Empowerment factors for young people in open youth centres

Salomeja Karaseviciute[1*], *Vida* Gudzinskiene[2]

[1] Kauno kolegija Higher Education Institution, Faculty of Arts and Education, Kaunas, Pramones pr. 20, Lithuania
[2] Mykolas Romeris University, Faculty of Human and Society studies, Vilnius, Ateities 20, Lithuania

Abstract. The aim of this article is to reveal the preconditions for empowering young people in open youth centres. Qualitative research was chosen for the study by using the method of a semi-structured interview. The obtained data were analysed by using the content analysis method. Seven social workers, who work in open youth centres, participated in the study. The study revealed that, in open youth centres, social workers organising many group activities develop young people's communication, cooperation and leadership skills. Another important factor in empowering young people is psychological support. This helps young people to cope with stress, depression and other emotional problems. Involving young people in various community project activities enables them to solve their problems, implement ideas that are important to them and learn how to plan and organise their personal time. The third important factor in empowering young people is the creation and maintenance of social networks, which serve to encourage young people to participate in projects and initiate their own project activities. This opens the way for young people to improve their well-being, feel needed, become autonomous and achieve their life goals. Group activities, psychological support, networking and support as well as various project activities are important for youth empowerment in open youth centres. **Keywords**: empowerment, youth, open youth centres, social worker

1 Introduction

Empowerment is defined as the capacity of individuals, groups and communities to take control of their circumstances, exercise power, achieve their own goals and help themselves and others maximise the quality of their lives. Stepcenko [1] employs Paolo Freire's humanistic approach in defining and analysing social empowerment. Her theoretical developments include the United Nations' care of individual empowerment and building life conditions to satisfy the basic needs of vulnerable social groups. The empowerment of individuals, groups and communities is combined differently to provide a valuable means of evaluation.

* Corresponding author: s.karaseviciute@gmail.com

© The Authors, published by EDP Sciences. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

'Empowerment is a process whereby individuals or communities increase their control over their lives and become involved in decision-making when decisions affect their lives' Kreisberg [2, p.18]. According to Sultan and Yahaya [3], empowerment is the ability of an individual or group to make choices, turn those choices into desired actions and achieve results that are important to them. According to the authors, empowerment is a form of self-control in which a person controls the decisions and choices they make, and it influences the changes in their personal life and community. Gudžinskienė & Karasevičiūtė [4] define empowerment as the capacity of individuals, groups and communities to take control of their circumstances, exercise power, achieve their own goals and help themselves and others to maximise the quality of their lives. There has been notable research conducted on social work practices in Latvia, particularly focusing on empowering families at social risk.

According to Crawford Shearer and Reed [5], empowerment can be described as a process that promotes people's power to take control of their own lives, communities and society by acting on issues they define as important. Empowerment allows a person to feel confident that they have the power to create the life they want and to develop the belief that they can do anything they set their mind to. A sense of empowerment allows a person to pursue their goals and dreams with enthusiasm. Empowerment gives people the opportunity to better understand their lives and change them in the desired direction. Empowerment in social work aims to help service users gain decision-making and action power in their lives by reducing the impact of social or personal barriers that prevent them from exercising their power, impact, increasing their abilities and self-confidence, using their power and transferring power to people who do not have it [6]. Empowering a person promotes their self-confidence when they take responsibility for their life and lifestyle. In other words, empowerment influences the resolution of a person's social problems, and it is an effective interactive process that aims to empower an individual or group to independently control their lives, make decisions and take responsibility for their future.

Open youth centres are places where young people with different abilities gather. Open youth centres' aim is to develop young people's personal and social competences, actively engage in community and social processes, help them overcome difficulties, solve problems constructively, encourage them to develop their personal development, foster entrepreneurship and develop skills for the labour market. It is very important to create opportunities for young people with fewer opportunities to develop personal and social skills. Social workers at open youth centres use experiential learning strategies and other specialists to help disadvantaged young people build their personal lives. The aim of this study is to reveal the preconditions for empowering young people in open youth centres.

2 Research methodology

In order to reveal the factors that determine empowerment for young people in open youth centres, qualitative research was chosen. The purpose of qualitative research is to reveal barely researched social phenomena, the experiences and encounters of people, human synergies, behavioural strategies and culture occurring in real environments, making the experience of the participants of a study meaningful along with the characteristics and specificities of daily life [7]. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the nuances and complexities involved in this process.

