Analysis of factors that determine the success of cooperation between the social worker and the case manager

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Abstract. The aim of this article is to reveal factors that determine the success of the cooperation between the social worker and the case manager. The data were collected using the semi-structured interview and discussion (focus) group methods. The research is based on the experiences of social workers and case managers. The problematic question: what determines the success of cooperation between the social worker and the case manager in their activities? The article presents the results of qualitative research that reveal the factors that influence successful cooperation between the social worker and the case manager. The data analysis of the conducted research, during which experiences of case managers related to their cooperation with social workers were analysed, revealed that successful cooperation between the social worker and the case manager is determined by: teamwork of the case manager and the social worker, and the social worker's contact with the client. The data analysis of the conducted research, during which experiences of social workers related to their cooperation with the case managers were analysed, revealed that successful cooperation between the case manager and the social worker is determined by: the social worker's personality traits, existing skills, and their psychological well-being.

Keywords – case manager, cooperation, social worker, success, factors.

1 Introduction

Family is one of the most important systems in the state and society. In the constitution of the Republic of Lithuania, family is perceived as "the foundation of society and the state" [1]. According to Leliūgienė [2], "family is the main factor of socialisation, by virtue of which the child acquires essential social knowledge, develops skills and abilities, and adopts values and ideals, rules and norms, necessary for living in the society around them." Liobikienė also defines family as the closest and most significant environment for human development [3]. The essence of the functioning of the family system, as with every system,

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is working together and depending on one another. The child is one of the most important parts of the system, and due to their age, immaturity, and dependence, is the most vulnerable one. As the functioning of the family tightens, ensuring their rights and best interests becomes one of the most important aspects in this context, which is regulated in international documents, as "the situation of children in many parts of the world remains critical" [4].

The role of the social worker, as a specialist working in a team with the case manager, becomes extremely significant, especially in order to ensure the rights of the child in families that receive assistance. Milkintaitė and Marcinkevičienė [5] specify that social work with persons at risk "can be considered as one of the most relevant tasks of the state". The social worker and the case manager become one of the most important specialists in the process of helping the family and the child. The definition of a social worker is often equated with services. Bagdonas [6] states that social workers are "providers of social services". In the provision and organisation of services, when aspiration becomes the pursuit of the family's independence and the ability to independently ensure the best interests of the child, factors that determine the success of cooperation between the social worker and the case manager become relevant.

The topic of social work is examined in sufficient detail. Budrytė [7] has explored the skills that the social worker must have. Bagdonas [6] has emphasised the circumstances that determine the success of the social worker at the professional level. Žibėnienė and Mikniūtė [8] have analysed the relationship between the social worker and the client. Abramavičienė and Vyšniauskytė-Rimkienė [9] have studied the relationship between the social worker and the client, revealing the factors that determine it. At the same time, foreign authors [10] have placed an emphasis on the importance of the social worker's skills, because they influence the relationship with the client and the acceptance of services. Hanna and Nash [11] have revealed the importance of the social workers' communication skills in building a relationship with the client. Kim, Imburgia, Armstrong-Richardson, Jaggers, and Hall [12] have analysed teamwork carried out by specialists working in the field of child welfare, and in the conducted study, emphasised the importance of effective teamwork and team formation.

Changes in the field of child welfare were aimed at ensuring the more successful protection of children's rights, as well as the application of the case management method in the country. The main functions of the social worker, as a specialist working in a team with the case manager, are the provision and organisation of comprehensive services for the child and the family. In this context, factors that determine successful activities in the process of helping the child and the family in order to achieve changes are particularly important. The relevance of examining the factors that determine the success of the social worker in the context of their cooperation with the case manager remains.

Research object – factors that determine the success of cooperation between the social worker and the case manager.

The aim of this article is to reveal the factors that determine the success of the cooperation between the social worker and the case manager, on the basis of their experiences. Problematic questions: What determines the success of cooperation between the social worker and the case manager?

Research methods: analysis of scientific literature and legal acts, generalisation method, qualitative research, and research data were collected by the semi-structured interview method. The content analysis method was used for the analysis of research data.

2 Research methodology

Research methods. In order to reveal the factors that determine the success of cooperation between the social worker and the case manager, qualitative research was carried out, while

the data were collected using the semi-structured interview and discussion (focus) group methods. The qualitative research aimed to "understand the phenomenon "from the inside", i.e., from the perspective of the research participant" [13]. In order to answer the problematic question, research participants were asked: What determines the success of cooperation between the social worker and the case manager?

