

# EMPOWERING PSYCHOLOGICALLY TRAUMATISED CHILDREN AT SCHOOL: THE EXPERIENCE OF SOCIAL PEDAGOGUES

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**Abstract.** *The aim of the study is to reveal the experience of social pedagogues in empowering psychologically traumatised children at school. Qualitative research was chosen for the study by using the method of semi-structured interview. 10 social pedagogues, who work in school in different Lithuanian regions, participated in the study.*

*The study revealed the experience of social pedagogues in empowering traumatised children in school. The study highlighted that in empowering children who have experienced psychological trauma, it is first of all important for the social pedagogue to show the child individual care and provide him with the necessary support. Ensuring that the child receives emotional support and counselling, if necessary using the services of a psychotherapist or psychologist. It is also important to work with the child's family to understand the family's needs and capacity to provide the necessary support. Provide the family with practical help and advice on how to cope with the child's trauma and stress. In order to empower children, it is important to allow them to participate in decision-making because then children will feel in control of their own lives. Empowering psychologically traumatised children requires providing them with a safe and stable environment where they can feel calm and have their needs met. It is equally important that traumatised children become involved in classroom activities or social groups at school, to build relationships and receive support from the school community. Social educators emphasise the importance of educational activities in the school community to help children develop their skills and talents. Long-term collaboration to empower children and their families ensures sustainable well-being of society.*

**Keywords:** *child, empowerment, school, social pedagogues.*

## Introduction

Empowerment is a process encompassing the enhancement of an individual, community, or social group's abilities to actively engage and control their own lives. Aertsen, Bolivar, Mesmaecker, Lauwers (2011, p. 10) It denotes that “empowerment is a phenomenon in which people, organisations, and communities address the issues that concern them.” Various disciplines in the field of social sciences, including education, sociology, economics, management, political science, and others, use the concept of empowerment. Education, sociology, economics, management, political science, etc. Vencloviene (2015,

p. 114) asserts that “in the field of education sciences, Michel Foucault extensively analysed power theories, with a key emphasis on power relations”. According to Ruškus, Mažeikienė, Naujanienė, Motiečienė, and Dvarionis (2013), Foucault was crucial for understanding not only how power operates but also how it can be resisted.

What is the relationship between power and empowerment? The empowerment issue is related to how power is conceptualised. Power is considered a fundamental element that constructs and structures society. This relationship can be twofold, depending on the chosen perspective towards power. Kreisberg (1992) explains that power has two roots. The first is the fundamental expression – “power over,” meaning “above our heads.” This type of power is accompanied by a lack of trust and respect. It is associated with the lower feeling of fear when a person lacks self-confidence and feels inferior to others. The second expression is opposite to the first understanding of power. Power is understood as “power with,” having an expression of empowerment within itself. “Understanding the phenomena of power and empowerment is possible only by recognising their expression at macro, meso, and micro levels, clarifying how power and the exercise of power are related to societal structures and the functioning of society” (Ruškus, Mažeikienė et al., 2013, p. 10).

It is particularly important to empower children who have experienced trauma. Liutkevičienė (2015, p. 129) notes that “it is important to strengthen the sense of personal responsibility and help discover opportunities to act by giving the individual uniqueness.” Children must understand that they make decisions about their actions and life events, they decide for themselves, aligning their decisions with those of others, and “self-confidence is important in overcoming difficulties and obstacles” (Gudžinskienė et al., 2017, p. 167). According to Liutkevičienė (2015, p. 120), based on the empowerment theory, “children need to be given the opportunity to freely make decisions and thus reduce their vulnerability,” and decision-making methods cannot be imposed, freedom of choice must be granted. Venclovienė (2015, p. 116) notes that this is “closely related to psychosocial categories of human beings: self-control, perceived competence, self-esteem, self-confidence, and recognition of one's strengths”. Psychological trauma (also known as mental trauma, psychiatric trauma, or psychotrauma) is an emotional response caused by severe distressing events that are outside the normal range of human experiences, with extreme examples being violence, rape, or a terrorist attack (Barros, Assar, Botto, Leighton, Quevedo & Jiménez (2022)).

In Lithuania, there is an increasing number of studies on the possibilities of empowerment, however, there is a lack of scientifically grounded data on the empowerment possibilities of children who have experienced trauma in general education schools. Therefore, research related to the empowerment of psychologically traumatised children is relevant and timely. The aim of the study

is to reveal the experience of social pedagogues in empowering psychologically traumatized children at school. The article is based on qualitative study by interviewing social pedagogues about empowering traumatized children at school.