A mixed-methods purposive sampling strategy was utilised to select the study participants. This involved a combination of convenience and snowball sampling techniques. Initially, the participants were recruited from open youth centres who work with young people. Subsequently, snowball sampling was employed, where the participants recommended individuals with relevant experience and knowledge.

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 [8]. The research participants were selected according to the following criterion: at least two years' work experience in open youth centres as a social worker. Seven social workers from various Lithuanian regions were selected for the study.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to facilitate the exploration of participants' perceptions, meanings and interpretations of their experiences. The number of interviews was determined by the principle of saturation, where new information ceased to emerge. The research involved seven social workers who met the criterion. All of the interviews were conducted remotely using 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 earlier received data, the new research participants were not included in the research. All of the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed.

Qualitative content analysis was carried out in accordance with the inductive, study data based and categories composed logic. According to Creswell [8], content analysis is a technique which, having examined the specificities of the text, allows, objectively and systematically, for you to draw reliable conclusions. In this study, the qualitative content analysis was performed regarding the following sequence: repeated reading of the content of transcript interview texts, distinction of meaning elements in the text analysed as well as grouping of the distinguished meaning elements into categories and sub-categories. Later on, the authors of the present study integrated the categories/sub-categories into the context of the phenomenon analysed and provided a description of their analysis as recommended by Creswell [8].

The study was based on respect for personal privacy, benevolence and attitude, not to harm a research participant and strict confidentiality [9]. The study participants participated in the study on a voluntary basis and agreed that their interview would be recorded. They were introduced to the purpose, the method of study data collection and the procedure of the study, in which anonymity and confidentiality were ensured. When analysing the results of the study, the characteristics of the study participants are presented generally while ensuring that personal information, which would enable a particular participant of the study to be identified, will not be presented, the confidentiality of the participants and non-disclosure of personal identity information had been guaranteed, and the names of the study participants were encoded by using a letter, e.g. A, B, C, etc.

3 Results of the research and discussion

The study revealed that, in open youth centres, social workers empower young people by organising group activities, psychological support and the creation and maintenance of social networks (Table 1).

Table 1. Empowerment factors for young people in open youth centres

Category	Subcategory
Organising group activities	Develop communication skills
	Develop cooperation skills
	Develop leadership skills

Psychological support	To cope with stress, depression and other emotional problems
	Learn to solve their problems
	Learn to implement ideas that are important to them
	Learn how to plan their personal life
	Learn how to organise their personal time
Creation and maintenance of social networks	To participate in projects
	To initiate their own project activities

The study revealed that, in open youth centres, social workers organise many group activities in order to develop communication, cooperation and leadership skills. Social workers develop communication skills by using various team games and organising discussions and conversations with young people on issues that concern them. According to the study participants: 'Young people are actively involved in discussions with local authorities and the community' (B). 'Young people organise meetings with the mayor to express their ideas and problems, thus learning active listening, respect and reasoned speech' (G), 'We encourage young people to express their opinions and to respect their interlocutors' (A). Therefore, it can be said that it is important for social workers to develop young people's communication skills. In open youth centres, they use various interactive methods that not only help develop young people's communication skills, but also to motivate them to actively participate in community life and speak publicly and articulately. Koprowska [10] showed that communication skills help to develop their critical thinking and ability to accept different opinions.

The study revealed that young people develop cooperation skills at open youth centres. The study participants noted the following: 'Some young people lack smooth cooperation skills, so we devote time to developing these skills because it is important to share responsibility when cooperating' (D), 'We teach young people to cooperate by assigning them team tasks' (C), 'Discussing real conflict situations as well as role-playing conflict situations and looking for solutions also contribute to the development of cooperation skills' (F), 'Young people stage arguments and look for peaceful solutions' (E). Thus, social workers develop young people's cooperation skills using real and simulated situations, and young people also develop teamwork skills while learning to cooperate. According to Redmond & Dolan [11], the ability to collaborate with others and express thoughts clearly opens up authentic opportunities for young people to practice and improve their skills.

