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Social workers' communication competence in talking to parents:
Childcare intervention in Kazakhstan

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ABSTRACT

Title: Social workers' communication competence in talking to parents: Childcare intervention in Kazakhstan

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Keyword: social work, communication competence, parents, childcare intervention.

This research aimed to explore communication competence adopted in the social work interaction with parents in childcare intervention, specifically in the context of Kazakhstan. The study further examined what modes of communication are used in the interaction, what role communication plays in social work practices, strategies applied to tackle obstacles in conducting effective communication with parents regarding childcare services. Qualitative methods were conducted through semi-structured interviews with seven social workers, and the thematic analysis was done using MAXQDA software to discover experiences of social workers' interaction with parents. The findings revealed that verbal communication, the ability to actively listen and empathize are the primary approaches to maintaining interaction with service users. This research recognized the critical role of communication in social work practice, particularly in childcare interventions, where social workers must navigate power imbalances, misconceptions, and practical barriers to establish trust and facilitate positive outcomes for children and their families. Addressing these challenges requires clear communication, building trust, and convey genuineness in engaging parents as partners in the intervention process. The research underscores the importance of ongoing training and support for social workers in Kazakhstan, emphasizing the necessity for professional development.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background and Relevance of the topic

Research on social work practice repeatedly shows that the trusted professional-client interaction is critical for favourable outcomes in counselling and for achieving shared goals in this helping profession (Dunk-West, 2018). Clear and effective communication often guarantees successful collaboration between social workers and clients (Lishman, 2009). Social work intervention requires communicating in a true, sincere, and compassionate manner whereas the professionals should be mindful of their communicative behaviour and style, and how these factors play an essential role in the practice (Koprowska, 2008).

Collaborating effectively with parents has been a cornerstone of child welfare practice for many years (Forrester et al., 2007). It is encouraged and identified as crucial if parents can take care of their children's well-being, but many may need guidance in exercising their parenting potential and strengths. Hence, social work is regarded as a guiding partner for parents in ensuring the safety and positive development of a child thus enhancing family resilience (Trevithick, 2003). Parents who are engaged in child welfare services tend to be more motivated to change and feel that they are not alone in trying to mitigate adversities in childcare (Gladstone et al, 2014).

In spite of a variety of studies on the role of professional communication skills in the field of social work, the discussion around the exact concepts that social workers can or tend to employ when interacting with parents regarding childcare is rather scarce (Forrester et al., 2019; Saar-Heiman, 2023). Family is a complex system with its own unique dynamics and culture, thus, it might be not enough to only demonstrate active listening, empathy and kindness in communicating with them (Trevithick, 2003). A practitioner encounters families and caregivers who are resistant and hesitant to welcome social work involvement because of vulnerability while facing childcare professionals, reluctance to change and denial of child neglect (Baginsky, 2023). In other words, the workers have to be able to accommodate the service users and showcase their profound knowledge-based competence in building trust-based relationships with parents (Mason, 2011). Although connecting and interacting with some parents may be challenging for social services, the professionals have the mandate to build worker-client relationships based on personalised family concerns (Babayeva et al, 2018). In order to conduct effective intervention, it is crucial to be informed about what working with parents in child welfare practices implies and how to demonstrate communication skills in this regard.

1.2. Problem statement

A social worker-client relationship has its complexity, given the context of a problem and the communication skills of the workers. When working with children and their families, a relationship with parents can be a way to approach the issue of safeguarding a child (Forrester et al., 2008). Therefore, social workers have to consider interacting with the families in a way to ensure parents' readiness to cooperate with the professionals and a welcoming attitude towards the assessment or intervention (Forrester et al., 2007). Encountering social workers might bring overwhelming and complex feelings to clients as it means your life is being intervened. Even though the importance of social workers' communication skills in talking to clients has been widely discussed in the literature, engaging with parents in a child welfare context requires considering more research in the communication competence of the practitioners (Spratt & Callan, 2004). In a study conducted by Lynch et al. (2019), it is emphasised that social workers should exhibit good levels of empathy, employ open-ended questions, and utilize reflective techniques when communicating with parents. It is necessary to emphasize the urgency of addressing this issue to practice an informed and substantial approach in working with children and their parents. Social workers can create a more equitable and supportive dynamic by building rapport with parents, listening actively to their concerns, and involving them in decision-making processes.

In Kazakhstan's context, social work is a comparatively recent practice and the public might not be fully informed about its implications (An et al., 2020). The first social work activities in Kazakhstan were implemented only around two decades ago and thus have faced challenges in achieving stability and status (Michels et al, 2021). Consequently, there is a lack of research done to explore the current state of the field in the country. Specifically, social work practice recently started taking place in the childcare intervention and home visiting services for families with newborn babies (Babayeva et al, 2018). The inherent challenges in talking to parents and the status quo of social work in the country drive this research to examine how social workers understand communication with parents in childcare interventions in Kazakhstan.

1.3. Research objectives and questions

The primary study objective is to analyze how social workers in Kazakhstan understand and apply their communication competence in childcare intervention with parents.

Specific objectives are:

- To explore what modes of communication social workers use and how they use it with parents in childcare intervention.
- To analyze to what extent social workers in Kazakhstan understand the role and importance of communication skills in talking to parents.
- To understand the use of communication in relationship-building with parents and how it influences the childcare intervention.
- To identify what barriers social workers in Kazakhstan experience in communication with parents regarding childcare intervention.
- To examine strategies for improved communication of social workers with parents in childcare intervention.

These specific aims will help us learn about Kazakhstani social work practitioners' approach to communicating with parents regarding their children's well-being and thus engage them in the necessary childcare intervention.

Research questions:

1. What modes of communication do social workers commonly utilize when interacting with parents in childcare intervention, and how do they employ these modes in practice?
2. How do social workers in Kazakhstan perceive the purpose of communication skills in their interactions with parents during childcare intervention?
3. How does the communication between social workers and parents influence the establishment of relationship, and what impact does this have on the effectiveness of interventions?
4. What specific barriers do social workers in Kazakhstan encounter when communicating with parents regarding childcare intervention?
5. What strategies can be identified to enhance the communication competence of social workers when engaging with parents in childcare intervention in Kazakhstan?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review chapter explains the context in which the topic will be studied. It includes a context of how social work profession developed in Kazakhstan and how childcare intervention is approached by social work practice in the country. As the research is focused on understanding the aspects of communication and interaction with parents, this chapter touches upon studies done to define professional communication in social work, modes of communication and what communication competence in relationship-building means in social work field. These concepts can serve as a basis for the core skills that social workers might need to use in order to engage with parents in more collaborative ways and make the intervention successful.

Most of the social work related literature on communication with parents and childcare services mentions theories and concepts around person-centered approach, strength-based approach and communication models like motivational interviewing. The concept of power imbalance in the worker-client interaction has been also mentioned in the relevant literature. An integrated analytical framework was developed to cover both theories and practical approaches guiding the research on social worker-client relationships and communication competence in Kazakhstan's context.

2.1. Social work in Kazakhstan

Being under the communist regime of the USSR till 1991, that denied the existence of *social diseases*, Kazakhstan had to realize on its own the need to build social support systems (Michels et al., 2021). The fields of Social Work and Social Pedagogy in Kazakhstan's higher education system have been implemented for bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, and doctoral studies in 40 educational institutions nationwide since 1992 (Abdrasheva & Nurseytova, 2021). Overall, Central Asia as a post-Soviet region, has established a short history of social work as a profession. The evolution of the field in Kazakhstan is unstable also due to the tendencies where social issues have been addressed from the perspectives of medical intervention for a while (Michels et al., 2021). For example, the alcoholic and substance abuse problems in society have been solved medically, while social and interpersonal factors in such cases have been overlooked (Michels et al, 2021). In the reports about social work in the prevention of HIV/AIDS in Kazakhstan, it was noted that the case involves more medical support than the social work practices and thus the prevention might not be able to address the client's core needs for social inclusion (Michels et al, 2021). In Kazakhstan, the position of social workers can be unstable and easily influenced by how the role of their job can be underestimated and due to the lack of informational resources for workers (Michels et al., 2021). Even though these days medical

institutions have social workers teams, their role is still not transparent and are mostly replaced by medical staff responsibilities (Michels et al., 2021).

The scarcity of informational promotion and resources about what social work as a profession entails and does for a society also have led to the Kazakhstani community's ambiguous perception of it (Adilova & Abitova, 2019). Research conducted on the perception of social work in Kazakhstan showed that almost half of the study respondents didn't experience any encounter with social workers (Tulebayev, 2021). These tendencies depict how, in fact, the profession is not widely recognized as a helping service in the social welfare discourse of the country. Antikeyeva et al. (2021) describe contemporary social work as an evolving field requiring cross-disciplinary coordination and involving a variety of responsibilities provided by social services and institutions. The necessity of high professional standards and a scientific approach to social work in Kazakhstan was also emphasized. Despite theoretical advances in social worker training, there is still a gap between the demands for social support services and the current reality of professional development in Kazakhstan's social security institutions (Antikeyeva et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, the 2021 International Social Work Forum organized by UNICEF Kazakhstan served as a platform to emphasize the importance of changing the status quo of the field of social work in the country (UNICEF, 2021). During the forum, a draft law on social status of social workers in the Republic of Kazakhstan was introduced that suggests improvement of the training and professional development system for the professionals (UNICEF, 2021). The round table discussion also touched on the inclination of social services towards helping with finance-related issues of low-income families rather than offering only psychosocial intervention. Hence, the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population along with UNICEF in Kazakhstan and educational institutions has begun implementing renewed educational material for social workers to improve their qualifications and professional attributes that will meet the needs of contemporary Kazakhstani families. Moreover, only by 2021, the Ministry of Justice in Kazakhstan signed the registration document of the National Alliance of Professional Social Workers that nowadays guides the local practitioners in turning social work into agents of social change (National Alliance of Professional Social Workers, n.d.). Upgrading the professional, educational and psychological competence of social workers has been also initiated by the government as the lack of proper training in the field was recognized (Antikeyeva et al., 2021). Such a recent entrance of the professional practice in the country's history and misleading start in developing it serve as reasons to emphasize the relevance of studying the communication competence of social workers in Kazakhstan.

