Social support for schoolchildren at risk of social exclusion

V. Ivanauskiene

Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania

Abstract. Social exclusion is a wider concept than poverty and includes not only material conditions but also inability to participate in economic, social, political and cultural life. The essence of social exclusion is social relationships (more exactly breaking off relationships), which may mean not only pushing away some members of the society, but also breaking off relationships with the society from the side of a person himself/herself. The reasons of origin of social exclusion may be legal, political, economical, social and cultural. Nowadays social exclusion is predetermined by social-economic factors. According to Poviliūnas (2001), the problems of children's social exclusion may be solved ensuring proper education, care of public health, safety and minimal life standard. Growing aggression and violence of schoolchildren and their social exclusion are nowadays an important issue of political debate and media reports. Often schoolchildren face the risk of social exclusion at school during the period of adolescence. The risk also depends on the social status of their family in the society and the relationship of the family members.

   The aim of the article is to identify characteristic features of schoolchildren at risk of social exclusion and analyze social support provided for them. A quantitative research was carried out to achieve the aim. The method of data collection is a questionnaire. 105 teachers working in 3 secondary schools in Lithuania participated in the research.

   The research results revealed that most often schoolchildren face the risk of social exclusion at school during adolescence period. They are characterized as incommunicative, unsociable, passive, and shy, do not trust others, are vulnerable, have learning problems and avoid collaborative activities. These schoolchildren usually come from families of social risk or single parent families. The support provided at school by teachers to schoolchildren at risk of social exclusion is only fragmentary. Further development of social skills and close cooperation of professionals working at school is necessary to prevent social exclusion.

Key words: *characteristic features, social support, social exclusion, schoolchildren at risk*

The problem of social exclusion has become a focus area for social researchers relatively recently. Modern sociology understands the problem of social exclusion in rather broad terms, up to national and international level.

   Social exclusion has become one of the important themes in contemporary social policy debates. While there is a considerable debate about the precise meaning of the term (Evans, Paugham, Prelis, 1995; Atkinson, 1998; Klasen, 1997), some definitions emphasize that social exclusion is concerned with the inability to participate effectively in economic, social, and cultural life and, in some characteristics, alienation and distance from mainstream society (Duffy, 1995). So social exclusion is primarily perceived as the relationship between the individual and society, and the dynamics of that relationship.

   Social exclusion is a multi-dimensional concept, involving economic, social, political, and cultural aspects of disadvantage and deprivation. It is often described as the process by which individuals and groups are wholly or partly closed out from participation in their society, as a consequence of low income and constricted access to employment, social benefits and services, and to various aspects of cultural and community life.

   The policy of reducing social exclusion has to be two folded: symptomatic and preventive. Symptomatic social policy has to smooth existing forms of social exclusion and the scope of its expression while preventive policy has to hinder the formation of new exclusion groups. Preventive

policy is more perspective as it reduces the scope of social exclusion and includes not only visible social exclusion groups but also those which are only being formed, in other words groups at social risk (Saulauskas, 2000).

Key aspects of social exclusion are as follows:

- it is multidimensional;
- it requires a dynamic, longitudinal perspective;
- it is concerned with the interplays of individuals and their (multiple) contexts;
- it has a key emphasis on the development of the individual through the life-course;
- there is often some emphasis on child development, and especially early child development, as a key pathway out of social exclusion.

Social exclusion of children

With regards to children and young people, the terms 'socially excluded', 'at risk' and 'difficult' are often employed as synonyms. Social exclusion is an issue violating their rights and capabilities directly, which is recognized in the Convention of the Rights of the Child. As children are growing to be adults, decisions, choices and opportunities in childhood crucially affect their position as adults.

Scholars acknowledge that for most people social exclusion of children is largely associated with social exclusion of their parents. Obviously, one cannot fully separate the social exclusion of children from that of their parents, especially with regard to very young children. Social exclusion of children is linked to social exclusion and economic opportunities in the family or household the children grow up in.

