenges of environment critically. To sum up, it is possible to perceive the characteristics of the practice with the group of youth at social risk covering "dragging" out of exclusion, creating safe communal spaces for the young man to stay and grow and accompanying him, assisting in solving existential questions of his age period and cultivating a personality reacting to the challenges of the environment critically.

The category "*Practices of work with youthwith disabilities*" is concretized by 3 subcategories: informal education of youth with disabilities – guaranteeing safe environment to stay and act, empowering youth "to search, reinvent the wheel" and the display of equal communication posture with youthwith disabilities (Table4).

**Table4. Practices of Work with Youthwith Disabilities**

| SUBCATEGORIES   | Proving statements  |
|---|---|
| Informal education of youth with disabilities - guaranteeing safe environment to stay and act | <i>The work is linked to the environments of (self-)education of youth with disabilities, e.g. youth with disabilities - they need guarantee of safe stay, staying without parents, staying with others, with the elements of experiential learning in the group (N)</i>  |
| Empowering youth “to search, reinvent the wheel”  | <i>To create conditions to search, reinvent the wheel, experience an “I can” feeling (T)</i>  |
| Demonstration of equal communication posture with disabled youth                              | <i>... not indulging them, without trying to smooth things over, but communicate equally (J)<br/>...there were three adolescents suffering from schizophrenia...during that stage of the program when they talked about themselves, about their disability the group would accept them nicely and naturally...(L)</i> |

*Informal education of disabled youth* is understood by the research participants as guaranteeing *safe environment for them to stay and act* by employing (self-)education “through experience” methods. The task of social work practice is to create inclusive environments for engagement when cultivating the autonomy of youth with disability. An insight can be made that inclusive environments of the organization should be linked to engagement activities in which both groups of able and disabled youth participate.

*Empowering youth “to search, reinvent the wheel”* should be linked to the development of the abilities of youth with disabilities by creating environments in which they can try themselves, search and invent. There is a possible insight that the research participants base the practice of social work with youth on humanistic attitudes recognizing the potential and abilities of youth with disabilities.

*Equal communication posture with disabled youth* is understood by the research participants as an unindulging, no-smoothing-over, natural communication of all the participants without ignoring realities arising in the practice or group. Natural acceptance of the disabled in the group is recognized and supported when creating communication-friendly environments.

When summing up the data, there is a possible insight that the practice perspective of social work with disabled youth should be linked to the creative and equal communication abilities of workers enabling to create safe, adjusted, informal and interactive learning environments for the disabled.

*Practice of internationality in work with the youth* is reflected by the content of 3 subcategories: *appropriation of and learning from foreign experience in other countries, preparation of young volunteers for international volunteering and participation in the implementation of international programs* (Table 5).

**Table5. Practice of Internationality in Work with the Youth**

| SUBCATEGORIES  | Proving statements   |
|--|--|
| Appropriation of and learning from foreign experience in other countries | <i>...when organizing informal education environments, workers use good practice of other countries (e.g. British, German etc.) (T)</i><br><i>Here we would need to talk about a social pedagogue from Germany who brought loads of experience, taught Lithuanians how to work with young people: not autocratically, but humanistically by creating space for a man himself to learn and grow (N)</i>   |
| Preparation of young volunteers for international volunteering           | <i>...seminars are organized to prepare volunteers going to work abroad....(K)</i><br><i>I used to lead trainings for volunteers going abroad or for those who came from other countries according to European Volunteer Service program which is funded by international cooperation agency (N)</i><br><i>...international volunteering, international work with youth.<br/>We have received a few foreign volunteers (from Germany)...<br/>...we work with European Volunteer Service – we had youth initiatives, we had intercultural exchanges...(N)</i> |
| Participation in the implementation of international programs            | <i>Lithuania hosts European Commission program “Youth” which supported informal youth education in our country and provided funding to it in different areas (N)</i><br><i>Not only do we work with the youth who come from the university, but we implement European voluntary programme, and volunteers from other EU countries come to us, we have Erasmus students who do their practical work at ours (J)</i>   |

The practice of social work with children and youth covers *appropriation of and learning from foreign experience* as well. The research participants point out that the experience of informal education of youth is appropriated from foreign countries (Britain, Germany etc.) that have traditions of work with youth based on humanistic attitudes when *space for a young man himself to learn and grow* is created. There is a possibility to make an insight that international experience of informal education of youth finds its application in Lithuania in the practice of social work with children and youth today as well.

The research participants-informants of the *Preparation of young volunteers for international volunteering* acknowledge it as the practice perspective which is developed by leading trainings for volunteers going abroad or to the ones who have come from other countries and supporting youth initiatives and intercultural exchange. Thus, the development of international volunteering in the social work practice can be linked to youth socialization and cultivation of the tolerance for cultural diversity.