2.2. Childcare intervention in Kazakhstan

It is believed that parents and caregivers tend to lack knowledge and experience in providing primary care for newly born babies in a home setting (UNICEF, 2019). They might even not be aware of what medical support in terms of hygiene and diet their children need in their first years of life (UNICEF, 2019). In Kazakhstan, early childhood development concerns, to a great extent, have been addressed by the medical means (Baizhiyenova et al., 2024). Consequently, postpartum nurses usually focus on the health-related concerns of parents and don't have required skills in detecting social risks and needs of each family and child (Babayeva, 2018). The 2016-2019 governmental healthcare development program Densaulyk in Kazakhstan improved the home visiting practice that now includes social work intervention along with medical support in early childhood development (Baizhiyenova et al., 2024). Such nationwide healthcare programs put exceptional focus on maternal and child care to reduce maternity and infant mortality with comprehensive public healthcare system (Abenova et al., 2021). UNICEF in Kazakhstan has been providing help in implementing these universal home visiting programs for pregnant women and families with children under 5 years old (UNICEF, 2019). The Universal Progressive Model of Home-Visiting implemented in Kazakhstan aims to provide comprehensive support by postpartum nurses, psychologists, social workers and pediatricians to families with newborn children by offering universal home visits. In Kazakhstan, implementing this model involves a shift towards more efficient, effective, and culturally informed service delivery, drawing on the concept of an innovative healthcare system to address the needs of families and new parents through 16 topics (Babayeva et al., 2018). The thematic modules touch upon the mental well-being of parents, the importance of fathers' involvement in childcare, breastfeeding and parent-child attachment (Babayeva et al., 2018). These methods and measurements aimed at meeting positive outcomes in reproductive health and maternal-child wellness, such as: increasing people's access, quality, and consistency of medical treatment, particularly for mothers and children; "creating an effective system for providing family planning services" by developing a national handbook and educating medical practitioners in family planning counselling; encouraging and promoting breastfeeding while making sure babies and young children are introduced to suitable supplementary meals on time (Abenova et al., 2021, p. 1134). Therefore, these patronage services create an opportunity to meet families in their natural environment and examine if the family struggles to meet a child's basic needs at home (Kilburn & Cannon, 2017). Overall, universal-progressive model of patronage services offer more effective intervention for families with kids in developing countries like Kazakhstan, especially when not every family in the country have an access for informational and material resources regarding childcare (Babayeva et al, 2018). This particular system is effective in assessing the

potential risks and challenges for each case as the majority of families experience socio-economic and psychological distress as well as difficulties in providing safe environment for kids' steady development. This model focuses on reaching out to families regardless of their health condition, development progress, or economic outcomes, emphasizing the importance of early intervention and support for all parents inclusively (Kilburn & Cannon, 2017). By integrating parenting support within and beyond the medical institutions, this holistic system of services includes parenting, behavior, and early childcare support, with the option of home-visiting services for every family (Kamalova, 2023).

The Universal Progressive Model of Home-Visiting in Kazakhstan represents a proactive and inclusive approach to supporting childcare practices with visits not only by medical teams but also by social workers. According to this model, the practitioners has to possess skills that would ensure that parents are the primary caregivers, they have the strength and potential to face challenges in parenting and that the intervention acts as a support system for a family (Babayeva et al, 2018). By providing universal access to medical and social care during home visits, the social work intervention aims to enhance parenting skills and strengthen family well-being while contributing to the overall development and welfare of children in the country.

2.3. Professional communication in social work

In today's studies, communicative competence is not just a set of skills, but a systematic approach involving knowledge, abilities, and one's habits and personal trait that emerges from interactions with others (Domina et al., 2019). In social work practice, it is crucial to not only recognize and comprehend what and how specific skills support the communication process with clients, but also to empathize and understand their unique situations (Dunk-West, 2018). Most of all, engaging in practice means dedicating time and critical thinking to grasping communication principles. The effectiveness of communication highly depends on the self-reflection, flexibility and responsiveness of service providers (Schirmer et al., 2005). Nevertheless, in the social work setting specifically, it was noted that the interaction can be as well influenced by how the clients perceive the social worker (Schirmer et al., 2005). Consequently, efficient communication entails the professional to the social and cognitive elements of the processes in communication, which is generated by analyzing the attitude of the clients towards the conversation. This emphasis on empathy and understanding in professional communication fosters a sense of compassion and connection, crucial in the field of social work.

The professionalism of a social worker is highly standardized by his/her behaviour and communication competence, which are ruled by professional norms (Henderson & Mathew-Byrne, 2016). The ability to choose the proper words, tone of voice, and attitude in communication is critical for social work professionals working with clients to achieve certain goals (Healy, 2012). Practicing professional communication is crucial at every step as social workers are trying to solve problems: gathering the necessary information, understanding people's thoughts and emotions, sharing their ideas, organizing interventions effectively, giving them helpful advice, motivating them, and guiding them in the right direction (Farukuzzaman & Rahman, 2019). It is undeniably argued that the social work profession implies the ability to take into account of what are the advantages and disadvantages of communication skills in a professional possess. (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014, as cited in Davies & Jones, 2016). Lishman (2009) argues that nowadays, social work is practiced in various contexts, starting from child protection to social rehabilitation, where a practitioner has to be able to demonstrate either helpful or controlling communication skills. Domina et al. (2019) believe that the successful realization of these components characterizes that an individual practices communication expertise and can thus effectively navigate all aspects of problem-solving and decision-making in social work. All these components are valuable, and a social worker should aim to embody these competencies in professional communication.

According to Domina et al. (2019), the social communication process includes four major communicative components: diagnostic, programming, organizational, and performance. Diagnostic communication element implies analysing how the interaction is being carried out by both the specialist and client and what challenges occur in the process. Programming communication means forming the basis for effective communication based on what parameters in the process were discovered during the diagnostics. Organizational component of communication competence involves actively structuring the communication processes and motivating another actor to engage in effective communication. Within the elements of the communication process, the performance of the communication holds a significant role, demonstrating the communicative abilities of a social work practitioner. It's crucial to recognize that communicative competence is part of a broader category known as the potential of an individual in executing communication procedures. An individual's communicative behaviour, including aspects like interest, emotional responsiveness, and the ability to formulate and execute a personal communication plan, contribute to their overall communication potential (Domina et al., 2019).

In conclusion, the significance of communication in various fields, particularly in social work, cannot be overstated. Communication in social work is not a one-size-fits-all approach, but a dynamic process that

requires understanding the contextual environment, employing specific approaches tailored to clients, and constantly evaluating and refining one's communication skills. In social work, communication proficiency involves analyzing social and cognitive elements, choosing appropriate words and attitudes, and engaging in professional communication practices throughout problem-solving processes. This emphasis on adaptability in professional communication fosters a sense of flexibility and open-mindedness, crucial in the ever-changing landscape of social work.

2.4. Modes of communication: Verbal, non-verbal and symbolic

Hole (2013) emphasizes that communication is interactive and ongoing, involving a dynamic exchange between sender and receiver. It aims to convey a message through a channel within a specific context, which includes various environmental and social factors. Communication can and should deliver both verbal and nonverbal elements, with the content of language and delivery influencing how the recipient understands the message (Hole, 2013). While certain aspects and the importance of communication may seem straightforward, effectively using both verbal and nonverbal modes of communication is crucial for a meaningful dialogue with others, especially in social work practice (Dunk-West, 2018). By mastering both verbal and nonverbal communication skills, social workers can build stronger connections with clients and effectively navigate various social work scenarios.

First of all, it is stated that non-verbal communication plays a decisive role in assuming how effective the social work practice with clients will be (Sidell & Smiley, 2008). Moreover, prioritising non-verbal types of communication is believed to have an influential effect on addressing and dealing with complex feelings in social worker-client interaction (Healy, 2012). Nonverbal communication can be characterized by one's posture, facial expression and body language, such as nodding, all of which a helping professional should be able to control just like his/her verbal content (Lishman, 2009). For example, crossed hands, closed body posture, or even sitting far from a person already can give a sign of a hostile or unwelcoming attitude towards a conversation with a partner (Lishman, 2009). On the other hand, the act of listening is referred to as an important non-verbal behaviour in talking to clients during social work intervention. It can be demonstrated by how one shows non-verbally attention and focus while a speaker is expressing concern with body gestures and/or eye movements (Dunk-West, 2018). Maintaining close eye contact gives an understanding that a person is listening attentively (Healy, 2012). Additionally, Koprowska (2008) highlights the role of non-verbal communication in providing support and regulation to individuals who may struggle with

managing and understanding their emotions. It describes how non-verbal cues, such as urgency in speech and body language, often convey emotions more clearly than words alone (Koprowska, 2008). Unlike verbal communication, which can be controlled, nonverbal communication is relentless and unconscious because our bodies always move without our awareness, allowing others to learn about us by monitoring our actions (Hole, 2013). Furthermore, Hole (2013) emphasizes the role of nonverbal communication in affecting how messages are perceived. It is stated that nonverbal communication is non-reversible as it is later challenging to modify or reverse a view that has been established via nonverbal clues. On the other hand, nonverbal communication may supplement verbal communication by offering visual cues or gestures that improve comprehension of the content being delivered verbally (Hole, 2013). Considering these aspects of nonverbal communication is particularly important in caregiving roles, whereas understanding and responding to others' emotions effectively is essential.

With words, one will be able to demonstrate politeness and respect to a receiver. For example, a social worker can show how he/she supports the client with encouraging words while also conveying negative feelings with judging phrases (Sidell & Smiley, 2008). When approaching verbal communication analysis, the System for Analyzing Verbal Interaction (SAVI) was initially designed for mental health practitioners in the United States, United Kingdom, and Sweden (Koprowska, 2008). SAVI examines verbal exchanges to assist in understanding attitudes toward oneself and others, as well as emotions and their modulation (Koprowska, 2008). The program categorizes spoken interactions while taking into account emotional content, notably voice pitch, which might take power over linguistic content if it conflicts. As shown in Figure 1 below, interrupting and using yes/but expressions can imply that a speaker is trying to compete for a controlling role in the conversation (Koprowska, 2008). In social services, one needs to be inclined towards the green light as a service provider should emphasize, clarify, and ask questions. Words and content in verbal communication are linked to the importance of being transparent with a message (Sidell & Smiley, 2008). Specifically in social services, giving all necessary information in a concise and comprehensible manner can lead to effective communication between a client and service provider (Lishman, 2009). As part of verbal communication, asking questions during conversation serves not only as a way of getting information and also to maintain the discussion for a deeper understanding of a situation (Dunk-West, 2018). There are two types of questions : open-ended questions encouraging detailed responses and closed-ended questions requiring brief answers. For instance, in a dialogue with a client, social worker is encouraged to ask an open-ended question to delve deeper into service user's feelings and case as it also helps to demonstrate attentiveness and interest (Davies & Jones, 2016).

Figure 1*SAVI™ Grid**System for Analyzing Verbal Interaction*

	PERSON	TOPIC	
	Person	Factual	Orienting
RED Light	1 FIGHT Attack/Blame Righteous question Self defense Complaints Sarcasm	2 DATA-VOID Mind-reading Negative prediction Gossip Joking around Thinking out loud	3 COMPETE Yes/Buts Discounts Leading question Oughtitudes Interrupts
YELLOW Light	4 SOCIAL SELF Personal information (current) Personal information (past) Personal explanations	5 PUBLIC DATA Facts & figures General information Narrow question Broad question	6 INFLUENCE Opinion Proposal Command Impersonal reinforcement
GREEN Light	7 EMPATHIZE Tells own feeling Asks or Answers (inner-person) question Mirrors other's (inner-person) experience Affectionate joke Self assertion	8 DATA PROCESS Answers question Paraphrase Summarize Clarifies own answer (with data) Corrective feedback	9 INTEGRATE Agreement/Positives Building on other's ideas or experiences Work joke

Note. The three columns explains perspectives from Person, Factual and Orienting expressions as above. From *Communication and Interpersonal Skills in Social Work* (2nd ed., p. 73) by J. Koprowska, 2008, Learning Matters.