The study identified that open youth centres provide young people with opportunities to develop leadership skills. According to social workers: 'We carry out various projects with young people and try to ensure that each young person takes on a leadership role in a project that is personally and morally important to them' (A), 'Representatives of our city council not only discuss issues with young people but also take their opinions into account, and young people feel valued and understand that their leadership is important' (B). 'Young people's participation in youth councils and social projects develops leadership skills, and young people are happy to get involved by sharing responsibility' (F). The most important condition for developing leadership skills is to create a safe and motivating environment where young people can experiment, try new roles and learn from their experiences. As Karagianni & Jude Montgomery [12] state, young people are empowered when they gain not only leadership experience and self-confidence but also take responsibility not only for themselves but also for the group.

The micro-level practices observed in open youth centres can be conceptualised as mechanisms of empowerment, linking individual experiences to broader social processes.

For example, communication, collaboration and leadership practices facilitate the formation of social capital by fostering trust-based relationships, social norms and networks through repeated interactions [13, 14]. These resources extend beyond the open youth centre's immediate context and become important factors in young people's social integration and civic engagement. Analysing these processes through the lens of structuration theory [15], it can be argued that young people's everyday practices not only reflect existing social structures but also actively participate in the transformation of young people, thereby creating the conditions for their more active participation in society. In this regard, open youth centres function as intermediate spaces where individual agency is consistently cultivated through social interactions and reflective practices. In this way, micro-level practices become an essential bridge to macro-level social empowerment and change.

Another important factor in empowering young people is psychological support. The study showed that social workers at open youth centres help young people cope with stress, depression and other emotional problems. The participants in the study also noted the following: 'A significant number of young people, who do not receive psychological support in their families, visit our centres, so we try to create a safe and supportive emotional environment for young people' (C), 'There are cases when emotionally broken young people come to the centre, and they lack self-confidence and are withdrawn' (B), 'We have helped a young person who was unable to manage his stress, was depressed and even hurt himself' (E). Thus, the study showed that social workers, in order to empower young people, provide them with psychological help and support, responding to their emotional needs. According to Howe, Kohli & Walsh, [16], to cope with such emotional difficulties, youths need support from social workers, local community and family.

The results of the study show that social workers at open youth centres enable young people to solve their problems: 'Young people with various problems come to the centres, but they lack the skills to solve them' (D). 'We encourage young people to solve their problems themselves, rather than just getting angry or giving up when faced with difficulties. To this end, we use round-table discussions and specialists from other fields' (G), 'When we have very complex situations, we are assisted by psychologists and sometimes psychotherapists...' (A), 'Over time, with our support and the support of other specialists, young people take responsibility for their lives and no longer drift along and no longer blame their parents' (F). In other words, social workers seek in various ways to involve not only the young people themselves, but also specialists from other fields in solving young people's problems and empowering them. Kam [17] says that, by providing services, social workers help and empower young people to solve problems.

The study identified that social workers empowering young people by involving them in various community project activities and helping them to learn to implement ideas that are important to them. Social workers noted: 'In order to empower young people, it is important to create conditions for them to implement their ideas, and they do have ideas' (C), 'When you create conditions for young people to realise their dreams, they responsibly and carefully try to show that they can realise them with the help of others' (B), 'Since our young people often lack self-confidence, it is important to provide them with support, encouragement, motivation and moral support so that they do not give up when they encounter difficulties in putting their ideas into practice' (G). According to Stoyanova [18], in order to prepare young people for an independent and successful life, it is important to learn to implement ideas that are important to them.

The results of the study show that, by empowering young people, social workers at open youth centres teach them how to plan their personal lives. By empowering young people to plan their personal lives, social workers teach them to get to know themselves, set goals, develop their decision-making skills and emphasise the ability to ask for help in difficult moments in life. The study participants noted: 'Self-awareness is important for young people

because it helps them better understand their strengths and weaknesses' (D), 'We create conditions for young people to get to know themselves, identify their interests and set realistic, achievable short-term and long-term goals' (B), 'Our young people lack decision-making skills, so in order to empower them, we teach them to evaluate different options, anticipate the consequences and make responsible choices when planning their personal lives' (F), 'We often notice that young people who come to our centre do not know how to ask for help, so in order to empower them, we teach them the skills to ask for help in difficult moments in life' (C). Other authors, such as Sala-Torrent, Planas-Lladó, Soler-Masó and Gómez [19], also note that teaching young people to plan their personal lives is an important factor in empowerment.