*Participation in the implementation of international programs* by the informants also illustrates internationality of work with youth covering not only preparation of volunteers for international volunteering, but also work with youth who come from academic environment or come from foreign universities to do their practical work of Erasmus studies.

The practice perspective of social youth worker would include acceptance and application of the experience of other countries, the development of international volunteering and international programs aimed at implementation of youth programs and intercultural exchange.

The content of the category “*Practice of preventive work with youth*“ is revealed by 3 subcategories: *preventive work with youth that integrates social work*, *preventive work combining various youth groups when avoiding stigmatization and early prevention in order to avoid an accident* (Table 6).

**Table6. Preventive Work with Youth**

| SUBCATEGORIES   | Proving statements  |
|---|---|
| Preventive work with youth that integrates social work                      | <i>I would consider it as preventive work with youth in order to integrate social work with children and youth (N)</i>  |
| Preventive work combining various youth groups when avoiding stigmatization | <i>Where there is prevention I would not separate it from the area of work with youth, because when it is separated the stigmatization of those young people or children occurs, that they're different in various senses, because they receive funding, others don't receive, different, because they're worse, because they're different, because they're different in some other way, various interpretations, in what way they are different than others, but the fact is – they're different...(N)</i> |
| Early prevention in order to avoid an accident                              | <i>Prevention when there is no intervention by institutions, when accidents have not occurred yet or have occurred today or now (K)</i><br><i>Preventive work is important when work is performed with the youth who have not posed problems yet, who have not got to the zone of social risk. Their motivation, rallying, cultural-cognitive activity into which they would need to be involved in order that they would be engaged (J)</i>  |

The research participants link the practice of preventive work with children and youth to social work integration, because the application of only traditional approaches of social work is aimed at youth groups at social risk. The research participants tend to think that preventive work or programs oriented towards youth groups at social risk provoke stigmatization of this youth, especially when targeted prevention programs are implemented. Preventive work that combines various youth groups avoiding stigmatization is acknowledged by the research participants as a perspective when practice unites informal youth initiatives and the efforts of youth workers and social workers.

*Early prevention in order to avoid an accident* is understood by the informants as the component of their practice when universal preventive work is done with youth who “...have not posed problems yet, who have not got to the zone of social risk”, “...there is no intervention by institutions, when accidents have not occurred yet ...”. Therefore social workers care about motivating youth and rallying for social activity, support for cultural-cognitive initiatives and engagement organization.

The content of the category “*Construction of intervention in social work with youth*“ is revealed by four subcategories which are linked to informal youth education as an important component of social work intervention, as well as an intervention based on equal communication taking into consideration the characteristics of youth age period, an intervention as assistance to a young man to find positive strength inside himself and an intervention as the example of an authority (Table 7).

**Table7. Construction of Interventions in Social Work with Youth**

| SUBCATEGORIES  | Proving statements  |
|--|---|
| Informal education of youth is a component the intervention of social work                                     | <p><i>...not to separate informal education of youth from social work...(K)</i></p> <p><i>I would emphasize social work with children and youth based on the principles of informal education. It is not narrow, there are a great many areas and opportunities, the same concept of informal education of youth can be applied in various manners and in various areas (N)</i></p> <p><i>I'd like to call informal education of youth humanistic education of youth, because the concept of informal education of youth is based on the principle of totality of humanistic education and the creation of non-competitive space and informal and equal relationship with a youth worker or social worker. These are humanistic education principles – space creation when a young man can grow (N)</i></p> |
| An intervention based on equal communication taking into consideration the characteristics of youth age period | <p><i>...often the work with youth is autocratic, they resist in such age period, when any intervention or any work which restricts them is associated by them with formal requirements, and they are in the age of the re-evaluation of values, the age of search for their identity, search for friends, relying on friends, what kind of relationship is meant, they're after equal communication. (T)</i></p> <p><i>A social worker has to know this age period very well and not to be a directive worker in any way. Demanding workers could work with intervention, but not autocratic (L)</i></p>   |
| An intervention as assistance for a young man to find positive strength inside himself                         | <i>I see no sense in autocratic education of young people who are socially wounded, in a preventive sense, because it only deepens even more their vulnerability. They have also encountered groundless requirements, disrespect towards their person and lack of constructive freedom. Everything has been quite destructive, quite chaotic, requirements lacked clarity of what was demanded and how to do that, and now permission to those young people to be themselves is most probably the most necessary thing they need – to find some positive strength in themselves (K)</i>   |
| An intervention as an example of an authority  | <i>It is important to be able to be an authority to the youth in order to be able to stir and inspire them. Young men, especially adolescents, are in search for a senior friend who would be able to be their buddy, not a representative of parents or teachers, who might be wearing the same clothes as them, who has something in common with them, to be their formal and informal leader at the same time (J)</i>  |

According to the understanding of the participants of the research *informal education of youth is a component of the intervention of social work* practical implementation of which is based on the principles of humanistic education and universalism when creating non-competitive spaces for the youth to act and grow, informal and equal mutual relationships. The application of the principles of informal education of youth in the practice of social work humanizes the environments of intervention, broadens its possibilities when intervention is based on equal communication and not autocracy.