Therefore, the strategic use of open-ended questions in social work intervention is not just a theoretical concept, but a practical tool that can effectively address the needs and concerns of a client. This approach fosters a favourable effect on the conversation, leading to more productive client interactions. Reflective practices and clarification, conveyed through verbal communication, have also been identified as important in managing positive dialogue with a client in a social work setting (Lishman, 2009). In communication with service users, social workers utilize clarification and summary approaches to ensure that their conversations are clear and understandable for both sides (Davies & Jones, 2016). They follow up on and summarize material to ensure comprehension and clarify any ambiguities. Social workers are also trained to reflect vocally on their clients' words, feelings, and experiences as it serves to demonstrate attentiveness and

increase self-awareness for a receiver, thus assisting problem-solving and decision-making processes (Lishman, 2009).

In verbal communication, words can express not only the meanings and thoughts of a speaker but also the tone, intentions, and hesitations in the voice while talking. It implies oral and spoken mode of communication that also consists of paralanguage patterns such as frequency and pauses in a speech (Lishman, 2009). Sidell and Smiley (2008) also explained that it can be evident from the intensity of a voice what a speaker is feeling and even sometimes about the person's personality. Such aspects of verbal communication are thus very influential in exposing one's true feelings and attitude. In social work practice, it is suggested to be mindful of the voice's intensity and not to affect it with inner feelings while talking to a client, as it can easily impact the interaction either positively or negatively (Lishman, 2009). Along with non-verbal clues in an interaction, verbal communication skills should also be practised efficiently in social work intervention to facilitate engagement, assessment, and exchange of vital information.

As a mode of communication, symbolic interaction can also be regarded as people being able to send messages through symbols. Lishman (2009) states that social work intervention is also about how a service provider presents herself/himself, acts and creates an environment for interaction with a client. The appearance, such as clothing and facial visuals, sends information about the intentions of a speaker in a conversation (Healy, 2012). Even though there is a lack of studies on determining the role of symbolic communication in social work settings, it can still be evident how a practitioner can express his/her professionalism just by a look and physical presence (Healy, 2012). Having neat and not overwhelming dress helps a client to perceive a social worker positively and leaves a pleasant first impression. In residential care, symbolic communication also involves how service providers treat and show care through symbols, such as giving proper food and maintaining the place clean for residents (Lishman, 2009). Cases where a service provider comes unprepared and late for a visit to a client are also considered symbolic communication as he/she communicates the unprofessional attitude in working with a service user (Lishman, 2009). Unlike verbal communication, which depends on spoken or written words, symbolic communication employs abstract representations with cultural, societal, or personal meaning.

Based on the literature on communication and its role in social work intervention, communication can be performed by words and body gestures and symbols through which a speaker represents him/herself and the purpose of interaction. It is crucial to understand the purpose and importance of each communication mode in conveying a message and maintaining efficient communication.

2.5. Communication skills in relationship-building with parents

Communication between human beings has been conceptualized and approached from various perspectives, yet undeniably it is emphasized that communication happens in relation to the contextual environment (Hole, 2013). However, in any context, communication is fundamental in building any type of relationships. For example, if communication is considered a strategy in assessing, conducting intervention and getting information, then relationship serves as a channel for implementing positive outcomes in the social work practices (Davies & Jones, 2016; Schirmer et al, 2005). Koprowska (2008) identifies the importance of understanding communication as a intensive and interactive process that needs to be linked to the quality of the relationship in social work practice. Consequently, it is being argued that “relationships are vital to the quality and quantity of life”, with studies emphasizing context such as social connections and social assistance to support this argument (Spitzberg, 2013, p. 127). Communication skills are not the only guarantee in building relationship, as a social worker should be able to express interest and awareness of socio-economic, psychological and cultural context around a client (Davies & Jones, 2016).

Trevithick (2003) emphasizes that good relationships are defined by trust, respect, care, and competence, which allow for honest interactions and collaborative problem-solving. The pivotal role of communication in shaping such relationships can be underscored as well in influencing individuals' perceptions and experiences within them. In the context of relationship-building, it is suggested that communication is not confined solely to the individuals involved but is influenced by the broader world around them (Koprowska, 2008). According to Davies and Jones (2016), the perception and personal views of a practitioner can influence communication in shaping a rapport with a service user. A specialist has to accept, understand and respect the diversity and its dimensions in human relationships (Davies & Jones, 2016). Cooperation and empathy skills are emphasized as critical for developing successful client interactions in social work, with skilled workers effectively integrating control and empathy (Mullins & Kirkwood, 2022). Nonetheless, they are considered critical components of effective practice. This means that external factors such as cultural, societal, and environmental elements play a significant role in shaping the nature of communication within a relationship. Essentially, Koprowska (2008) emphasizes that effective communication within relationships is not only about what is said between individuals but also about understanding and navigating the larger context in which the relationship exists. Specifically, family-oriented intervention is considered different than working with one client as social workers have to more likely to address the needs of more people collectively.

Mullins and Kirkwood (2022) investigated the value of caregiving and communication skills in social work, emphasizing the need of actively listening to and cooperating with families. This approach helps to build stronger relationships with parents, enhances collaboration, and eventually increases the likelihood of successful intervention outcomes for the child. That is being argued, when the assistance expands beyond one person, it brings more complexity, challenges and the necessity for practitioner to demonstrate greater competence in such a complex situation (Shulman et al, 2009; Healy, 2012). Specifically, social worker has to ensure positive outcomes for a child as well as positive relationship with parents that might pose challenges influenced by various individual and organizational contexts (Healy, 2012). Effective communication, active listening, and an honest interest in families are all important aspects in building effective relationships between social workers and parents. Parents value social workers who connect with them and handle their problems in a caring manner. On another hand, social workers, dealing with bureaucratic workload and organizational responsibilities, and child-related tasks, find limited time for the often time-requiring task of building a connection with parents (Marcenko et al, 2010).

Various elements concerning the relationship between parents and professionals have been examined, encompassing workers' communication abilities in building it, their hesitant attitudes toward service users, and the power imbalances inherent in the relationship (Rollins, 2019). In approaching child development intervention, social workers are most likely to face resistance and involuntary behaviour from a child's family regarding engagement. Parent engagement in child welfare services is influenced by various factors, including parents' perception of the severity of problems about their children's well-being, their understanding of the risks causing these problems, and whether they can critically assess benefits and barriers to taking action (Gladstone et al., 2014). Efforts to establish connections with parents are additionally hindered by the existing signs of power and authority linked to the representative image of the child service professions (Saar-Heiman, 2023). Feelings of disempowerment, shame, guilt, and disadvantage occur among parents due to the presence of an imbalance of power in intervention and decision-making for a child's well-being (Rollins, 2019). A social work intervention is usually seen as a substantial sign of the need for professional help to improve one's life or eliminate potential life-threatening risks. Specifically, while addressing the childcare-related questions, the social work involvement might not seem like a helping service but a scrutinizing investigation of families' child-rearing practices. Sakamoto and Pitner (2005) suggest that fostering critical awareness would enable social workers to question themselves and remain mindful of power dynamics in the relationship. Given the intricate and fluctuating nature of the worker-client relationship, compounded by the inherent pressures of the child protection system, it becomes necessary to

explore strategies to establish or restore this type of partnership in childcare (Maiter et al., 2006). As Mandell (2008) emphasizes, power remains present in the interaction between the practitioner and client, regardless of the worker's kindness, self-awareness, or caution when talking to families. Aware of the workers' capacity to impact crucial childcare-related decisions, parents are likely to be cautious and concerned as workers attempt to interact closely (Marcenko et al., 2010). In terms of developing relationships with parents, research shows that when social workers listen, recognize and demonstrate a real interest in families' daily lives without expressing negative emotions in communication, parents respond positively and voluntarily (Spratt & Callan, 2004). The recommended communication approach should be characterized by curiosity rather than judgment, and social workers are encouraged to delve into understanding parents' challenging experiences by placing a focus on the emotional aspects of their interactions (Lynch et al., 2019).

In conclusion, the studies provide useful insights into the many abilities required for social work, with a focus on care, engagement, assertive yet empathic contact, collaboration, and other key characteristics. The literature emphasizes that strong communication skills are critical in social work practice for developing close connections with service users, understanding their needs, giving assistance, and encouraging positive outcomes via empathic and meaningful encounters.

3.THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Person-centered approach by Rogers

Various theoretical approaches and models exist for understanding and developing relationship-building concepts in a social work discourse. First of all, teaching communication skills in social work is often based on the notion that counselling skills may benefit social workers. The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) emphasizes the implication of humanistic and client-centred theories by Rogers, Carkhuff, and Egan in social worker communication skills training (Forrester, 2007). Davies and Jones (2016) listed the “psychosocial approach (Howe, 2009), play therapy (McMahon, 1992), solution-focused therapy (De Shazer & Dolan, 2007) and Rogers’ person-centred approach (2012)” (p.10). Essentially, social workers frequently comply with Carl Rogers' person-centred approach established in the 1940s and 1950s (Payne, 2005). Carl Rogers first created the Client-Centered Theory in the 1940s. Later, in the 1970s, it was renamed into person-centred theory to better represent the principles of Rogers' therapeutic approach (Holosko et al., 2008). It is believed that the transition from *client* to *person* underlined the recognition of the individual's humanity and independence (Holosko et al., 2008). Rogers stressed that people seeking therapy were more than just *patients* or people in need; they were fully formed people with their own complexities, such as desires, worries, goals, challenges, and potential to deal with adversities (Howe, 2009). This viewpoint sought to humanize the therapeutic process and acknowledge the whole persona of the individual seeking support.

Through counselling therapy perspectives, Rogers has influenced social work theory (Murphy et al., 2012). The therapeutic approach in social work practices with clients made his ideas more relevant to the field (Payne, 2005; Howe, 2009). According to Rogers, an excellent therapeutic relationship requires the counsellor to possess specific skills (Dunk-West, 2018). Rogers' requirements for building therapeutic relationships with empathy, unconditional positive regard, and sincerity have been considered crucial communication skills for engaging in high-quality social work practice (Holosko et al., 2008). Consequently, being genuinely interested about our clients' perspectives, histories, and narratives is essential for courteous and effective social work contact. According to Rogers’ approach, a helping professional should also exercise active listening and curiosity rather than a judgemental attitude while conducting genuine interaction with the client (Payne, 2005). Mullins and Kirkwood (2022) discuss that social workers communication skills should deliver warmth and respect for a client. Their belief also referred to Rogers’ understanding of helping

practice, which consists of essential qualities such as warmth, empathy, and genuineness. These three characteristics could be enough in practical counselling work (Mullins & Kirkwood, 2022).

Murphy et al. (2012), however, argue that currently, social work still needs to possess the ideology of the person-centred approach by Rogers as it is nowadays becoming a directive practice. It is argued that social work intervention is not about building relationships with clients but building them in order to achieve the objectives of the intervention (Murphy et al., 2012). Nevertheless, Rogers' emphasis and perspectives on focusing on relationships with clients and their meaning have contributed to the basis of social worker-client interactions. Empathy, unconditional encouraging regard, and congruence are critical characteristics of a corresponding professional (Dunk-West, 2018). It can still be argued that the helping profession, such as a social worker, is about facilitating positive change in a client's behaviour. Therapists act as change agents, creating a therapeutic environment for growth by expressing attitudes of cooperation, unconditional positive regard, and adequate empathic understanding (Holosko et al., 2008). These essential conditions, which are core to person-centered therapy and relationship-building, allow a social worker and the client to communicate effectively on a path of self-regulation and thus progress together towards positive intervention outcomes.

