

# **SOCIALIA 2017**

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## **Social work in the local environment in the theoretical thought of Helena Radlińska. Topicality of the concept**

The subject of this paper is the concept of providing environmental aid included in the work of Helena Orsza Radlińska (1879-1954), creator of the Polish school of social pedagogy, recognized as the greatest classics of this scientific discipline in Poland (L. Witkowski, 2014, p. 173). Considerations undertaken by her since the first decade of the past century on the subject and tasks of social pedagogy have been based on multidimensional exploration, team research and experiments, and have also benefited from the achievements of social sciences and sciences devoted to humans, such as: medicine or agriculture (M. Brenk 2007, p. 88). The thesis

formulated in the title about the topicality of Radlińska's social thought is the recalling of voices, which in this context were often expressed by researchers of her work (E. A. Mazurkiewicz, 1994, p.41. J. Rudniański, 1983, p. 5. D. Coner, M. Jakubowski, 1980, p. 29. S. Kawula, 1979, p. 89. I. Lepalczyk, 1979, p. 109). On the other hand, the nature of the considerations taken in the article is – by virtue of the volume requirements of the publishing house – only random and contributory.

It is worth mentioning at the beginning that the period of social work and Helena Radlińska's scientific work fell on times of changing political conditions (also economic, social, cultural, etc.), that is, years when the Poles did not have their own country (until 1918), times of freedom (1918-1939), war and occupation (1939-1945), and the post-war years under the communist rule imposed by the USSR. Consequently, here theoretical considerations devoted to social work related to a much broader context than the relationship between the social guardian and the petitioner. Hence, the tasks we now assign to social workers, as well as the methods of social work, can be found in the guidelines for, among others, nurses, librarians and other employees who perform their tasks in the field of the local environment. The responsibility for intentional educational influences in the local environment rests with those who are professionally involved with facilities such as nurseries, kindergartens, schools, self-government institutions and social workers (D. Coner, M. Jakubowski, 1980, p. 26). It should also be mentioned that Helena Radlińska does not yet use the term of a "social worker", since this term came into the Polish language after the II World War (M. Brenk, 2012, p. 102).

The above holistic approach to environmental work has made Helena Radlińska enter the creative world at the beginning of a few professions, which have gone away from social work today – in this context, Edward Mazurkiewicz wrote about her: "she is the forerunner of the social education for nurses and the precursor of higher education for the purposes of nursing care. We must emphasise her active presence at the birth of nursing as a profession in our country" (1983, p. 70). This relationship of health care, especially social prevention with the caring work, was justified by Radlińska with the need to prevent diseases at the level of living environment in order to reduce the number of patients requiring hospital treatment and convalescence in sanatoriums (H. Radlińska, 1947, p. 279).

The starting point for further considerations should be Radlińska's remarks on the components of the local environment, which include: "nature, the conditions of being, created by human work and relationships between people, resulting from them; people acting and reacting to the impact of various factors and products of the human spirit: beliefs, science, literature, art, experiences, mental attitudes. The components of the environment include the future equally to the present" (H. Radlińska, 1935b, p. 29-30). These are the conditions and factors that undoubtedly shape a human being, affect him, influence his choices, literally "go" with him despite the environment in which he is staying is changing. For educational activities, the invisible factors have the key significance, which affect such spheres like defining concepts, beliefs, affective attitudes, habits. They play a role of self-determination of the group, shape its members and subconsciously influence the life choices (H. Radlińska, 1935b, p. 29-33). They can limit the unit in the undertaken activities, while the role of the educator is to use them to transform and improve the environment (L. Witkowski, 2014, p. 111-118).

In the reflections devoted to the local environment Helena Radlińska has made many remarkable comments dedicated to the role of leaders, whose work in educational institutions or self-government institutions requires involvement in the educational sphere. She pointed to a librarian as an example of a leader, who is demanded active involvement in environmental work: "he does not only have to be the servant of the ideal, but also the explorer of the reality, in which he should introduce the ideal". She pointed to his need to have many skills and competencies needed to work effectively with people: "the abilities to get to know social environments and human souls is not less important for the librarian than knowledge of

literature”. He should be substantively prepared to his work: “In order to meet the tasks, the educational librarian should have general education, get familiarised with psychology and modern social issues, with institutions, which serve the social development. (...) He must get to know and be able to explore the social environment”. Radlińska’s remarks were not limited only to theory – the approach described above was the element of education in this profession in the librarian school and the work of the Institute of Studying Writing and Reading in Lipsk and at the Study of Social and Educational Work in Warsaw (H. Radlińska, 1934, p. 22-30).

Helena Radlińska discussing the forms of work with people and social groups requiring support points to such a characteristic as “contemporary”. However, the practices of the past that are still present in the minds of people are shown in opposition, like charity, philanthropy of princesses and the activities of medieval monasteries – their common feature was to be the ineffective support of pauperism, without effective coping with it, i.e., keeping the same group of clients in poverty. By pointing out the necessity of supporting all good in people, helping the development, extracting strength from individuals and human clusters by social workers, she wrote: “The contemporary foreman walks in a group, as a companion and colleague, and he should never imitate the benefactor, who descends from high to low. The value of his work is measured not by what he does himself, but by what he can bring out from the group, among which and with which he works” (H. Radlińska, 1928, p. 202-203). In Radlińska’s reflections on the role of social workers, the need becomes evident for them to take on merely the attitude of accompaniment, rather than replacement or looking from a dominant position. A teacher working with people from endangered communities has the task of finding social forces – both known and latent. In addition, it should facilitate, help develop aptitudes, help acquire skills, as well as take action in the area of socialization: implement the unit to cooperate with others and awaken the sense of responsibility and belonging to the community (H. Radlińska, 1934, p. 210).