Selection of the research sample and organisation of the study. The sample of research participants was formed by means of targeted selection based on defined criteria [13]. Research participants were selected according to the following criteria: 1) case managers working in X institutions, providing case management services and organising the process of assistance for families experiencing social risks; 2) the experience of research participants in the field of case management is at least 2 years. In order to assess the validity of the questionnaire, a pilot study was organised and conducted in October 2022–2023, with the participation of one research participant. The research involved 6 case managers, who met all the criteria, and 6 social workers, who 1) provided assistance to families experiencing social risk; 2) whose work experience in the process of providing assistance to the family was at least 2 years. All the interviews were conducted remotely using the Microsoft Teams software, and the interviews were recorded. Collection of the research data was stopped in compliance with the data saturation principle. When it was noticed that the answers obtained during interviews started repeating the data received earlier, the new research participants were not included in the research.

Research ethics. When organising qualitative research, much attention was paid to the principle of the voluntary participation of research participants. The research participants were informed of the aim of the research and of compliance with the principles of research ethics. Anonymity was preserved by coding the responses of each research participant. Coding takes place when "different parts of data with the same features are connected" [13]. Case managers' responses were coded with the letters AV, and those of the social workers – with SD. The coded data of all research participants were only accessible to the researcher.

Qualitative research data analysis. The obtained data were analysed using the qualitative content analysis method. Qualitative content analysis was performed in accordance with the inductive logic of categorisation based on the research data. The method of qualitative content analysis allows one to delve into the researched phenomenon in detail, maintaining sensitivity to the context and avoiding preconceptions or generalisations [13]. Research data were analysed by distinguishing categories and subcategories, assigning supporting statements, and later, interpreting and analysing the obtained results, and connecting them with the scientific insights of other authors. The data of the study were analysed by two researchers. According to Gaižauskaite and Valavičiene [13], it is difficult to ensure the relevance and reliability of the results when analysed by one researcher. Before starting the data analysis, the researchers agreed on the parameters of the data analysis. The researchers conducted the initial data analysis separately, coding the data and forming the initial subcategories and categories. This enabled the researchers to understand the collected data and delve into them. Subsequently, the researchers compared the initial subcategories and categories, discussed them, and finally formed them by consensus.

3 Results of the research

The analysis of research data on the discussion (focus) group in which social workers working with the family participated, regarding the factors that determine the success of cooperation between the social worker and the case manager, allowed the formation of two categories and five subcategories (Table 1).

Table 1. Factors that determine the success of the social worker: experiences of social workers

Category	Subcategory
Teamwork of the case manager and the social worker	Support felt by the social worker from the case manager
	Close cooperation between the case manager and the social worker
	Good contact of the case manager and the social worker
Social worker's contact with the client	The social worker's building of a relationship with the client
	The social worker's respect for the client

The teamwork of the case manager and the social worker was identified by the research participants as one of the factors that determines success. The research data revealed that support felt by the social worker from the case manager is very important; therefore, an expectation that the social worker "needs to receive more support from the case manager" (SD3) was expressed. Social workers associated the support of the case manager with the defence of the position of the social worker during the organised case management meetings, when the established order in the system was opposed: "there must be support during the family case review meeting, so that the case manager is the person who represents the social worker, because it is no secret that in certain institutions there is real opposition when a social worker opposes some systematic things and systematic attitudes, and defends the family" (SD1). On the other hand, there is also a different understanding of the case manager's support when the family situation, emerging problems, and measures of the assistance plan are discussed "to talk before the meetings, discuss any problems, and discuss the assistance plan with the social worker" (SD2). The research data revealed that social workers want more support from the case manager because this is what influences the success of their cooperation. The support is associated with the defence of the social worker's position, support during organised case management meetings, as well as their immediate cooperation in preparing for the case management meeting.

The research participants associated the close cooperation between the case manager and the social worker with the factor that determines success, because "success depends on the cooperation between the case manager and the social worker" (SD1). Cooperation lies in the manifestations of teamwork, and is most evident in the planning stage of the case manager, when a family assistance plan is drawn up, and measures are discussed, "from drawing up a plan and measures together, discussion, and above all, from trusting each other's work" (SD1). The success of teamwork lies in mutual trust, listening to each other when there is a common position, and working in the same direction: "when two specialists work, who listen to each other, work in the same direction, have a common point of view, and respect each other" (SD6). The following means that close cooperation between the case manager and the social worker is a success factor, which is very important at the planning stage in the case management process, when the principles of teamwork are applied without a lack of trust, listening, having a common position, and acting in one direction.