### **Research methodology**

Qualitative research was chosen for the study by using the method of semi-structured interview. The semi-structured interview enables to move closer to the perception of human experiences, the identification of meanings, the definition of situations and the interpretation of reality (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The study used mixed purposive sampling of study participants. In particular, convenience, when the sample is drawn from the most easily accessible unit, in cooperation with one of the schools of big cities in Lithuania. Snowball sampling has also been used (George, 2023). The sample units were selected from people who were recommended by other research participants as individuals who have experience, knowledge, and information about the topic of the research. The main criterion is that the participants of the study should have worked as social pedagogues for at least 5 years. Participants of the research was 10 social pedagogues, who work in schools in different Lithuanian regions with psychologically traumatized children. The research participants are women aged between 29 and 49 years. All interviews took place in the school premises during or before work. The research was conducted in 2023. The number of interviews is defined based on the principle of saturation, when the information provided by the research participants begins to repeat itself. Analyzing the research data was based on the qualitative data analysis steps outlined by George (2023). In the context of this article, we use content analysis as a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of data. The study was based on the respect for personal privacy and confidentiality. The participants of the study participated voluntarily. They were briefed on the purpose and the use of the study. Study participants were assigned a code by using the letters 'A, B, C' and so on.

### **Research results**

The research shows that social educators can empower children who have experienced psychological trauma: by taking an interest in the child, providing them with the necessary support, relieving tension after the psychological trauma, organising the services of a psychologist or psychotherapist, working with the family of the traumatised child, creating a safe environment for traumatised children, enabling traumatised children to participate in decision-making, and building the self-confidence of psychologically traumatised children (Table 1).

**Table 1 Empowering Psychologically Traumatized Children At School**  
(made by Authors)

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Showing interest in the child  | <b>Engaging in active listening.</b>   |
|  | Communicating empathetically   |
|  | Encouraging the child by highlighting their successes  |
|  | Identifying and understanding the child's important personal goals and aspirations                                       |
| Providing necessary assistance to the child                                    | Organising interesting and appealing educational activities  |
|  | Offering support to the child in problem-solving   |
|  | Assisting the child in achieving their goals   |
| Reducing tension after an injury   | Supporting the child in overcoming learning difficulties   |
|  | Teaching relaxation techniques   |
|  | Encouraging participation in sports activities   |
| Organising the services of a psychologist or psychotherapist                   | Involving children in artistic expression activities   |
|  | Proposing specialised psychological services   |
| Working with the child's family  | Mediating in obtaining psychotherapeutic services  |
|  | Collaborating with the child's family to understand the family's needs and possibilities to provide necessary assistance |
| Creating a safe environment for traumatised children                           | Providing emotional support to the family and the child  |
|  | Establishing a safe environment in the classroom   |
| Creating conditions for traumatised children to participate in decision-making | Ensuring a safe environment in the school  |
|  | Organising class meetings  |
| Fostering self-confidence in children who have experienced trauma              | Facilitating open dialogue and transparency in decision-making   |
|  | Involving children in class and school activities  |
|  | Highlighting the strengths of the child  |
|  | Providing support and motivation to the child  |

Analysing the research data was found that social educators make efforts to empower psychologically traumatised children in various ways. Recognising the importance of empowering practices, research participants emphasised that **showing interest in the child** primarily manifests through *active listening*: “we ask children what they like, discuss their hobbies, dreams, experiences...” (C); “We show attention by listening to the child and answering their questions” (E). When a child is sad, angry, fearful, facing a problem, or is very tired, it is crucial to demonstrate that they are heard, and efforts are made to understand them and their emotions. The study revealed that *empathetic communication* with children who have experienced psychological trauma is another essential component of showing interest and empowering them. According to the survey participants: “we strive to be empathetic, reflect the child's feelings during the conversation, and are attentive to their experience.” (A); “We take into account each child's uniqueness, their strengths and weaknesses.” (J). Actively listening and