3.2. Strength-based approach in family-centred practice

In the helping profession, there is a strength-based perspective that recognizes the importance of identifying a client's potential instead of focusing on the person's problem. This approach is consistent with other techniques, such as solution-focused and narrative therapy, distinguishing the person from the problem (Dunk-West, 2018). Carl Rogers also mentioned personal power as a way of emphasizing the importance of conveying that every person has the strength to handle his/her struggles and help themselves (Payne, 2005). Moreover, his person-centered theory found its relevance in family-centred intervention as it can potentially recognize the family's capacity to achieve positive outcomes in childcare and family dynamics (Bamm & Rosenbaum, 2008). In essence, a strength-based approach as part of social work communication competence with parents entails facilitating families' given strengths and resources in generating solutions themselves. As social workers form meaningful relationships, it is crucial to help parents in identifying and challenging their capacities.

While empowerment is a recognized aspect of social work, Dunk-West (2018) argues that social workers don't simply empower people, but rather help them discover and utilize their talents. A strength perspective in social work interactions with parents involves identifying and nurturing families' inherent

strengths and resources to empower them to confront challenges and achieve positive outcomes (Healy, 2012). For instance, a study on social work intervention with parents of children with autism demonstrated the transformative potential of a strength-based approach, leading to improved quality of life and addressing the specific needs of these families (Stoliaryk & Semigina, 2022). The effective implementation of a strength-based strategy necessitates expanding its focus beyond individual strengths to encompass the social, economic, and political contexts of families and measures (Healy, 2012). A truly strengths-based approach requires a structural shift in social care to co-create solutions with people, families, groups, and communities (Caiels et al., 2021). Specifically, family-centered strategies underscore the importance of recognizing and enhancing family members' abilities (Dunst & Sherwindt, 2016). In fact, the family-centered approach serves as a theoretical framework in child welfare practices involving families (Lietz & Geiger, 2017). It comprises principles and concepts that are later implemented in family intervention, providing child protection services with a direction on how to approach families. According to Lietz and Geiger (2017), it places a strong emphasis on involving the family in decision-making and tailoring strength-based empowerment to foster a helping relationship for positive family outcomes.

According to Dunst and Espe-Sherwindt (2016), the term 'family-centered' refers to an approach that involves 'treating families and their members with dignity and respect' by promoting informed decisions and actively involving family members in childcare-related matters through resource mobilization to meet the family's needs (p. 37). This approach, when applied to relationships, emphasizes collaborative, open, transparent, and trust-based practices in communication with families (Epley et al, 2014). Childcare intervention methods are designed to cater not only to individual children but also to families and systems. Within the strength-based perspective, the family is recognized as the primary influence on a child's behavior, education, and growth.

3.3. Motivational interviewing

Literature on social worker's communication competence in talking to parents has been conceptualized in the framework of motivational interviewing skills. Motivational interviewing (MI) can be used as a practical perspective to understand how social workers can effectively engage parents in early childhood intervention, particularly when behavioural change is required (Forrester et al., 2019). For example, MI has been referred as an approach in social work intervention and communication with clients in drug abuse cases and proved to have similarities with Rogers' principle of social worker-client relationship (Dunk-West, 2018). Motivational interviewing, a technique commonly used in counseling and therapy, can serve as a way of guiding clients in

resolving their ambivalences or uncertainties. This process is conducted in a client-centered and respectful manner, aiming to empower the client and help them make decisions that align with their values and goals (Dunk-West, 2018).

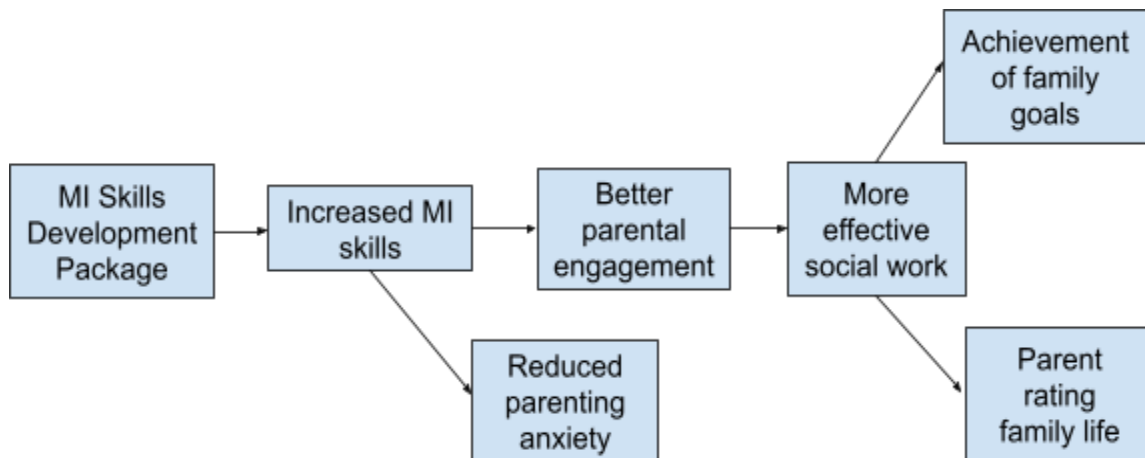
Resistance is believed to mainly originate from the relational dynamics between a social worker and their client (Diclemente & Velasquez, 2002). Research results suggest that adjusting one's communication approach can directly influence the degree of a client's resistant behaviour, either exacerbating or alleviating it (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). The way a social work professional addresses client resistance is the critical factor that sets motivational interviewing apart from other methods (Boyle et al., 2019). The basis of the motivational interviewing concept dictates that ongoing resistance is not primarily a client issue but rather a skill-related challenge that social workers face (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). Forrester and his colleagues (2018) put forward the hypothesis that providing training in motivational interviewing to social workers would enhance their abilities, leading to higher levels of parental engagement and improved family outcomes. This model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the process of behavior change, encompassing the initiation, modification, or cessation of a particular behavior. The Stages of Change, a crucial element within the transtheoretical model (TTM), outline a sequence of phases individuals go through when altering a behavior (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). This model perceives change as progress from the pre-contemplation stage, where the person is not actively thinking about changing (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). It then moves to the contemplation phase, where a person thoughtfully weighs the pros and cons of change (Leask et al., 2012). Subsequently, it advances to the preparation stage, where they are committed and planning their steps in changing. The application of these stages and support for the various aspects of the change process were represented in quitting smoking, alcohol, and drug use, as well as promoting healthy routines and behaviors (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). Even though the purpose for each behavior varies, the algorithm for how it works is consistent. People progress from being uninformed and reluctant to address the issue to being open-minded and mobilized to do something, consequently maintaining this new pattern in their behaviour. The transtheoretical model (TTM), specifically the stages of progressing in behavioural change, developed and inspired the approach of motivational interviewing as an interventional practice. Hence, MI can be implemented to help clients to complete the steps necessary to move from the pre-contemplation stage to the maintenance stage (Boyle et al., 2019).

To actually conducting MI effectively means that a social worker has to use their “good authority” to help clients to identify their own goals and motivations for change (Forrester et al., 2019). In social work practice, MI is a style of communication that helps clients to explore their own motivations for change and

good authority helps to set clear expectations, provide guidance, and hold clients accountable while making these changes (Farukuzzaman & Rahman, 2019).

Figure 2

Diagram of causal effect of MI in family intervention



Note. Hypothesis on causal relationship of MI towards positive family outcomes. From “A randomized controlled trial of training in Motivational Interviewing for child protection,” by D. J. Forrester, D. Westlake, M. Killian, V. Antonopoulou, M., McCann, A. Thurnham, R. M. Thomas, C. Waits, C. Whittaker and D. Hutchison, 2018. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 88, p. 182.

Hence, clients are more likely to be open to guidance and support from social workers when they feel that their own goals are being respected (Boyle et al., 2019). Social workers can use MI to help parents explore their motivations for change by asking open-ended questions, reflecting on what parents have said, and avoiding judgment (Rollins, 2019). Additionally, social workers can use good authority to set clear expectations for parents' involvement in the intervention process by providing them with a written plan of action, outlining their roles and responsibilities, and holding them accountable for meeting agreed-upon goals (Forrester et al., 2019). As shown in Figure 2 above, the study was conducted to prove the notion that MI training will improve abilities in practice, resulting in higher parental involvement. Furthermore, it implies that combining motivational interviewing (MI) abilities with increased parental participation might improve social work intervention outcomes with families (Forrester et al., 2018). As a result, parents who have received MI training were more likely to report better self-identified goal attainment and enhanced family life. In the framework of MI, the study further presented that enhanced practice of empathetic listening may be directly related to decreased parental worry and stress (Forrester et al., 2018). With above-mentioned

arguments, it can be concluded that by using motivational interviewing techniques in communication; social workers can create a supportive and empowering environment for parents, helping them to understand that they are able to become active partners in their children's care.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1. Research design

The study is focused on social workers' communication skills when talking with parents. To reach such findings, an in-depth research design with a flexible data collection approach, a qualitative research method, was chosen. This research method allows one to gain an unbiased understanding of attitudes and views on a specific social process (Rubin & Babbie, 2006). The inductive analysis identified patterns, themes, or theories based on findings, which later were analyzed for any alignments with reviewed secondary studies. The inductive approach is usually used as a framework in qualitative research, allowing concepts to emerge from primarily collected data (Bryman, 2012).

4.2. Study population

As the research is about interaction between social workers and parents in childcare intervention context, the sampling was derived from the population of over 100 social workers in Kazakhstan who work particularly with diverse groups of children and their families. The representative of National Alliance of Professional Social workers in Kazakhstan gave an access to a Whatsapp group of social workers working nationwide and where the researcher was able to send invitation to participate if a person has an experience in childcare intervention with families in the country.

4.3. Sampling

The participants for this research were reached out by the snowball sampling as one participant with relevant background working with parents and families had been chosen from the predetermined study population and were asked to invite other colleagues who have similar experience. Snowball sample helps to first identify relevant respondent and look for more through that person's reference to other people with similar background (Rubin & Babbie, 2006). Particularly, social workers, who had or has been working with Universal Model of Home visiting services to visit families with children at home, were taking part in the

interviews. Only few social workers are currently working in educational institutions but one participant had an experience in home-visiting social services and another one works with schools students and their parents.

4.4. Participants

In the Table 1 below, the information about the experience of each participant in social work intervention is provided. Most of them work in medical centers as part of universal model of home-visiting in the team with medical personnel that is attached to certain amount of families living in the neighborhood around the institution. Some of the interviewed professionals didn't directly study for the degree social work but instead were assigned by their organization to serve as a social worker and thus changed their specialization from nursing to social work. It proves how structure and control over the qualification system in social work field is yet to be established.