Nonetheless, good contact of the social worker with the case manager is also identified as a factor that determines success, because "the success of the social worker depends on the contact… with the case manager" (SD1). Research participants found good contact between the case manager and the social worker to be especially important, because it is the initial point from which joint work begins. The following was reflected in the research participants' statements: "first of all, the contact between the social worker and the case manager must be

good; this is where teamwork begins" (SD3). The importance of the common approach of the social worker and the case manager remains strong: "one has to look in the same direction as the case manager" (SD2). Hence, another factor that determines the success of cooperation between the social worker and the case manager is the good contact between them, which becomes a starting point from which their smooth teamwork begins. In order to create good contact between the social worker and the case manager, their common point of view is important.

Another factor that determines the success of cooperation between the social worker and the case manager is the social worker's contact with the client. The establishment of contact between the social worker and the client is a prerequisite for success: "good contact with the family shows that everything is fine" (SD2). Success depends on the contact established with the family and the child; thus, the social worker's position is particularly important, since "if you come as a director and start pointing fingers at them, saying you go there, and you go there, you won't achieve anything" (SD4). It can be said that the establishment of contact between the social worker and the client depends on the social worker's position, because an equal relationship with the client is particularly important. Success in making contact depends on the relationship between the social worker and the client.

The social worker's respect for the client is related to the establishment of contact between the social worker and the client: "in order for the client to establish contact with the social worker, their respect must be felt; this is the essential thing. It is where help for the family, for the child, and for the person themselves begins; it affects how the client will accept the social worker. The client's contact influences the services they receive and the solution to problems" (SD6). Research participants emphasised that the social worker's position is particularly important, because it is important "not to go there like a boss with an attitude that I'm the employee and you have problems. You have to go like an ordinary person, without showing off as being more important" (SD2). This means that the social worker's respect for the client is related to the establishment of contact with the client and maintaining support during the entire process of assistance. An essential factor is the social worker's respect for the client, since the organisation of services for the child and the family, the acceptance of the social worker, as well as the equal relationship between the social worker and the client, start from respect.

The analysis of data from the interview research that involved case managers working in a team with social workers, regarding the factors that determine the success of their cooperation, allowed one to distinguish three categories and nine subcategories (Table 2).

Table 2. Factors that determine the success of the social worker: experiences of case managers

Category	Subcategory
Personality traits of the social worker	Personality traits that help the social worker create and maintain a relationship with the client
	Personality traits that help the social worker remain professional when providing services
Existing skills of the social worker	Communication skills
	Listening skills
	Observation skills
	Professional competencies of the social worker
	Positive internal attitude of the social worker

Psychological well-being of the social worker	Social worker's desire to help the client overcome difficulties
	A social worker's good relationship with the manager

Personal qualities determine the success of the social worker. Research participants emphasised that the social worker's personal qualities help them create and maintain a relationship with the client, thus their understanding and acceptance of the client are very important: "the social worker must be empathetic, and able to accept the client as they are" (AV3). Flexibility and understanding of the social worker are considered extremely important when working with the most vulnerable persons, because this influences not having very strict attitudes: "flexibility, a lack of very strict attitudes, like when it will be as I said and not otherwise, because the work is complicated anyway, and we work with people who are vulnerable" (AV4), "understanding" (AV4). Success is also determined by the social worker's sensitivity, getting to know the client's situation and involvement, avoiding conflict situations: "sensitively reacts to the other person's problem, gets deeper into the matter, analyses, and doesn't conflict with the family" (AV1). The research data revealed that personal qualities such as empathy, acceptance of the client as they are, flexibility, a lack of strict attitudes, understanding, sensitivity, delving into the client's situation, and avoiding conflict situations are the personal qualities that affect the success of cases in the work of the social worker.

In the meantime, according to the research participants, in order to remain professional when providing services, the social worker must first "not be afraid to stand up for themselves" (AV4). Strong attitudes, the ability to defend them, express one's position, and having a clear value system help the social worker to remain professional when providing services, which is confirmed by the research participant's statement: "his strong attitudes, the value system, the ability to represent their attitudes, vision, and opinion" (AV6). According to the research participants, only by having these qualities will one be able to represent the client, and also "be able to represent the client's position and rights" (AV6). It is emphasised that if the social worker does not have their own strong attitudes, they will be easily influenced and will easily agree with the position of others, which will affect the representation of the client: "they will be distracted in all directions and will want to agree with everyone, and they will not be able to represent their client at a high-quality level" (AV4). The age of the social worker is singled out, because "young social workers, especially, have more difficulty being accepted by older clients, because it is believed that they cannot understand much, do not have children, and do not have life experience, thus are unable to advise" (AV3). The following shows that not being afraid to stand up, strong attitudes, the value system, the ability to represent the client's position, and age, help the social worker remain professional and ensure quality service provision and client representation.