*An intervention based on equal communication taking into consideration the characteristics of youth age period.* In the opinion of the informants the youth resist autocratic intervention of workers, because in this age period restrictions are associated by them with formal requirements. Therefore when applying interventions, it is important not to formalize, but create relationships of equal communication with youth taking into consideration the challenges arising during their age period that are related to re-evaluation of their values, the search for their identity and relying on friends.

“*A social worker has to know this age period very well and not to be a directive worker in any way*”. On the other hand, the informants do not reject the characteristic of a demanding worker in the interaction with young people.

*An intervention as assistance for a young man to find positive strength inside himself.* The participants of the research have underlined the senselessness of autocratic education of young people, because, in their opinion, it only deepens their vulnerability. Socially wounded adolescents have already “*...encountered groundless requirements, disrespect towards their personality and lack of constructive freedom. Everything has been quite destructive, quite chaotic, requirements lacked clarity of what was demanded and how to do that ...*”

Professional assistance should be linked to “...*permission to those young people to be themselves is most probably the most necessary thing they need – to find some positive strength in themselves.*”

*An intervention as the example of an authority.* The participants of the research recognize that it is important for them to be able to be an authority to the youth, to be able to stir and inspire them. They also understand a natural need of young people to search for “...*a senior friend who would be able to be their buddy, not a representative of parents or teachers, who might be wearing the same clothes as them, who has something in common with them, to be their formal and informal leader at the same time*”. It is possible to perceive that it can be a great challenge for a youth worker/social worker to find balance in combining formal and informal leadership in his practice.

## **Discussion**

In the discussion we refer to the data of the conducted research and the components of the conception of social work with children and the perspectives of practice which are presented in the Lithuanian and foreign documents and scientific sources.

**The work with youth and social work with children and youth – the perspective of integrated activity.** The relevance of work with youth has been pointed out in recent years by national documents and those of the European Union (National Youth Policy Development programme for 2011-2019, Europe 2020 strategy) which foresee the development of the diversity and quality of youth services by involving youth workers, pedagogues and social workers. In National Description of the Activity of Youth Workers (2013) work with youth is defined as the activity of educational character with young people or their group in their leisure time taking into consideration their needs in order to create conditions for young people to get integrated into society's life and empower them to create their own life responsibly and take part in society and professional life consciously and actively. The activity of youth workers is aimed at the processes of informal education of young people.

In literature (Banks, 2010; Jeffs, Smitf, 2010) work with youth is described as variety of activities combining three major directions: youth leisure time activities that are based on the principles of voluntary participation and informal education of youth; work for the youth that covers informal (self-)education in the peer groups based on voluntary participation; social work with youth that covers the activities of caring or assistance, education and assessment or control, including individual consultation and work in the groups. It also includes assistance to youth to take part in the process of formal (self-) education, prepare for professional career and acquire life skills. In the opinion of the research participants, work with youth (for youth) integrates social work with youth (for youth) when creating spaces that are friendly to the young man. “*I would generally see to it that when working with youth social work with children and youth would be integrated into it.*” “*...when creating non-competitive spaces for youth's growth...*” “*...the creation of non-competitive space and informal and equal relationship with a youth worker and social worker. These are humanistic education principles – space creation when the young man can grow*”.

The conception of work with youth (for youth) is linked to youth's participation in the activity of the society, volunteering or volunteering programs, youth's (self-)learning and social assistance (career counseling, self-assistance groups etc.), engagement and the culture of youth groups, youth's bringing into associations, the cultivation of mutual relationships of the youth, sense of belonging to the community and friendship on the basis of humanistic education and the principles of totality (Jeffs, Smitf, 2010). In the opinion of the research participants, social work with youth (for youth) should not be separated from work with youth (for youth), because when it is separated stigmatization of those young people or children occurs, because they are different, because they are different in some other way, various interpretations... On the basis of the research data social workers can be regarded youth workers when they are able ...not to separate informal youth education from social work....to base social work with children and youth on the principles of informal education.

The conception of social work is linked to the assistance and opportunities provision by social workers to the children and youth experiencing social exclusion when youth workers put a lot of effort into trying to reach the youth experiencing social exclusion. In practice there is a gap between social work and work with youth when initiatives of youth workers do not reach children and youth that are in the most unfavorable conditions (Coussee, Roets, & De Bie, 2009). On the other hand, social youth workers can apply such forms of work with children and youth which are questionable, because they may arise suspicions related to “*stigmatization occurrence*”.