Table 1

Information about the interview participants

Coded names	Years of Experience	Current workplace	Education
Social Worker 1	8 years	Public polyclinic	Bachelor's degree in Social Work, Graduating from Master's degree in Social Work.
Social Worker 2	3 years	University	Bachelor's degree in Social Work, Graduating from Master's degree in Social Work.
Social Worker 3	5 years	Public polyclinic	Bachelor's degree in Social Work, Master's degree in Social Work.
Social Worker 4	4 years	Public polyclinic	Medical degree in Nursing
Social Worker 5	14 years	Public polyclinic	Medical degree in Nursing
Social Worker 6	3 years	Public polyclinic	Certificate in Social Work studies
Social Worker 7	20 years	Public school	Bachelor's degree in Social Pedagogy

4.5. Data analysis method

The qualitative data to be collected through one-to-one interviews using a semi-structured interview technique is subjected to thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a widely-used approach in qualitative research that involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting code and eventually themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The flexible nature of the semi-structured interviews allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives, and thematic analysis was employed to uncover recurring themes and patterns in their responses.

After transcribing responses the interviews, the data were systematically coded, and these codes were then grouped into broader categories and themes with the use of MAXQDA , a software for qualitative data analysis. It also has a deductive approach as the process is guided by the research questions and aimed at capturing the specific themes around the topic of the participants' communication skills in engaging parents in childcare intervention. The identification of themes facilitated an overall understanding around the participants' viewpoints, providing common insights into the research topic.

As the interviews will be conducted either in Kazakh or Russian, as they are Kazakhstan's official languages, the relevant findings will be translated into English to be presented for this research.

4.6. Data collection procedure

Qualitative research allows deriving opinions and perspectives towards certain complex topics based on different data collecting instruments such as interviews (Hammarberg et al, 2016). Hence, it was decided to apply semi-structured interview and gather data on a flexible term allowing open discussions and adjust follow-up questions based on the previous response. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online via Zoom software platform depending on the convenience of participants and the researcher. In-person interview was conducted with only one participant as both researcher and the participant were in one city. The interview data was thus collected throughout January to March, 2024 with the flexibility of time offered to the participants's convenience.

Semi-structure interview consists of questions asking about professional and educational background, relevance of their experience to the research topic, and 14 questions developed from the research objectives and literature review as shown below in Table 2. Also, see Appendix A for the full version of the interview guide.

Table 2*Interview schedule*

Research objectives	Concept/Theory	Indicators	Interview Questions
To explore what modes of communication social workers and how they use it with parents in childcare intervention.	Modes of communication, Communication in social work.	Verbal, Non-verbal, symbolic communication. Clear and trust-based communication.	1.Can you describe the modes of communication you usually use when you approach parents in childcare intervention context? 2.What do you do to make communication with parents clear and trustworthy?
To analyze to what extent social workers in Kazakhstan understand the role and importance of communication skills in talking to parents.	Communication with parents, Role of communication skills in social work practice, Person-centered approach	Importance of communications skills in talking to parents.	3.Can you elaborate on specific aspects of communication that you find particularly crucial in your interactions with parents? 4.Have there been instances where you felt that your communication skills significantly contributed to positive outcomes for the families you worked with?
To understand the use of communication in relationship-building with parents and how it influences the childcare intervention.	Social worker - client relationship.	Empathy, warmth and genuine regard in communication with parents, Importance of communication in relationship building. Influence of relationship on childcare intervention.	5. How do you perceive influence of the communication on relationship-building with parents? 6.How do you perceive the influence of the relationship-building with parents on the results of the childcare intervention? 7.Could you provide examples of how you communicate to show warmth, empathy,

			genuineness and sensitivity in building relationship with parents? 8.What communication skills do you consider to be necessary in establishing relationship with parents?
To identify what barriers social workers in Kazakhstan experience in communication with parents regarding childcare intervention.	Challenges in communication with parents, Resistance in social work intervention, Power imbalance.	Examples of difficulties in communicating with parents, Parents' reactions and emotions during social work intervention, Power dynamic between social worker and parents.	9.Describe the situation/s where you faced difficulties in communicating with parents regarding childcare intervention? 10.What kind of emotions and/or reactions from parents have you encountered in your experience that challenged your communication competence? For example, any resistance and disbelief from parents? 11. Have you considered your profession's power as an obstacle in communication with parents? If yes, how do you attempt to make the balance between your professional power and supportive role in communication with parents?
To examine strategies for improved communication of social workers with	Motivational Interviewing, Strength-based approach.	Communication strategies and recommendations.	12.Do you have specific communication strategies to address these complex feelings by parents and reassure that you are here to listen and help?

parents in childcare intervention.			13. What is your approach in assuring parents that they are capable of solving their problem? 14. What do you think is there to improve the communication competence of social workers in Kazakhstan?
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4.7. Ethical considerations and data management

The research was conducted in a way that would not contradict the ethical principles set by University Institute of Lisbon's Code of Ethics in Research by following their general guideline as below:

- *Responsibility*: Researcher was accountable for ensuring the well-being of participants by respecting their autonomy and minimizing any potential risks to their physical or psychological health. Additionally, researcher prioritized studies for significant societal and scientific good while considering the favorable impact and promoting sustainable resource management.
- *Honesty*: Researcher uphold transparency and truthfulness throughout the research process, including with data collection, analysis, and reporting procedures.
- *Reliability and Rigor*: Researcher conducted the work with careful consideration to details, and ensuring the accuracy, completeness, and impartiality of the findings when sharing the knowledge.
- *Objectivity*: Researcher maintained objectivity in their interpretations and conclusions, grounding them in verifiable data and evidence obtained through empirical study.
- *Integrity*: Researcher demonstrated integrity by adhering to ethical guidelines and moral standards throughout the research process while recognizing any potential conflict of interest.

For the interview with human subjects, it is necessary to inform the participants about the purpose of research being conducted and the procedure of interviewing beforehand (Whittaker, 2012). They were notified in the invitation to the interview and during the interview that the study is done purely for this master thesis and that their personal information will not be asked. They were told and assured that the data will be only analysed by the leading researchers and not share with third parties. The informed consent and interview guide include points emphasizing that their participation is voluntary and they have a right to withdraw from

the research at any time. They were also asked about the possibility to record the interview and their responses, as they were informed that only the researcher will listen to them. After giving their permission to collect data and record the interview, they were asked to announce that they give permission to record. The recorded interview are stored in password-protected folder and are not indicated by the names of participants.

4.8. Limitations of the study

Even though the research provided with primary data through in-depth interviews and thus achieved study objectives, there has been considerable challenges during the data collection process that might have affected the quantity and quality of gathered data. First of all, some participants struggled to understand and fully comprehend the interview questions as more time and thinking were needed to be able to answer the questions because concepts sounded unfamiliar to them. Moreover, as questions were first constructed based on the international resources and then translated into Kazakh/Russian according to the preferences of each participant, the meaning and context of some questions were turned to be confusing to few interviewees. Due to the novelty and still developing status of social work practices with families in home visits, it required some time and tremendous effort to find and reach out to social workers. Effective communication strategies were needed in order to persuade and encourage practitioners to participate as later after initial agreement few participants expressed their unavailability to take part in the interviews. Lastly, during the data analysis, the initial meaning behind interview responses might have been slightly changed as they were translated from either Kazakh or Russian for the thematic analysis.

5. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

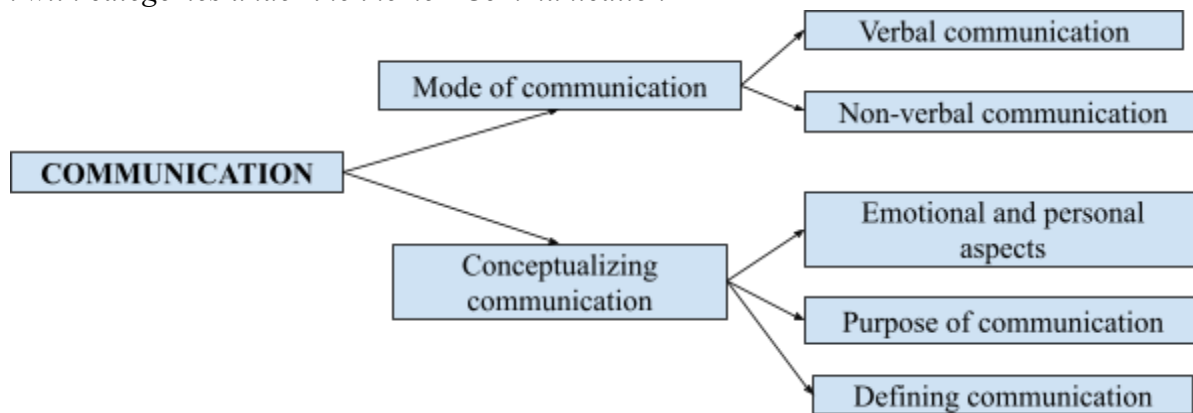
This chapter analyses and discusses the empirical data derived from the semi-structured interviews. The thematic analysis were utilized to create codes from the interview responses with the help of MAXQDA software. The codes were grouped by their similarities into unique themes corresponding to the research objectives.

In Figure 3, the diagram depicts how subcategories such as *verbal* and *non-verbal communication* generated from the codes were grouped as a category called Mode of communication. When describing what communication meant to them, participants shared opinions about *personal elements in interactions, purpose*

of communication and defined communication which created a bigger category. Consequently, these categories established the general idea under the theme name Communication.

Figure 3

Diagram with categories under the theme “Communication”



As participants were describing communication in social work, challenges they encountered in communication with parents were mentioned in terms of *misconceptions*, *negative feelings towards social work intervention* and *power disbalance* (See Figure 4 below). As a result, the bigger theme Challenges in communication emerged including in itself category touching upon professional *obstacles* that the social workers face in upgrading their communication competence. The diagram also shows how difficulties in establishing communication with parents such as misconceptions and negative reactions can be interrelated to each other and thus lead to the cycle of causal effects.

Figure 4

Diagram with categories under the theme “Challenges in communication”

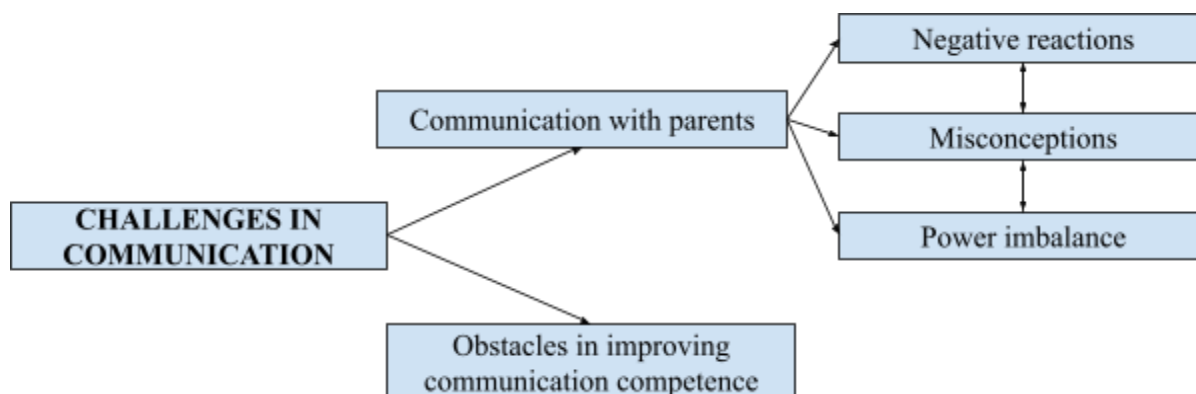


Figure 5 depicts subcategories such as *strength-based approach* and *motivational interviewing* that create a category Communication strategies. These two categories also including Recommendations for professional development that participants mentioned during the interview present general theme called Improving communication competence in the diagram.