communicating effectively with the child mean verbally expressing how we understand the child's feelings. Most of the time, the child's problems are related to the experience of negative feelings, so through active listening and communication, social educators help the child to understand his/her feelings and show that they accept him/her with these feelings. Children who have experienced trauma need to feel successful and believe in their abilities (Nelsen, 2006). *Encouraging the child by highlighting their successes* is also a significant tool in empowering a child who has experienced psychological trauma. Social educators noted: "I notice and emphasise the child's efforts and successes, and encourage progress, however small" (G); "Whatever the child is doing, I focus on the successful moments, not on failures" (E). By constantly encouraging and showing that they believe in children's abilities, social educators build traumatised children's autonomy and confidence in their abilities, and they become independent in planning and implementing their activities. Latham (2007) asserts that the most effective way to help a child is to notice and encourage them more frequently. During interviews, social educators said that *clarifying and understanding the personal goals and aspirations that are important for children* is important for them when working with children who have experienced psychological trauma. According to the research participants: "In conversations, we try to understand and comprehend the child's important goals and aspirations, what is important to them in life." (D); "We create opportunities for the child to share their dreams, goals." (H). It is noteworthy that social educators, in seeking to understand and identify children's personal goals and aspirations, aim to develop social competence in children. Rubin and Burgess (2002) define social competence as the ability to achieve personal goals while interacting with others and maintaining positive relationships with them. *Social educators use various methods to engage children in educational activities*. The results of the research indicate that *organising interesting and appealing educational activities* also contributes to the empowerment of psychologically traumatised children. Research participants reported: "organising fun, stimulating activities" (I); "I organise learning activities through games, give creative tasks that children engage more actively in than in regular lessons; it's important to avoid boredom..." (B). Collaborative activities between social educators and children represent one of the most positive shared educational experiences. Children relax and play out experienced traumas, expressing negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, fear, and sadness. Games foster a child's creativity and enhance imagination. Bonneville-Baruchel (2015) emphasizes that play and games are a way for a child to explore the surrounding world, mitigating the consequences of mistakes and failures without adding unnecessary tension. Therefore, research results indicate that showing interest in children who have experienced psychological trauma is crucial in their empowerment process. According to Upton et al. (2003), a genuine

interest in a child opens the way to trust, positive relationships, and the development of a child's creativity.

Providing empowering services involves **giving necessary assistance to the child**. The needed help is provided by *supporting the child in problem-solving*. As mentioned by research participants: “helping to solve problems” (F); “we talk and explain what is most challenging for the child, and if I can, I help myself, or the class teacher helps, and if needed, we turn to specialists” (B). Typically, a problem is solved by defining it, coming up with as many possible solutions and potential consequences as possible, and then choosing the best solution. For social educators, it is important to initially allow the child to express their feelings and concerns about the problem and then assist in resolving it. Having learned to freely accept the child's ideas, discussing them together with children who have experienced trauma, social educators teach and empower children to independently solve problems. The research shows that in empowering children who have experienced psychological trauma, *providing support to the child in achieving their goals is also crucial*. This is illustrated by statements from research participants: “If a child is interested, for example, in football and wants to attend, then we find a club and a coach where he can participate, negotiate discounts, or even agree that the child can attend training for free” (D).

Experienced psychological traumas hinder the development and self-expression of a child's personality, but they can be successfully addressed by providing timely assistance. The successful support provided by social educators empowers children to pursue their goals. *Supporting the child to overcome learning difficulties*. Research participants indicated that conditions are created in schools for children to stay after classes and receive individual consultations, thus overcoming learning difficulties: “We create opportunities for children to stay after classes and consult with the teacher individually” (C); “taking into account the child's emotional state, assessments are organised individually” (E). Learning difficulties lead to lower interest in school, lower self-esteem, and lower academic achievement. They can only be compensated by knowing the most successful teaching methods (Raudeliūnaitė & Gudžinskienė, 2019). Depending on the child's emotional state, assessments can be postponed as long as the child's health requires. Children who have experienced trauma face learning challenges, and social educators help them by creating a suitable learning environment to realise their abilities in acquiring knowledge (Riviere, 2006). Thus, the research revealed that providing support in overcoming learning difficulties for children who have experienced psychological trauma helps achieve positive learning outcomes and boosts self-esteem.

Empowering psychologically traumatised children also involves **reducing tension after the experienced trauma**. The research showed that social educators strive to reduce tension in children who have experienced psychological trauma by *teaching them and their family members various relaxation techniques*:

“We help the child and his family learn relaxation exercises, such as breathing exercises, meditation, etc.” (J). In addition, to empower children who have experienced trauma, *educators use sports and artistic activities*. As mentioned by research participants, “We offer activities for children that help reduce tension and promote emotional relaxation, such as various sports clubs” (I); “some children prefer dancing over sports, so we encourage them to dance” (A). Children's engagement in artistic expression activities also helps them relax. Research participants noted: “Children who have experienced trauma relax by participating in art, graphics, and ceramics clubs.” (H); “in artistic expression activities, children forget and relax” (B). The application of art therapy methods to children to reduce their tension after experiencing trauma is emphasised by other scholars as well (Zhang, Wan, Iyendo, Apuke, & Tunca, 2023).