In reality the research participants notice the manifestations of formal and autocratic work with youth as resistance to the intervention of social work which limits them, is associated by them with formal requirements and ignores their relying on friends and equal communication.

Work with youth (for youth) as well as social youth work are activities of social integration the perspective of which is social involvement of various children and youth groups when reaching youth groups experiencing exclusion and recognition of the proofs of activity effectiveness (Tineke Van de Walle, Filip Cousseé and Maria Bouverne-De Bie, 2011) “*X center is a very nice example to me. There are adolescents from positive families and adolescents from at-risk families. The adolescents from good families want to share the good they have, they want to help discover a meaningful leisure time, help solve relationship problems*”....

**Social work with children and youth (for youth) is the development of social inclusion.** The research data reveal that the clients of social work are socially wounded children and youth who *encountered groundless requirements, disrespect towards their personality and lack of constructive freedom. Everything has been quite destructive, quite chaotic, requirements lacked clarity ... Youth at social risk are the ones with whom there is necessity to work in order to drag them out of that exclusion and bring together with different youth...*

The documents of the European Union define social inclusion as the process which guarantees that those threatened by poverty and social exclusion acquire resources and opportunities necessary for full-fledged participation in economic, social and cultural life and safeguarding standards of well-being and life accepted by the society (European Commission, Joint Report on Social Inclusion, 2004). Youth workers, pedagogues and social workers are named as the implementers of the measures of social youth inclusion in order to prevent emergence of social youth exclusion and solve the problems of youth leisure time, strengthening health, employment, migration and crime prevention (National Youth Policy Development programme for 2011-2019, 2010). The definition of social inclusion was begun to be used in the European Union as covering very diverse questions of social policy – income, skill imbalances, inequality in healthcare and education, access to housing, work/live ratio and so on (Boushey, Fremstad, Gragg, & Waller, 2007).

Acceleration of the pace of life and the context of rapid social change provokes social workers to search for new initiatives in work with youth not only in Lithuania, but also in other countries of the European Union. Although in many areas youth outperform adults in their achievements, however they are vulnerable without professional assistance and support. Irrespective of the diversity of the areas of work with youth (covering social work as well), the engagement of youth groups experiencing social exclusion is recognized as a common concern in the whole Europe (European Commission, 2009). In the opinion of the research participants, the search for innovations in the system of social services for children and youth, constant consideration or analysis of changing situations and possibilities to react regarding clients, organizations and society are important to a professionally working social youth worker. Dynamism and reflexivity are recognized as the characteristics of progressive organization working with youth when the organization acts as an attraction center for the meaningful youth activity and sharing experience.

In Lithuania social inclusion is executed by non-governmental organizations and state institutions carrying out targeted projects aimed at concrete societal or youth groups. The goal of the work with youth is to increase youth's responsibility and encourage social involvement into community's life by implementing volunteering programs (Assessment of the situation, needs and resultativity of social integration services for socially vulnerable and the groups of people at-social risk in order to use EU structural support for 2007-2013 effectively, 2011).

The research participants acknowledge informal self-education of youth through volunteering in urban or rural communities and organizations when creating youth-friendly activity environments to develop their social competencies. It is important for youth workers and social workers working in the organizations where a lot of young people (volunteers) come to be able to work with young volunteers, motivate them and give feedback.

*It is important for the workers to be able to empower young people to take initiative to act and participate in the communal life.*

The research participants point out the practice of international volunteering when involving local and foreign youth and academic youth:

*“I used to lead trainings for volunteers going abroad or to those who came from other countries according to European Volunteer Service program which is funded by international cooperation agency”.*

*“Not only do we work with the youth, who come from the university, but we implement European voluntary programme, and volunteers from other EU countries come to us, we have Erasmus students who do their practical work at ours”.*

Most services provided in Lithuania by NGO are oriented toward youth leisure time engagement which is treated as a preventive measure against youth alcohol abuse, substance dependence and crime and as social exclusion reduction of youth at-risk groups (Okunevičiūtė, Neverauskienė, Šlekienė, 2008). In informal NGO activity social workers encourage youth creativity and motivation to consciously participate in the society life. On the other hand, in the opinion of the research participants “*a social worker has to know this age period very well and not to be a directive worker in any way...*“

### **Conclusions**

The practice of social work with children and youth is understood by the research participants as a sensitive interaction of assistance with every separate person, as the development of informal (self-) development opportunities for diverse youth groups, as the reflection of professional experience and the reception of changes when supporting the initiatives of organizations working effectively, as the development of interprofessional, interinstitutional and international cooperation.

The practice perspective of social workers in children and youth organizations is social inclusion of youth covering youth groups experiencing social exclusion, when looking for new and attractive tools of informal education of youth and creating cooperation networks and interactions with youth workers and youth representatives and spaces favorable for youth growth.

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