Figure 5

Diagram with categories under the theme “Improving communication competence”



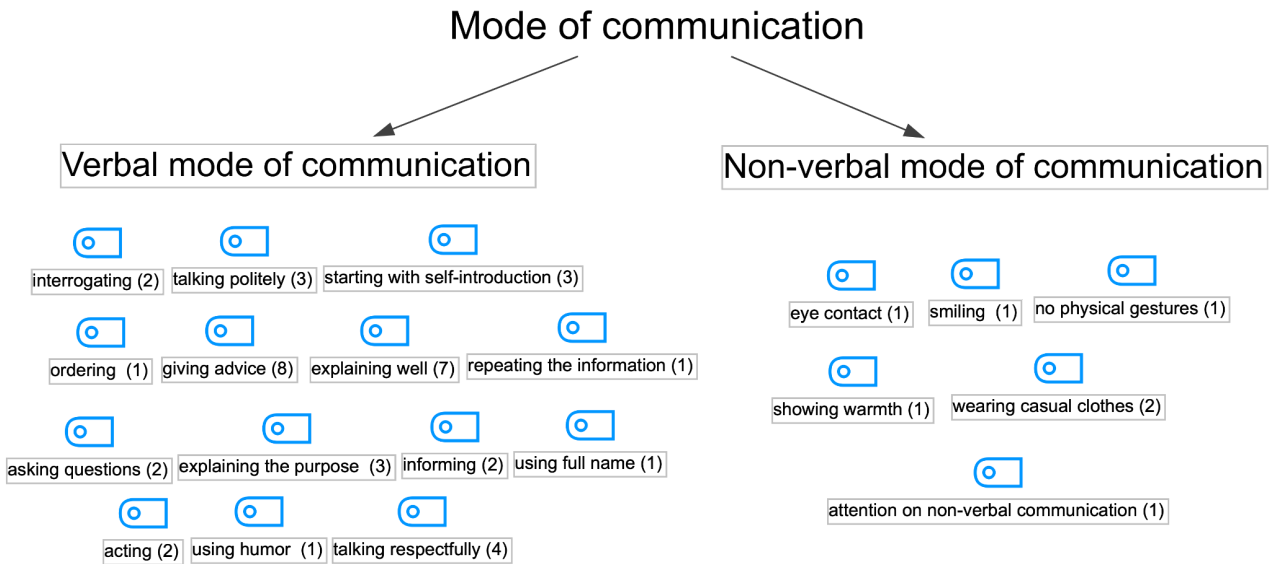
As *active listening* and *empathy* emerged as codes and were emphasized frequently during the interviews, the researched decided to put them as separate subcategories.

Finally, the grouped codes and emerging categories/subcategories can be seen from the visualized map created in MAXQDA. The frequency of appearance of codes in the interviews can be seen next to each code in the bracket. Most of the codes were analysed with direct quotes from the participants’ responses in a separate subchapter dedicated to each category. Later, the analysis of findings were discussed in relation to the secondary data mentioned in the literature review.

5.1. Communication in social work profession

5.1.1. Modes of communication

When participants were asked how they approach their clients, specifically parents regarding childcare intervention and other practices, most of them mentioned what words and questions they ask in their first encounter. As seen below in the graph, it can understood that less attention and emphasize were on the



non-verbal mode of their communication with service users by the social workers. As one of the social workers (Social worker 6) reflected back on her habits in talking with clients, she doesn't recall using *any physical gestures* in the communication even though she mentioned how she focuses on *showing warmth* with her tone and facial expressions. For social worker 5, it is hard due to her reserved personality to express with body language and facial expressions her emotions but she tries to *smile* when it is necessary for effective communication with parents. On another hand, another participant said that she tries to pay *attention on non-verbal communication* and keeps *eye contact* in her interactions with parents but didn't specify in which ways she uses non-verbal gestures.

As an aspect of verbal communication, only one social worker described using humor in her interactions with clients for the purpose of conveying a positive light. She states that when clients become upset or agitated, she tries to lighten the mood by making a joke.

"...when they get upset, I try to lighten the mood and make a joke. They calm down and start to smile. When doctors or patronage nurses start with asking questions, parents sometimes get stuck and feel pressured. It's like an interrogation, if you say something wrong, they think even more that there might be a problem in the family." (Social worker 3).

The majority of the participants mentions asking questions in a manner that used as a popular way of performing verbal communication in the practice. For some practitioners it was important to referring to clients by their full name in their verbal communication that would convey professionalism and show respectful consideration for their identity. Verbal communication was also applied in the act of seeking

permission before entering the client's space or assisting them with tasks. This likely involves verbal requests or inquiries made by the social worker to the client.

"I act like I didn't know anything about their bad situation so that they won't feel pressured from the beginning, thus we ask questions as if we don't know, we call them by their full name, we ask for permission before entering the room and taking off their shoes and before sitting down." (Social worker 3).

When for the first time visiting the houses of families, most participants pay attention to introducing themselves properly and *explaining the purpose* of their visit. Especially with some resistance and misunderstanding, they see the necessity of *explaining well* or *informing* every detail of the process with words and rules.

"We explain to them and repeat few times, of course, we try to reach out. There are some parents who understand right away, of course, there are some who don't understand saying something like 'you're deceiving us.'" (Social worker 7).

Some participants quoted what they usually have to say to parents who are not taking good care after their children and are reluctant to listen to recommendations by doctors and social workers.

"When I enter, I dress modestly, and then I speak politely by praising the person for doing something well. Then I go straight to the subject, I say 'So you can't do this, then do it like this and follow the instruction. Why are you not following recommendations by doctors and not giving the medicine to your kids?'" (Social worker 5).

This type of verbal communication gives the tone of ordering and interrogating the client as for why the parent is doing things wrong. Nevertheless, the participants regards appearance and dress as important part of communication in home visits to convey respect and politeness non-verbally.

The social workers described another approach to verbal communication, particularly in the context of giving advice and knowledge to clients rather than interrogating.

"I try to understand and provide with specific knowledge, of course by making the person trust you first. By giving this one client an advice to get support from a psychologist and that this relationship with her spouse is not healthy, she could get out of the crisis." (Social worker 1).

Even though most interview participants were not able to fully elaborate on their communication skills that they try to implement in their interactions with families, some emphasized that the way how practitioners communicate with clients are being more valued than the intervention itself.

"In the reviews online, for example, the clients won't mention a lot how well specialists treated them but would rather highlight how politely and well the service provider explained the procedure and would be thankful for that alone." (Social worker 3).

Discussion

It was challenging for practically all participants to think about their non-verbal communication skills or behaviour that they showcase during the encounter with their clients. On the other hand, the literature review underscores the interactive nature of communication, emphasizing the importance of both verbal and non-verbal elements (Hole, 2013; Sidell & Smiley, 2008; Lishman, 2009).

Both the secondary and primary data analysis emphasize the value of clear and respectful communication in establishing rapport, addressing concerns, and conveying information as well as intentions comprehensively. The literature review also highlights the importance of non-verbal communication in delivering messages and sentiments, suggesting that social workers must be mindful of their body language and facial expressions during interactions with clients. Dress and modest appearance were mentioned as way of building communication with families by few participants and as Lishman (2009) emphasized as well "formal suit , male or female, may convey distance and power" (p. 30) thus implying how interaction can be coordinated non-verbally. As one social worker explained it is even better not to wear fancy and luxury accessories as it can demonstrate the authoritative image to clients thus hindering them to open up. Even though there is no strict rule for social worker to what uniform to wear in their service with clients, it is suggested to be aware of the power first impression in form of physical appearance possesses (Lishman, 2009).

Asking questions to the services users were considered as a fundamental aspect of verbal interaction based on the common responses, as they want to facilitate dialogue and establish understanding with clients. Davies and Jones (2016) emphasize the significance of asking questions in practitioner-client interaction as a means of gathering information and maintaining dialogue. The openness in interaction nevertheless depends on whether open or closed type of question is asked (Dunk-West, 2018). As in the case with one interviewee the closed questions she asked seemed to have ordering and interrogating tone that might hinder to establish close rapport with a client. Koprowska (2008) elaborates on the role of questioning in verbal communication, particularly in the context of the System for Analyzing Verbal Interaction (SAVI). The SAVI framework analyzes verbal exchanges to understand attitudes, emotions, and modulation, highlighting the importance of intensity of questions in creating dynamics in interactions (Koprowska, 2008). In correspondence to this

framework, it can be assumed that how some participants ask question in an authoritative manner might convey negative attitude towards the services users.

In universal model of home visiting services, as social workers cooperate with medical personal such as general physicians, their duty also consists of reporting parents resistance towards medical check-ups and vaccinations for children (Babayeva et al, 2018). According to the theme 1, verbal communication for some was about the need to persuade parents to consider the medical and other recommendations in taking care after a child. As Leask et al. (2012) believe in terms of healthcare intervention, it is recommended to avoid persuasive behaviour in communication with users as it causes even more resistance. It is argued that recognizing the complexity of refusal and the limitations of simplistic verbal communication techniques such as overwhelming with more information should be considered in establishing mutual understanding (Leask et al., 2012). Nevertheless, some participants pointed out the difference between medical personnel and social workers' communication patterns as the former in talking to families can be even more straightforward and less sensitive about the emotions of the users.

Explaining the purpose and procedure of why the social worker is visiting this particular family and what he/she is going to do next was a typical response by the participants in their reflections to their verbal communication with parents. The social worker is mandated to first actively explain, verify, and mutually agree upon the purpose and objectives, as clients are unlikely to initiate these discussions themselves (Koprowska, 2008).

Answers such as giving advice and using humor in the social worker-client verbal interaction can depend on the practitioner's prior history with the client and the context of the relationship. This type of verbal communication can give the false impression of being a friend whose advice can be easily disregarded rather than a professional coming to help in a formal and structured way (Koprowska, 2008).

While the literature underscores the complex nature of communication, the primary data brings to light a specific challenge among practitioners-the need to recognize and address their non-verbal communication skills. This aspect, often overlooked, is crucial in establishing rapport with clients and conveying information effectively. Therefore, it calls for further research and training in this area.

5.1.2. Conceptualizing communication and its role in social work intervention

Personal and emotional elements in communication: During the interview, most participants found it crucial to point out what personality traits and attitude can be required in their encounter with service users. Having *patience* was mentioned few times in the interviews in terms of giving time and space to the clients to open

up first before starting with questions and intervention procedure. Such an awareness about one's personal habits can be either helpful or harmful in establishing clear communication with certain clients.

Personal and emotional elements in communication



"Therefore, social workers should have a sense of patience. It is not necessary to rush that family, the parents, or one of the parents." (Social worker 4).

"...because a person is venting their soul. And they don't think about how convenient it is for you. No, they just want to express their worries, and you should support them in this matter. This is also about being very patient. Patience is needed. Definitely. We don't have that in this regard." (Social worker 2).

These narratives emphasize the importance of patience for social workers in their interactions with families by suggesting that rushing or pressuring families, especially parents, is unnecessary and may not be conducive to effective social work intervention. It was also believed that social workers need to be patiently supportive of clients who are talking about their feelings, even if it inconveniences the worker.