Three groups of reasons for children's social exclusion are identified:

- Those related to the individual characteristics of a child (physical and/or mental disorders; chronic somatic and/or mental diseases; violations in social behavior).
- Those related to disorders of the socialization process (structure and functioning of the child's family; nature of school impact on the individual characteristics and needs of the child).
- Those related to negative societal processes existing in the society (poverty, homelessness; forced migration, national conflicts, etc.).

Discussing the first reason for social exclusion which is related to the individual characteristics of a child, it is important to note that problems related to social exclusion most often occur during teen years. The transfer to senior classes is linked with the drastic growth of academic requirements. Intellect becomes a less important factor in success than motivation. Those schoolchildren who do not complete their schooling are at high risk of social exclusion. Knowledge, skills and qualifications obtained in the educational process are acquisitions fostering involvement in societal life. A peak in egocentrism and a strong reaction to peers are observed. Self-esteem lowers, especially among girls, because of extra social and sexual pressures. Running away from home is often combined with other problems in children and adolescents. In comparison with children who never run away from home, young runaways use drugs 5 to 10 times more often and use alcohol 3 to 6 times more often (Klasen, 1997). Often running away from home is a manifestation of deep domestic and school problems in a child. Some children become street children and they involve in deviant groups, criminal career, sex industry and drug use, others become isolated. Schoolchildren at risk of social exclusion usually are passive; they fulfil daily duties with negativism and fear of punishment. Their relations with peers are also characterized by fear, distrust, rejection of inclusion and aggressiveness.

Socialization is the process of mastering and reproduction of social experiences by an individual. During this process and as a result of socialization, an individual learns social norms, values and masters socially approved behavioral patterns needed for normal functioning in society. Socialization

continues throughout life, but is most intensive during childhood, adolescence and youth. The institutes of socialization are the family and educational institutions. Western studies recognize the church as the third institute of socialization. Family's composition, its educational practices and the features of child-to-parent relationships impact the development of a child's personality. Negative influence of a family situation on children can be vividly traced based on the frequency of runaways from home. Children living with only one parent or with a non-biological parent run away from home more often than those who live with both parents. Children who grow up in two parent families attend school better than those raised by the mother, by the father or than those with no parents. Parents' involvement in educational process and their interest in child's achievements have positive effect on school attendance. School also has great influence with regards to the social exclusion. Children rejected by their peers become aggressive in their inter-personal contacts (Wheeler, Stomfay-Stitz, 2004). As young people or adults, former victims of bullying encounter difficulties in establishing close, love based relationships. Peer rejection always causes psychological trauma. The impact of the teacher's personality is important to academic performance and attendance: more experienced teachers have greater impact on schoolchildren's personal characteristics.

It is obvious that poverty is the major negative social process that leads to the social exclusion. Link between education and employment can be easily detected as well as the link between education and earnings. Low level of academic achievement is often tied to low family income. Students achieving less than a completed secondary education earn between 7 and 36% less than those with a high school degree. Low attendance is not always dependent on a child's personal choices – a child often has to start working and cuts classes. People who have suffered from childhood social exclusion in education are at risk of being poor and unemployed for longer and more often than others. Important societal impact of childhood social exclusion is the burden it places on the next generation. Children from people suffering from social exclusion will need considerably more support and resources to ensure that they will gain equal opportunities of participation in education and society at large.

Segregation of children with special needs, permanent exclusion of unruly and difficult children, and, to some degree, differentiated schooling structures can foster social exclusion, particularly if they are primarily aimed at freeing the regular school system from poorer achievers and more difficult students rather than cater specifically to their needs. So it may be stated that there exist 2 unofficial forms of social exclusion at school. The first which appears to be used in primary schools more than in secondary schools is where a child is asked to stand in the corridor outside the classroom while the lesson is in progress. The second form of social exclusion has recently emerged as competition among schools and has been strongly emphasized – parents are "persuaded" to remove their child from the school and in this way avoid a formal expulsion.