The existing skills of the social worker determine success in their activities. The research data show that the existing social worker's communication skills are a key focus in achieving successful cases, as the ability to establish contact with the client affects the successful process of securing the child's rights: "success in social work, in order to ensure the rights of the child, mostly depends on… the contact established by the social worker from the very first moments of communication with clients" (AV5), because this is exactly "work with the person, and with their environment" (AV1). In the activities of the social worker, of great importance are the skills to maintain and manage a conversation, and the ability to manage different topics and apply those abilities with clients of various age groups: "communication skills, maintaining a conversation with a client, knowing how to manage a conversation regardless of the direction it will turn, the ability to move from one topic to another, and to

do this very naturally" (AV3). It can be said that the social worker's communication skills are perceived as a part of successful work in order to ensure the rights of the child.

Meanwhile, the existing listening skills of the social worker are perceived by the research participants as the social worker's "ability to hear people out" (AV2), because the social worker "must be able to listen to the client. Hear them out. Listen actively and get involved, not passively and without hearing anything" (AV3). It is the possession of listening skills that is singled out as extremely important and significant: "an important aspect when thinking about the social worker is their ability to listen <…>" (AV3). The following shows that the social worker's listening skills are primarily the ability to hear people out.

On the other hand, the observation skills of the social worker are identified by the research participants as "capturing various details during the very first visit of the family, the behaviour of family members, and certain characteristics" (AV3). Observation skills are also very important for the social worker and require them to be observant and attentive, observing and seeing that "the social worker must be very attentive, observe, and see" (AV6). The characteristic feature of the social worker is the ability to notice extremely significant details and circumstances: "the attentiveness of the social worker is important in observation" (AV3). The research data show that the social worker's observation skills imply the recording of various details during a family visit, when the behaviour of family members is observed. Observation skills require the social worker to be observant, attentive, and to see.

According to the research participants, the social worker's professional competencies are influenced by their professionalism: "determined by professionalism" (AV1). Professionalism is the psychological and legal knowledge, strong communication skills, and knowledge of human development: "psychological knowledge, ability to communicate with the client" (AV2); "this is also legal knowledge, which is the knowledge of the adult and child development" (AV2). Research participants emphasised that it is the professionalism of the social worker that helps ensure the rights of the child in the process of helping them: "The social worker's professionalism helps when it is sought to ensure the rights of the child, as ensuring the rights of the child is the ultimate goal in social work" (AV5). The social worker's education, constant professional development, and desire to improve by updating their knowledge are also important: "the existing education, existing knowledge, their regular updating and interest in new methods, and their application" (AV3). This means that the social worker's professional competencies are perceived as having psychological and legal knowledge, the ability to communicate with the client and communication skills, because all of the above-mentioned influences the process of ensuring the child's rights. Education of the social worker, regular updating of knowledge, and interest in new methods and their application are considered important.

The success of the social worker is also determined by their psychological well-being. The research data revealed that the social worker's positive internal attitude is extremely important, especially their inner state and motivation: "the social worker's inner state and motivation greatly influence their psychological well-being and feelings" (AV3). The trust of the family depends on the social worker's inner state and motivation, and the following determines the effectiveness of solving problems: "the social worker gains the family's trust, and it becomes easier to solve problems" (AV1). When the social worker feels good about what they are doing, their motivation increases and the accomplishments that they achieve together with the client, and in contact with the client, are influenced: "if the social worker feels good, they will be valued and will be motivated to carry out their job. And I think it will be reflected in their work, achievements, and contact with the client" (AV3). The social worker's inner state also affects the client, because they only willingly consult if they trust the social worker: "the family trusts, consults and there are more frequent cases of a good experience" (AV1), but it is emphasised that the social worker must "be a strong, self-confident person and not afraid to stand against the system" (AV4). It can be claimed that

the positive attitude of the social worker is associated with their inner state and motivation, and when they gain the trust of the family, the problems that arise are easily solved. The inner state of the social worker affects the results achieved and the contact with the client, because the family trusts them and willingly consults. In this context, the social worker is perceived as a strong, self-confident person who is not afraid to stand up to the system.

The research participants identified the social worker's desire to help the client overcome difficulties as an essential aspect in achieving successful cases, because their success, as that of a specialist, depends on "their motivation to help the client solve the arising difficulties, and on their desire to help the client" (AV6), because "a motivated social worker will not give up, but try different methods, will consult with various specialists on providing help, and will finally find a solution and a settlement that will provide good results" (AV3), "if the social worker doesn't lack desire and motivation, together with the client, they will definitely find ways, methods, and specialists that will contribute to solving the problem and influence positive changes for the client" (AV6). The following shows that the social worker's desire to help the client overcome difficulties is influenced by their inner motivation, because a motivated social worker will use more diverse methods and ways of helping.