Few also talked about *loyalty* and *flexibility* being essential qualities in communication with service users.

"...some families need a strict professional who will persuade them straightforwardly to take actions. Other might need someone who will be more careful with their tone and is more sensitive. So a social work should be flexible to change their communication approach with each individual." (Social worker 3).

Being calm and kind was emphasized as a necessity in fostering smooth communication with parents. They encounter critical situation with domestic violence and one social worker believed that in such cases the kindness works the best to engage a user in interaction.

"...sometimes you really want to shout back at those rude parents, but given your professional ethics you have keep calm and hold it." (Social worker 5).

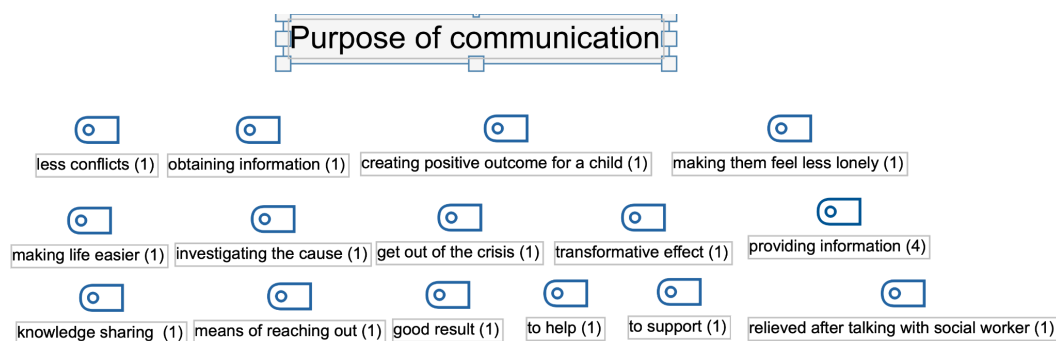
As some of the participants stated calmness help to be less irritated and triggered by all sorts of negative reactions from families. *Stress resistance* and being *resourceful* were considered as important emotional capacity in maintaining communication with families as it can get exhausting.

Promptness and *confidence* played crucial roles for some participants in effectively managing intervention cases with clients. One of the participants explained how it is important to her to express confidence in her competence as it conveys to service users that there is a professional that is able to help.

“...you always need to respond promptly, because sometimes what may seem like minor issues to us can be significant problems for the client. Therefore, it's important to respond to any request. Providing some responses, even if you don't have the resources to answer immediately to their request it's better to say so and explain ‘Sorry, I'm a bit busy right now’.” (Social worker 1).

The passage highlights the importance of honesty and responsiveness in communication, advising to admit when you don't have the resources or knowledge to respond effectively.

Purpose of communication: When describing the importance of communication in their work, most participants also concluded that communication serves different purposes in achieving certain goals in the



helping profession. Most importantly, as one mentioned it serves as a tool for *obtaining information* from clients about their situation while another social worker pointed out that it is about *providing information* to a service user on what can be done to solve their issue with the professional help. As one participants concluded communication drives the process of *knowledge sharing* between social worker and a clients in solving one issue together.

The majority of interview participants gave similar connotation to what the purpose of communication was for them as phrases such as *get out of the crisis*, *transformative effect*, *to help*, *to support* were indicated to explain that through the communication they are able to conduct their primary duties as helping professionals.

“...thanks to the communication and conversations with clients we helo them to get out of the crisis”. (Social worker 1)

In her interaction with a mother, one participant observed positive changes in the user's behavior over time, as she became more open and friendly towards the intervention. This transformation indicates the impact of supportive communication on personal growth and development within families.

"the mother didn't completely change her mindset, but she eventually started to trust me a lot.. And you know, she changed right before my eyes, you could say. Over time, she became more open to everyone, friendlier, and all she needed was support." (Social worker 2)

Some participants stated that communication helps not only to achieve effective interaction with parents but also to *create positive outcome for a child* as only through the family and by forming a team with them social workers will be able to ensure the safety in child's development.

"Communication is crucial in child development; the relationship with parents influences the future of the child. If we communicate well with the parents, if they understand what we say and do what we ask, the child develops well." (Social worker 5)

This response emphasizes the significance of communication in the context of parent-child relationships and child development. During another interview, social worker gave similar explanation stating that communication leads to *good results* in family intervention.

The excerpts from some of the interviews also suggest that the social workers get feedback of how their conversation make the service users *feel less lonely* in hard situations, how the support *makes their life seem easier* and some even *became relieved* after talking to the practitioners.

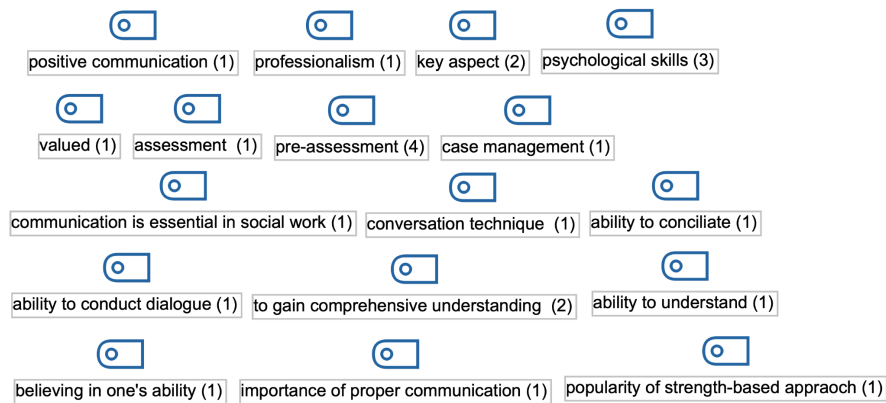
"Establishing proper communication is very important. Then the relationships will be warm, with fewer conflicts. People will understand each other and not resist making decisions together." (Social worker 7)

This response underscores the significance of communication in fostering positive relationships and avoiding conflict of interests. This suggests that clear communication is fundamental to building and maintaining cooperation with clients.

Defining professional communication: Every participants understood and recognize the role communication plays in their work, but all explained it differently what actually professional communication can imply. It was described as *valued, key aspect, important* and *essential* in providing professional social work services. For one social worker it meant delivering *positive communication* when leading professional conversation with service users.

"...in any job, not just in social work competence, I think, stands at a higher level. It's about professionalism. Competence is value, professionalism, skills." (Social worker 4)

Defining professional communication



The statement connects competence with professionalism, indicating that being proficient in communication is a hallmark of professionalism. Few of the participants revealed that for them it was important to possess *skills of psychologists* who can talk with clients in a way that would make them feel safe with sharing their emotions and feelings.

Professional terms in social work such as *assessment*, *pre-assessment*, *case management* and *popularity of strength-based approach* were emphasized in participants' responses defining approaches in professional communication with clients.

"...as one of the communication techniques they teach you principles of case management in social work where having communication competence is mandatory. Because case management itself is impossible without communication. And the case stage itself is the study of the case, gaining comprehensive understanding of the case through communication." (Social worker 1)

The excerpt mentions that science of communication are taught as part of case management training where you will be equipped with strong communication skills to effectively perform your role. By integrating communication training into case management education, professionals are better prepared to handle the complexities of their work as one has to build comprehensive knowledge about the given case.

"Therefore, as a professional, I believe that communication skills are very important. It is the ability to establish a connection with the client, the ability to listen to them, to understand them." (Social worker 1)

"I consider the job description of a social worker to be about the ability to engage in dialogue. That is, to engage in dialogue, for example, not immediately starting with attempts to solve the problems of the family you visited, but to earn the trust of that family." (Social worker 4)

The participants thus referred to professional communication in social work as ability to engage clients in meaningful dialogue by earning their trust and establishing rapport first.

Discussion

Within the realm of social work practice, Dunk-West (2018) highlights the importance of recognizing and understanding specific skills that support effective communication with clients.

Therefore, the findings provided with an overview on communication competence in social work as the participants shared how they understand communication and its role in their work with clients. First, the main component of communication skill for most of them was about personal traits that is manifested in this process. Domina et al. (2019) underscore the complexity of communicative competence, emphasizing its systematic nature involving practical knowledge, skills, behavioural habits, and also personality characteristics. Demonstrating kindness, calmness and exercising patience allowed some social workers to convey their intentions and establish mutual understanding in the communication with parents. Koprowska (2008) also pointed out that professional competence can be prioritized and valued yet it should come with the interpersonal quality such as sensitivity and kindness.

As one of the participants suggested, a social worker should express confidence even at times of uncertainty and be honest with a client about his/her abilities to solve an issue. Lishman (2009) describes such characteristic as genuineness and argues that it is a core aspect in helping profession such as social work. Additionally, it is argued that social work counseling should be complemented with a use of self thus representing you as a person with his/her own feelings that is here to help another person (Lishman, 2009). The participants were clear about how they sometime reveal their personalities of being too friendly, or impatient with some clients but also recognize that there should be balance between interpersonal and professional skills in tackling communication with service users. As mentioned in the analyzed findings, flexibility was indicated as valuable skill in conducting diverse types of communication. Practitioners are usually taught to foster adaptability and learn how to and when to transform their sets of theoretical approach in each practice (Davies & Jones, 2016). Effective communication in social work involves demonstrating stress resistance in challenging interactions. This ability allows social workers to navigate professional-client dialogues even in times of reluctance. The management of communication includes maintaining professionalism in pressuring situations, particularly when dealing with users in critical states with complex emotional needs (Davies & Jones, 2016). It also involves maintaining an emotionally stable state when the client is already stressed and requires a positive outcome from the interaction with a helping professional (Hepworth et al., 2013). The respondents also linked stress resistance in problem solving to the application of psychological skills in leading communication.

Based on the responses by the participated social workers, communication serves various purposes, such as gathering information from clients about their family situation and providing information to clients about potential solutions with a professional approach. This aligns with the perspective on the reverse role of communication in social work, where social workers gather information to understand clients' needs and in exchange creating circumstances where they provide information to clients to empower them in decision-making processes (Lishman, 2009). Communication needs to have purpose in order to provide the targetted professional support and achieve shared goals with a client. Healy (2012) listed practices in communication such as engagement and assessment that are directly linked to the purpose of social work. As it was mentioned in the interviews, communication starts already in pre-assessment and assessment stages where a practitioner has to develop understanding of the issue through different levels of interactions. As analyzed in the findings, for the majority of participants, communication serves as a tool for gathering information from clients about their situations, needs, and concerns and later giving feedback on how to improve the situation. The social workers responded that they received information about each family during the pre-assessment before meeting the client. Hepworth et al. (2013) present five phases: gaining secondary data on each case and allowing a client to share his/her first-hand experience during the direct assessment process. However, in order for a client to share the whole story voluntarily, a social worker needs to engage the person in effective communication by building a trust-based relationship in advance (Hepworth et al., 2013). Indeed, the participants recognized what an important role communication played in establishing rapport with clients as it is not only about exchanging information between a professional and a client but about making the users feel supported and thus less helpless.

Overall, the purpose of communication in social work was explained as an approach to establish meaningful connections with clients, gather essential information, provide support and guidance, and empower clients to make positive changes themselves in their lives.