In the case of complex psychological traumas, **offering specialised psychologist or psychotherapist services is crucial**. Psychological traumas can affect a child's behaviour and psychological well-being. The research shows that *offering specialised psychologist services* is relevant for children and their families who have experienced trauma. Research participants reported: “we inform the family about specialised psychologist services, possible professional help, his consultation, or therapy...” (F). Additionally, *the mediation of social educators in obtaining psychotherapist services* is relevant: “we mediate if we see that the child would benefit from psychotherapist services” (G); “sometimes services for the child are needed from other organisations, such as psychotherapists providing assistance to children who have experienced trauma and their families. So if there is a need, we mediate, depending on the situation” (D). The research indicates that social educators respond sensitively and responsibly to situations involving a child's trauma, ensuring that professional help is provided promptly. Psychologists aim to identify children's mental disorders and assess the impact of experienced psychological trauma. According to Don Fontenelle (2002), when evaluating the impact of trauma on a child, it is necessary to consider their adaptive abilities, which manifest through the totality of disorder symptoms and have significance for the course and prognosis of the disorder.

**Working with the child's family** is crucial when dealing with traumatic experiences. The research revealed that *collaborating with the child's family to understand the family's needs and capacity to provide the necessary support* is an integral component of working with a child who has experienced trauma. This is illustrated by statements from research participants: “we constantly communicate with the child's family, share information about the child's progress, achievements, and potential” (I); “Together with parents, we discuss and strive to create an environment where the child feels supported and encouraged” (C). However, it is essential to note that each family is unique, and their needs may vary significantly. In all cases, the key is to demonstrate understanding, support,

readiness to collaborate, and provide assistance tailored to the individual needs of a specific case. If difficulties arise, seeking help from professionals who can offer qualified assistance is crucial. Importantly, when working with a family and a child who has experienced psychological trauma, the provision of support should be consistent, uninterrupted, and develop into long-term collaboration in the future. An essential factor in empowering a child who has experienced trauma is *providing emotional support to the family and the child*. According to the research participants: “Firstly, we aim to listen carefully and empathetically to the family, allowing them to share their feelings and experiences, including traumatic experiences... providing support” (A); “It is very important to show the family that we understand their difficulties, that we are ready to help, teach stress coping methods, and explain how stress can affect a child's development...” (D); “It is essential to set a positive mindset and be prepared for long-term family support and collaboration because the process takes time...” (G); “my experience shows that it is beneficial for families to maintain connections with other families who have faced similar challenges, as families can provide emotional support and share experiences” (B). These statements support the notion that the individual progress of the child is crucial to research participants, emphasising attention to the child's empowerment process. Thus, social educators recognise the importance of the empowerment process and do not focus solely on the desired outcome. The work of social educators with both the child and their family sets the groundwork for the successful overcoming of psychological trauma consequences. Joseph, Dickenson, McCall & Roga, (2023) indicated that the better results are achieved when the entire family is involved in the therapeutic process.

The research also revealed that **creating a safe environment** is crucial for children who have experienced trauma. First and foremost, it is crucial to establish *a safe environment in the classroom*. Participants in the research emphasised that “Children feel safe and comfortable when entering the classroom” (I); and “in the classroom, children feel good, without tension from classmates or teachers” (C); The simplicity and clarity of materials, including clear board notes, straightforward textbooks, clear assignments, and adaptive tools, were highlighted as important elements” (F); “Provide opportunities for students to complete tasks in a variety of ways of their choice” (H). Empowering psychologically traumatised children requires the creation of a secure and stable environment in the classroom where they feel safe and can meet their needs. This is facilitated by applying the principles of universal design. Implementing universal design principles in creating a safe environment means that the environment is suitable, accessible, and user-friendly for all individuals, regardless of their abilities, age, or disabilities. Consequently, an environment is developed that is favourable for all children in the school. Moreover, it is essential for a child to feel safe not only in the classroom but also in the broader *school*



*environment*. According to the research participants: “We strive to make the child feel safe and accepted, emphasising the importance of parent collaboration with the school and other institutions that can provide assistance and support for the child” (D); “We support the family and the child by creating structured routines and communication traditions, involving more people whom the child can trust...” (J). Milot, St-Laurent, & Éthier (2016) also emphasise the importance of a safe environment for a child who has experienced trauma.