The study shows that, by empowering young people in open youth centres, social workers teach them how to organise their personal time. Social workers who participated in the study stated: 'My goal is to help young people acquire skills that will enable them to plan and organise their time independently' (G), 'We teach young people to set priorities, break tasks down into smaller steps and achieve them gradually. I show young people various planning techniques and encourage them to find the planning tools that suit them best' (E). 'I encourage young people to think about what is important to them personally and to create a daily schedule that reflects both their responsibilities and activities as well as time for themselves and rest. This not only helps them manage their time more effectively, but also to build their self-confidence and sense of responsibility' (A). 'I encourage them not only to set priorities and identify which tasks are most important, but also to determine whether a particular task has a deadline' (D). 'I cultivate planning habits in young people, encourage them to use calendars, notebooks or mobile apps, and not to overload their schedules, but to leave time for rest and unexpected situations as well as to periodically review what works and what could be improved. When they complete their tasks on time, they become more confident and take the initiative more readily' (B). According to Shor [20], developing time management skills and demonstrating how to plan activities using calendars, priority lists or simple planning programmes empowers young people to plan their time appropriately, take responsibility and, at the same time, build their confidence in completing tasks on time.

Micro-level practices such as the ability to solve your own problems, implement ideas that are important to them, plan your personal life, organise your free time, cope with stress and manage your emotions not only strengthen young people's daily self-regulation but also contribute to their self-efficacy [21], which is considered an essential dimension of psychological empowerment. The theory of psychological empowerment distinguishes three essential dimensions: competence, autonomy and the ability to influence your environment [22]. Young people who have the opportunity to implement ideas that are important to them in their daily lives are more likely to believe in their ability to act in broader social contexts.

The third important factor in empowering young people is the creation and maintenance of social networks, which serve to encourage young people to participate in projects and initiate their own project activities.

The young people at open youth centres are involved in various social projects. According to the study participants: 'Participation in various social projects opens up new perspectives for young people in their personal lives and encourages them to pursue self-fulfilment...' (B), 'In order to empower young people, we invite them to participate in social projects where they develop communication, organisational and creative skills as well as strengthen their self-confidence (F), 'By getting involved in project activities, young people gain digital literacy skills and the ability to represent themselves and their ideas online (A). As Sala-Torrent, Planas-Lladó, Soler-Masó and Gómez [19] also note that young people's participation in various project activities paves the way for them to acquire general and specific skills that are important for shaping their present and future lives.

The study showed that young people not only participate in projects, but they also initiate their own project activities. The participants in the study stated: The Youth Ambassadors project, created by young people, was very successful. In this project, young people became social media ambassadors and shared useful information about opportunities to get involved in open youth centre initiatives, thereby empowering young people to strengthen their existing social ties and create new ones. (G), 'The young people's project was interesting, with their authentic success stories being published on social networks in LIVE broadcasts' (C), 'The successful youth project "I Can", which aims to share achievements, new skills learned, good work done and projects started and implemented' (D). Involving young people in various project activities created on their own initiative enables them to solve their own problems and implement ideas that are important to them [19]. The opportunity for young people to initiate their own project activities increases their motivation to be active and positive members of the community, encourages their creativity, leadership, self-expression, personal development, independence and expands their social network. It should be noted that open youth centres provide a safe and inclusive environment where young people can experiment, learn from experience and receive support from staff and peers.

Youth participation in projects and the initiation of their own project activities are micro-level practices in open youth centres that acquire macro-social significance, as they not only strengthen individual capabilities but also create the conditions for structural empowerment—the active, conscious and socially engaged participation of youth in society. Thus, the aforementioned micro-level interventions can be interpreted within the context of positive youth development theory [23], which emphasises the cultivation of competencies and responsibility as the foundation for young people's long-term contribution to society.

In summary, it can be stated that micro-level practices in open youth centres are inseparable from macro-level processes of social change. Through the theoretical lenses of psychological empowerment [22], self-efficacy [21], social capital [13, 14], structuration [15] and positive youth development [23], it becomes evident that daily activities not only foster individual abilities but also create the conditions for broader social empowerment.