The research participants emphasised that the success of the social worker is also determined by their good relationship with the manager, which is particularly significant because a good relationship with the manager reflects the manager's contribution to the employee: "the employer's contribution to the employee is also very important" (AV4). Unconditional support for the employee by the manager, having a common goal, and pursuing it, helps achieve changes: "support and knowing that we are working towards one goal and are doing everything to achieve those results" (AV4). A good relationship between the social worker and the head of the institution determines the social worker's well-being: "influences their well-being, achievable results and successful cases" (AV6). Hence, a good relationship between the social worker and the manager is the employer's contribution to the employee, which is perceived as support for the employee, the pursuit of a common goal, and common results. The relationship with the manager influences the social worker's expected results, successful cases, and their well-being.

4 Discussion

The research revealed that the teamwork of the case manager and the social worker determines the success of their cooperation and is associated with the support felt by the social worker from the case manager, the close cooperation of these specialists, and the good contact of the case manager with the social worker. Lalajants [14], who studied the good practice of specialists working in the field of child welfare, also emphasised the importance of cooperation of specialists based on trust and communication, cooperation at the institutional level, and strong leadership of the coordinator, which influences the good experiences. On the other hand, Kim, Imburgia, Armstrong-Richardson, Jaggers, and Hall [12], having analysed the teamwork of specialists working in the field of child welfare, also emphasised the importance of effective teamwork and team formation.

The research also highlighted that the success of cooperation between the social worker and the case manager is also influenced by the social worker's contact with the client, where establishing a relationship with the client and showing respect for the service recipient are very important. Žibėnienė and Mikniūtė [8], who delved into the relationship between the social worker and the client, also note that the social worker's respect for the client, understanding that they have their own space, as well as openness, creation of trust, support, and not putting pressure on the client, are important.

The research revealed that the social worker's success is determined by their personal qualities, which help them create and maintain a relationship with the client and remain

professional in providing services. Bagdonas [6] highlighted that the success of the social worker depends on their age, attitudes towards the people experiencing social risks, and personal qualities such as communication, sincerity, and empathy.

The research showed that the success of the social worker is also influenced by the skills they have: communication, listening, observation skills, and the social worker's professional competencies. Budrytė [7] draws attention to communication, because it is one of the main tools of the social worker in their activities, identifying five essential skills that the social worker must have: observation, listening, questioning, attention and concentration, management and interpretation, and the creation of a suitable atmosphere. On the other hand, the professional competence of the social worker is primarily based on psychological and legal knowledge, the ability to communicate with the client, and communication skills, as well as education, regular updating of knowledge and interest in new methods, and their application. Bagdonas [6] also emphasised that the success of the social worker depends on their education.

The research highlighted that another factor that influences the success of the social worker is their psychological well-being, which is affected by their positive inner attitude, the desire to help the client overcome difficulties, and their good relationship with the manager. Žibėnienė and Mikniūtė [8], who delved into the relationship between the social worker and the client, note that the establishment of the relationship between the social worker and the client requires respect, understanding of the client's space and its acceptance, openness, trust, and support. The research revealed that the psychological well-being of the social worker is also influenced by a good relationship between the social worker and the manager, which is perceived as support for the employee, as well as the achievement of a common goal and common results. This aspect was not emphasised in the research and insights of other authors.

5 Conclusions

After analysing the case managers' experiences of their cooperation with social workers, data analysis revealed that the success of the cooperation between the social worker and the case manager is determined by: teamwork of the case manager and the social worker, and the social worker's contact with the client. The teamwork of the case manager and the social worker is related to the support felt by the social worker from the case manager, where the focus is on their close cooperation and good contact between the two. At the same time, in terms of the social worker's contact with the client, the establishment of contact with the client and respect for them are significant.

The research shows that the success of cooperation between the social worker and the case manager is determined by: the personal qualities of the social worker, existing skills, and their psychological well-being. The personal qualities of the social worker that determine success are those that help them establish and maintain a relationship with the client, as well as remain professional in the provision of services. At the same time, the existing skills of the social worker are related to communication, listening, observation skills, and professional competencies. Nevertheless, the success of the social worker is also influenced by their psychological well-being, which is associated with a positive inner attitude, the desire to help the client overcome difficulties, and a good relationship with the manager.

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