There is the additional worry that socially excluded children will pose a threat to the future well-being of society as they may become a social and economic burden to society or, even worse, generate considerable social disruptions if they have little stake in the existing order. In addition, to the extent that social exclusion is transmitted intergenerationally, social exclusion of children may create even deeper divisions within society that amplify across generations.

Research results

The research revealed that 82% of the research participants identify schoolchildren at risk of social exclusion in their schools. These schoolchildren spend their time separately from others during the breaks. According to the opinion of the teachers, there are two main reasons why schoolchildren find themselves at risk of social exclusion. The first reason is living in the social risk families and the second reason is poorly developed communication skills. Clothing of these schoolchildren differs from others as it often is poor, untidy and not clean. So supposition can be made that these schoolchildren are from social risk families and these families usually lack social skills. Children from such families are
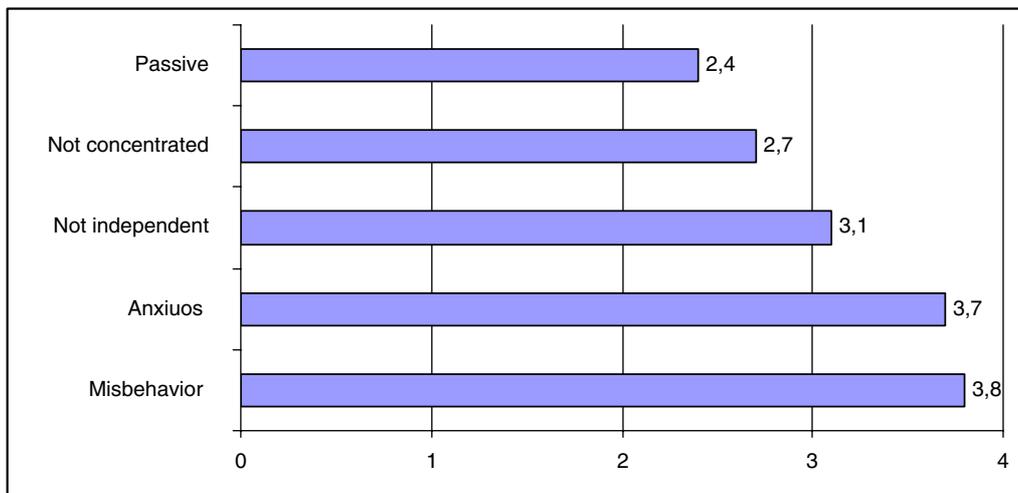
Figure 1. Rating of most frequent behavior of the schoolchildren at risk of social exclusion.

repudiated by their friends, as they are not communicating with others, they are inclined to be alone, and they are not seeking contact with the others.

The teachers were asked to identify behavior of schoolchildren at risk of social exclusion during lessons. Teachers stated that these schoolchildren in the classroom most often are passive (score 2,4), they are not able to concentrate (score 2,7), they are not able to act independently (score 3,1), they are nervous and anxious (score 3,7) or misbehave during the lessons (score 3,8) (Figure 1).

Teachers not only organize education process at school but also stimulate communication and creative thinking skills thus trying to prevent social exclusion among schoolchildren. According to the respondents' opinion active teaching methods help to involve such schoolchildren in common work with others. Most often teachers, trying to reduce risk of social exclusion, use work in small groups (score 1,6). Other active teaching methods named by the teachers are: brainstorming (score 3,4), discussions or debates (score 4,1), individual work (score 4,4), case analysis (score 5,1) (Figure 2).

62% of the research participants state that social support to schoolchildren at risk of social exclusion should be provided by the team of professionals working at school. The team members could be social pedagogue, psychologist, class master and subject teacher. 24% of teachers think that social support should be provided by social pedagogue alone, 10% of the respondents think that support could be provided only by psychologist and 4% state that class master could provide social support.

86% of the respondents think that combination of individual and team work is the most effective method of social support for the schoolchildren at risk of social exclusion. 10% value only individual social support and 4% encourage team work as social support for such schoolchildren.

According to teachers' opinion the most effective social support for schoolchildren at risk of social exclusion is development of social skills, involving of such children in after school activities, strengthening schoolchildren's self esteem and counselling by psychologist.