The overriding principle should be to make the people you help aware that they themselves are responsible both for themselves and for the state of their environment. The effectiveness of social worker’s action is, therefore, to include the charges to take independent actions – Radlińska wrote: “We cannot do anything in social work if we will want to do things for others”. This is to be done by showing what can be done to improve the living situation, how this should be done and – what is very important – showing the subordinate that he can be effective in action (H. Radlińska, 1935a, p. 12).

Effective work in the environment should be based on its best possible recognition, entering into spiritual life and finding a common language. Helena Radlińska emphasises that misunderstandings in the language communication area may be due to the specificity of the language used by educated people and those from the lower spheres, similarly she points to the need to distinguish the speech of children and adults. Hence, she advises the sense in conversations, as the same wording can have utterly different meanings for the sender and receiver of the message – this is despite the use of the same language (B. Berstein, 1980, p. 91). She correctly notes that the measure of the subject’s understanding of the content of messages is the moment, when he translates the content to his familiar spiritual language (inner) (H. Radlińska, 1935a, p. 16-17). The above considerations can be further developed by referring to sociolinguistic theories – Basil Berstein wrote that “the social structure generates separate forms or language codes, and these codes primarily convey culture, thus making a certain type of behaviour necessary” (B. Berstein, 1980, p. 90).

Helena Radlińska points out that social work can be taken with everyone – “There is no such miserable environment, so terrible conditions, that a man with spiritual powers cannot create a viable existence, (...) even without obtaining new material means”. The task of a social worker is to find the strength within the human and in his environment – that is in people and devices, which can support him (H. Radlińska, 1935a, p. 12-13). Speaking of borders, the

spiritual violence is indicated when giving help – as such border (H. Radlińska, 1928, p. 205). The situation is similar with the needs and habits of men. Helena Radlińska pointed to the low effectiveness of moralizing and commanding – instead, she suggested interacting by giving people a sense of joy from making changes – extremely illustrative examples includes decorating a window with a beautiful curtain and flowers in a neglected house (which will create a need to wash the floor and paint the walls in residents) or, for example, giving girls deprived of hygienic habits fashionable stockings (which will result in washing their legs daily) (H. Radlińska, 1935a, p. 24).

The demanding task that is put by Helena Radlińska for the social workers is to get to know the people who make up the community. Each person forming a community has individual characteristics, attributes, and – what is the most important – potential, which should be extracted for the purpose of multiplying and transforming. The Author treats the man autonomously, subjectively, he is not – despite unfortunate linguistic manipulations used in sociolinguistic theories – the “material”, but he is a “factor” and “element” (A. Żukiewicz, 2009, p. 84).

The task of social services was also to respect the dignity of people, especially those struggling with problems. She addressed the problem of “killing the sense of human dignity” through the stigmatizing function of some forms of support – e.g. using free food programs at schools (H. Radlińska, 1935a, p. 30-31). She has clearly emphasised the issue of equality of people – in order to realize this ideal, it is necessary to compensate for the shortages of people with social disabilities, which will awaken the dormant “deity” in people, that is, extract and develop the potential. Only with this approach to the human being, the “selection” in the society is possible, understood as showing individuals the most appropriate way of life for them (H. Radlińska, 1933, p. 158-159). Helena Radlińska did not limit her social work only to the concern for the people of the social margin. Yes, at the level of educational work, she divides the book collections and library works into the ones for “less-readable environments” (the least prepared readers, the least developed environments, the beginner environments) and for the “educated environment” (awoken environments, desiring serious reading, environment with higher, more diverse needs, environments reading more) (H. Radlińska, 1922, p. 10).

In her work she used the classic methods of social work: individual case method, group method and environmental method. She also uses the experiences of foreign social work practitioners – an example may include the cooperation with the Austrian psychologist Hildegarda Hetzer (1889-1991), who developed standards for the development of infants and at early childhood, allowing to show the environmental dysfunctions and implement the desired compensatory and preventive treatments. Thanks to these experiences, the concepts such as mean, norms, patterns and measures were introduced to the methodology of environmental studies, which have specific realizations in the form of research – even if they concern school failures (M. Jakubowski, 1980, p. 46), which were conducted on the group of twelve thousand children by the seminarians (H. Radlińska, 1937a, p. 319-340, H. Radlińska 1937b). The significance of research on the living environment of the families that requires support would certainly have been greater if it wasn't for the censorship introduced after the war by the communist authorities, which resulted in the abandonment of research and dismissal of the leading workers, including Helena Radlińska herself (I. Lepalczyk 1994, p. 26). It is worth mentioning that this period in the history of Polish social work and social pedagogy was associated with destructive actions on the part of the communist state apparatus in regard to all actions towards people in need of support undertaken by both state entities, and by non-governmental and ecclesial organizations.

Summing up the above comments, it should be emphasised that despite the tens of years, the achievements of Helena Radlińska still remain the source of inspiration and help understand the role of a social worker better while working with the local environment. In

addition, the great respect that Radlińska paid to the man, especially the one socially excluded, constantly seeking aid solutions – such that are in the potential of himself, the environment, and social workers.

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