Empowering traumatised children involves **creating conditions for them to participate in decision-making, which is a form of empowerment for children with psychological trauma**. One approach that class leaders can use is *organising class meetings*. As stated by research participants, “It is essential to regularly organise class meetings, creating opportunities for students to express their opinions, share thoughts, and exchange ideas” (E); “During meetings, class rules can be discussed, various projects planned, or relevant class issues addressed” (A). Thus, in a classroom environment where children know each other well, they can freely express their thoughts, share ideas, and engage in discussions. However, equally important is the *open dialogue and transparency in decision-making by social educators*. Participants emphasised that, to empower traumatised children: “It is crucial to be open, encouraging dialogue between teachers, students, and parents on important issues.” (I); “Occasionally, we organise discussions or forums that provide opportunities for children to participate in decision-making, which is important not only for psychologically traumatised children...” (F); “We strive to be open in decision-making, make them transparent, and ask all children to express their opinions” (B); “We listen to learners’ opinions before making relevant decisions...” (D). Other researchers (Bouma, Lopez, Knorth & Grietens, 2018) also highlight the importance of listening to the child when empowering them.

To **enhance the self-confidence of children who have experienced psychological trauma**, it is relevant to nurture their self-esteem. Educators make dedicated efforts to cultivate self-esteem in traumatised children by engaging them in various activities, emphasising their strengths, and motivating and supporting them. The research reveals that *educators employ diverse strategies to involve children in classroom and school activities*. This is illustrated by the thoughts of the participants in the research: “it is important that children who have experienced psychological trauma participate in school activities or social groups, establish connections, and receive support from the school community.” (G); “Involving traumatised children in various activities, active groups, and school councils, enabling them to represent decision-making, thereby gaining greater self-confidence” (E). The social pedagogues who took part in the research are aware that an equally important factor in a child's self-confidence is *highlighting the child's strengths*. Participants note: “I try to emphasise the child's strengths...” (A); “I tell the child that these are your talents, the skills you possess, in other

words, highlighting the child's strengths.” (H); “I strive to acknowledge the child's success in tasks where they feel accomplished” (I). *Supporting and motivating* the child is another crucial factor in building their self-confidence. Social educators express: “I patiently support, motivate, and help the child understand that they can experience success in activities they perform” (C); “to restore self-confidence in children, they need to be motivated.” (J); “Encourage, promote, and motivate by showing the child that they can” (D). Therefore, to empower children, it is essential to allow them to participate in decision-making, as this fosters a sense of control over their lives. Creating opportunities for children to participate in decision-making in school and class is vital because it promotes their activeness, a sense of responsibility, and the ability to communicate and collaborate. However, an inseparable factor in empowerment and participation in decision-making is encouraging and supporting the child's self-confidence by involving them in activities and highlighting their strengths. Titus & Muttungal (2023), highlighted that empowerment is as self-confidence and the ability to make independent decisions. It is crucial to provide psychologically traumatized children with the opportunity to actively engage in the life of the class and school, to be responsible contributors to their learning environment. This promotes their personal responsibility, self-confidence, develops communication and collaboration skills, and creates an inclusive community.

### **Conclusions**

The research reveals that in empowering psychologically traumatized children, social educators need to take an interest in the child by actively listening, engaging in empathetic communication, and highlighting the child's successes. Social educators show attention to the child who has experienced psychological trauma by understanding their personal goals and organising interesting and appealing educational activities. To empower traumatized children, social educators not only provide necessary assistance and support for problem-solving and achieving goals but also actively involve them in decision-making processes. In the process of educating children and their family members, social educators employ various relaxation techniques and encourage children to engage in sports and artistic self-expression activities, aiming to reduce the tension experienced by children after psychological trauma. In complex situations, social educators provide emotional support and counselling to the child, and when necessary, act as intermediaries to ensure access to the services of psychologists or psychotherapists. The research indicates that social educators understand that in the empowerment process of a psychologically traumatized child, work with the family is crucial. Thus, they collaborate with the child's family to comprehend the family's needs and capabilities to provide necessary assistance to the child. When needed, emotional support is extended to both the family and the child.

Empowering traumatised children requires the establishment of a safe and stable environment in the classroom and school. The research reveals that empowerment involves allowing children to participate in decision-making processes, fostering a sense of control over their lives. Organising class meetings and engaging in open dialogue during decision-making empower children to participate in school activities within the classroom or social groups. This helps them build connections and receive essential support from the school community. Encouraging children to actively participate in various school community activities empowers them to express themselves, recognise their strengths, and gain self-confidence. Providing support to the child and their family enables them to contribute to the sustainable well-being of society.

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