Thus, school's basic principles working with children at risk of social exclusion involve taking responsibility and making proactive efforts. The steps taken by school when working with schoolchildren at risk of social exclusion may be as follows:

- identification;
- establishing a contact with the family and evaluation of the family situation;
- determination of the required types of support;
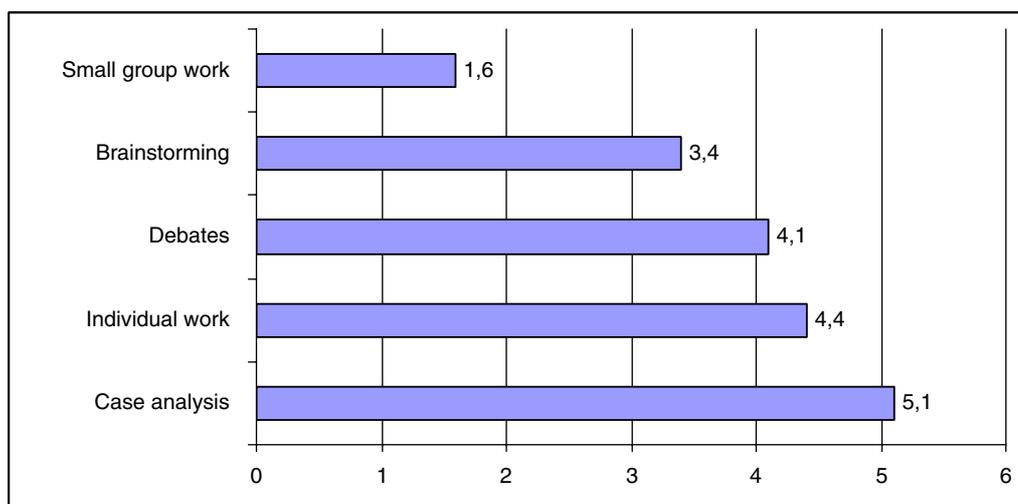- involving relevant professionals is support process;

Figure 2. Rating of active teaching methods used by the teachers.

- provision of social support;
- monitoring of changes.

When dealing with low academic performance, individual counselling of a child by a psychologist or a social worker and face-to-face teaching is most effective. Visits to the family by a social worker and conversations with parents could be undertaken in cases in which a child is facing family problems. Individual work with the child by a class teacher and vice principal through extracurricular activities is an effective strategy while working with schoolchildren at risk of social exclusion.

Conclusions

1. Social support and interventions for schoolchildren at risk of social exclusion have to occur at the possibly earliest stage. 2. It is important that when intervening, a team of different professionals works influencing the child's social environment: family, classmates and peers. 3. When providing social support for schoolchildren at risk of social exclusion, it is necessary to solve the problems of child's personality first, since problems with family and school environment are secondary. 4. Since schoolchildren at risk of social exclusion have communication difficulties, it is essential that communicative training is included in the support given to such children.

References

[1]   Atkinson, A.B. (1998) Social Exclusion, Poverty, and Unemployment. *CASEpaper* 4, p. 1-20.
[2]   Duffy, K. (1995) Social Exclusion and Human Dignity in Europe. *Council of Europe*.
[3]   Evans, M., Paugam S., Prelis J. (1995) Chunnel Vision: Poverty, Social Exclusion and Debate on Social Welfare in France and Britain. *LSE STICERD Discussion Paper* 115, Oct 95.
[4]   Klasen, S. (1997) Measuring Poverty and Deprivation in South Africa. University of Cambridge.
[5]   Poviliunas, A. (2001) Žmogaus socialinė raida. Vadovėlis aukštosioms mokykloms. Vilnius.
[6]   Saulauksas ir kt. Socialiniai pokyčiai: Lietuva, 1990/1998: kolektyvinė monografija. Vilnius
[7]   Wheeler, E., Stomfay-Stitz, A. (2004) Confronting Social Exclusion and Bullying. *Childhood Education*, Vol. 81. Issue 1.