4 Conclusions

The study revealed that, in open youth centres, social workers organise many group activities in order to develop communication, cooperation and leadership skills. Another important factor in empowering young people is psychological support. This helps young people to cope with stress, depression and other emotional problems. Involving young people in various community project activities enables them to solve their problems, implement ideas that are important to them and learn how to plan and organise their personal time. The third important factor in empowering young people is the creation and maintenance of social networks, which serve to encourage young people to participate in projects and initiate their own project activities. This opens the way for young people to improve their well-being, feel needed, become autonomous and achieve their life goals.

References

1. A. Stepcenko. Social Empowerment for Capability and Changes, Report on the Project 'Social Empowerment in Rural Areas' (SEMPRE), Interreg Baltic Sea Region Transnational European Territorial Cooperation Programme 2014–2020. 212. (2019).
2. S. Kreisberg. Transforming power: Domination, empowerment, and education. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. (1992).

3. N. Habib Sultan & F. Yahaya. Women empowerment in development: An overview. In *Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Multidisciplinary Research (ICMR), Medan, Indonesia* (pp. 5-6).(2018).
4. V. Gudžinskienė & S. Karasevičiūtė. Empowering psychologically traumatised children at school: the experience of social pedagogues. In *SOCIETY. INTEGRATION. EDUCATION. Proceedings of the International Scientific Conference* (Vol. 1, pp. 640-651). (2024).
5. N. B. Crawford Shearer & P. G. Reed. Empowerment: Reformulation of a Non-Rogerian Concept. Nursing Science Quarterly. (2016).
6. M. Payne. Social care and social justice. In *Routledge International Handbook of Social Justice* (pp. 398-408). Routledge.(2014).
7. V. Žydžiūnaitė, S. Sabaliauskas, Kokybiniai tyrimai: principai ir metodai (Vaga, Vilnius, 2017)
8. J. W. Creswell, Research design: quantitative, qualitative and mixed method approaches (Sage, London, 2014)
9. D. Aluwihare-Samaranayake, Ethics in Qualitative Research: A View of the Participants' and Researchers' World from a Critical Standpoint. Int. J. Qual. Methods **11**(2), 64-81 (2012). https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691201100208
10. J. Koprowska. Communication and interpersonal skills in social work. (2024).
11. S. Redmond & P. Dolan. Towards a conceptual model of youth leadership development. Child & Family Social Work, **21**(3), 261-271. (2016).
12. D. Karagianni & A. Jude Montgomery. Developing leadership skills among adolescents and young adults: a review of leadership programmes. International Journal of Adolescence and Youth, **23**(1), 86-98. (2018).
13. P. Bourdieu. The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education (pp. 241–258). Greenwood. (1986).
14. R. D. Putnam. Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community. Simon & Schuster. (2000).
15. A. Giddens. The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration. University of California Press. (1984).
16. D. Howe, R. Kohli, M. Smith, C. Parkinson, L. McMahon, R. Solomon & J. Walsh. *Relationship-based social work: Getting to the heart of practice*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers. (2018).
17. P. K. Kam. Strengthening the empowerment approach in social work practice: An EPS model. Journal of Social Work, **21**(3), 329-352. (2021).
18. D. Stoyanova. The role of young people in the process of implementation of new knowledge in practice. In *EDULEARN19 Proceedings* (pp. 9456-9459). IATED. (2019).
19. M. Sala-Torrent, A. Planas-Lladó, P. Soler-Masó & C. Gómez. Evaluation of youth empowerment projects from an educators' perspective. Research on Social Work Practice, **34**(1), 70-83. (2024)
20. I. Shor. *Empowering education: Critical teaching for social change*. University of Chicago Press. (2024).
21. A. Bandura. Guide for constructing self-efficacy scales. (2006).
22. M. A. Zimmerman. Psychological empowerment: Issues and illustrations. American Journal of Community Psychology, **23**(5), 581–599. (1995).

23. Lerner, R. M., Almerigi, J. B., Theokas, C., & Lerner, J. V. (2005). Positive youth development: A view of the issues. Journal of Early Adolescence, **25**(1), 10–16.