5.2. Challenges in communication

5.2.1. Communication challenges with parents

Negative reactions from parents: In their attempts to effectively communicate in the childcare intervention process, social workers identified main challenges as to be the unpleasant attitude from parents. When participants visit a family for the first time, they more often encounter parents with trust issues and disbelief in the social support services. The majority of them pointed out *resistance* as a common reaction from

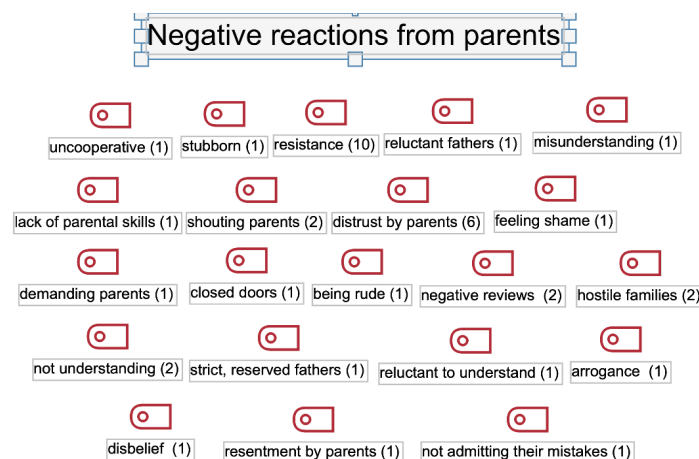
parents when they try to talk with them and do assessment. Resistant behaviour can occur in the first encounter with social service as well as upon receiving recommendation in childcare from the professionals.

“There are parents who don’t get it at all, they believe what they want to believe and sometime with such people one visit is not enough to convince them.” (Social worker 7)

“When we try to recommend them to keep the house clean for the kids’ well-being or visit doctor as the kid is sick, they will be like ‘who are you tell me this, i know the best what is good for my children’.” (Social worker 3)

Another social worker highlights the difficulty of dealing with aggressive families who may not cooperate from the beginning and not allowing them to enter their house. This indicates a significant barrier to establishing effective communication and engagement with such families.

“If the family is already aggressive, kicks you out, does not let [the social worker] into the house, then nevertheless, an initial assessment is still conducted, where all these behaviours are indicated, and then an inspector is involved with more power.” (Social worker 1)



This suggests that protocols and procedures are in place to address such situations, emphasizing the importance of assessing the family's situation regardless of their level of cooperation.

“I encountered one father who didn’t even allow the mother to show the baby to us stating that we won’t help much anyways and wasting their time.” (Social worker 6)

Some participants had issues particularly with fathers who were hostile to medical and social work intervention, especially toward vaccination. As shared, fathers openly express their strict and negative attitude toward the home-visiting services.

Mostly, common negative experience with parents were also mostly about *misunderstanding, distrust* and *disbelief* towards the workers and their services. Clients tend to not believe that we can offer professional help but would instead think that we can only talk and do nothing efficient.

"Where have you been when we most needed the help, we didn't even have shelter. We didn't know where to go and ask professional help." (Social worker 4)

The social worker also explained that these parents had such distrust toward the practice because of their previous experience with healthcare specialists who were out of reach when needed the most. It was emphasized that one could feel the resentment from the parents' expressed emotions.

The challenges with resistant parents occurred also due to the feelings of *shame, lack of parental skills* or when parents didn't want to *admit their mistakes* in not practicing proper childcare. The mention of timidity, especially among parents with children, suggests that discussing certain topics related to their past or critical family situation can be particularly challenging.

"We all feel a little shame when, for example, we ask someone about their past, especially with children. There is often timidity, especially among parents with children." (Social worker 2)

The response highlights the common experience of feeling shame or discomfort when discussing personal matters where one did something wrong. As another participants said, service users feel reluctant to open up about sensitive topics due to feelings of shame or don't want to admit that there is a problem that needs to be solved.

"I had such a family, when the parent lacks parenting skills and instincts in safeguarding the child, as strange as it may sound. This mother didn't know or wanted to take care after her child and thus didn't cooperate well with us social workers." (Social worker 1)

It was later stated that without adequate parenting skills, parents struggle to effectively communicate their needs, concerns, or understand the information provided by social workers. This can lead to misunderstandings and ineffective communication between the parent and the social worker.

On other hand, one social worker argued how mothers with a lot of kids know their rights to receive help if they are a household with more than few kids. They can be more demanding and *informed* of what social services and financial aid they are supposed to get.

"... the mothers of large families, they tend to rally against the state, against the authorities, and they come to us social workers more often with demands." (Social worker 7)

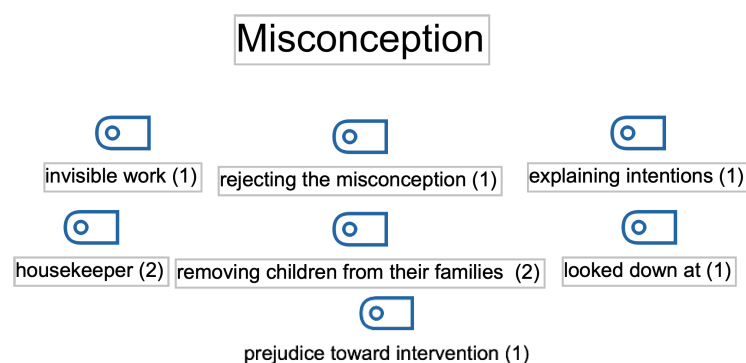
The statement indicates that mothers of large families may become more demanding or assertive in seeking assistance from social services or authorities. Social workers and service providers need to understand these dynamics to effectively address the needs of such families while navigating potential challenges in communication and resource allocation.

Few participants also divided groups of parents they usually encounter as those who are *adequate* or *inadequate*.

"So, I was assigned a family, and everyone told me that the mother was very wild and inadequate, and then It turned out to be true. In general, yes, there are cases when parents do not make contact at all, this is a common situation." (Social worker 2)

The social worker describes encountering a challenging situation with a mother who is described as wild and inadequate suggesting that the behaviour was difficult to manage or understand. The practitioner acknowledges that such situations are not uncommon, indicating that difficulties in communication with parents can arise frequently in their line of work.

Misconception about social work intervention: Most of the negative emotions social workers described from their experience were associated with how parents had incorrect perception about the childcare intervention practices. As previously the participants was mentioning about *inadequate* parent with whom it was hard to establish proper interaction, she also added that this particular mother treat the worker as housekeeper who came to the house to take care of their house. It might have occurred due to their professional duty of



checking if the house is clean and safe for a kid to live. According to another social worker's unpleasant experience, when visiting families with high socio-economic status she tends to feel like *looked down at* thus feeling less confident to communicate with the service users. When one participant said, "...at first, our services are indeed invisible and people tend to not see the impact right away" (Social worker 1), she means

that the benefits of the service may not be immediately obvious or easily quantifiable making it harder to the clients to hope for good result while working with the social workers. It underscores the importance of considering the less tangible aspects of the service, such as emotional support or guidance, which may not be readily visible but can still be valuable to those receiving it.

"...but in Kazakhstan, here, it's not really welcomed by parents, because when child protection services are called, they mostly think that we've come strictly to remove their kid from the family, not to help, not to help at all, that we've come only to take something away." (Social worker 2)

The practitioner suggests that parents often view the involvement of social services as solely punishment, with the assumption that we are there to remove their children rather than to provide assistance or support that would help their family to thrive. As one participant believed such misconceptions and *prejudice towards the intervention* might have occurred as a result of false representation about their work on social media. It was assumed that such perceptions could hinder effective communication and collaboration between parents and social workers, potentially leading to mistrust and resistance from parents.

Power imbalance: Participants recalled situations when it was challenging to form equal partnership and communication with parents due to responsibilities that it is either social worker or these clients who takes and it is usually not shared evenly. Some parents put all the pressure of childcaring on the shoulders of social services and didn't want to take role of a partner in this process. Therefore, they had to *define boundaries*, *define responsibilities* and try *not to promise a lot* while maintaining clear communication with the families.

"...there are boundaries, where you can step in and where you should hold back. I tried to talk to this client about the fact that 'I can support you, you can call me, I'm ready to listen to you, but I can't persuade your spouse to return to the family.'" (Social worker 1)

As participant explained the clients sometimes want social workers to meet all of their needs and do something that is not part of their competence. This demonstrates an awareness of professional boundaries and ethical considerations in their practice.

"...when promising something, I must know if I can do what I promise. Not just promising for the sake of it, like, 'Oh, I promised, the child's mother relied on me, so she's waiting for some decision, and we forgot about her, and that's it.' It's necessary to consider one's capabilities." (Social worker 4)

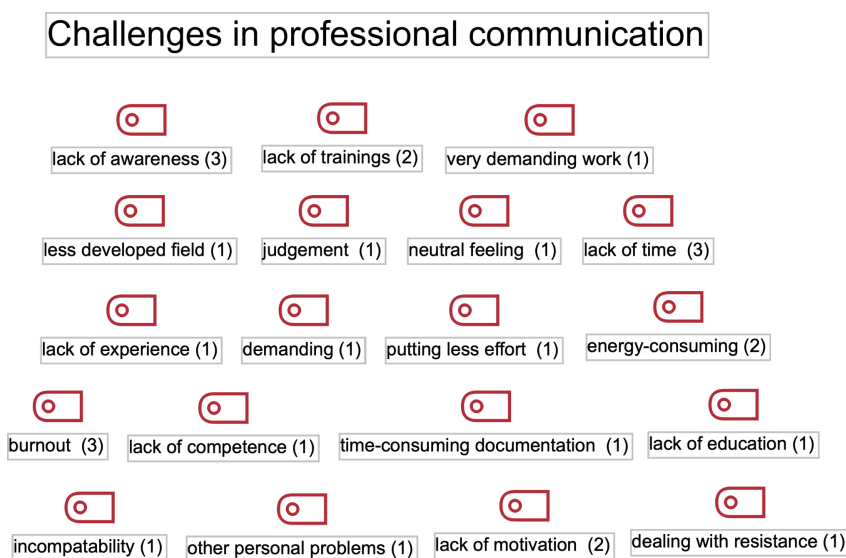
The person underscores the significance of not only making promises but also considering one's capacity to fulfill them, thus communicating to the parents what is in social worker's power to fix and what is not.

"I tried to teach one parent to not be dependent on my help and that I can't be authoritative over them. I constantly call them and tell what to do but this is already power, it feels like I control this parent. Because when the child returns home, we encountered difficulties. The parent becomes dependent, dependent on power." (Social worker 1)

This describes the attempt to put *line between empowerment and control* between herself and the parent by reducing the professional's authoritative impact and encouraging self-reliance. The participants acknowledges the risk of the parent becoming overly dependent on authority figures, highlighting the delicate balance of power between two parties required in navigating such situations. Some other participants also recognized how in their work with parents it is either service users or a social worker who take the "*power over*" and control the outputs of the intervention.

5.2.2. Obstacles in developing communication competence

As social workers were describing challenges in talking to parents and coping with negative attitudes, most of them recognized that as professionals they face difficulties in effectively using communication approaches. First of all, the basic problem was in the *lack of trainings* for social workers about how to talk to



clients and make the communication clear while conducting interventions. It seems to emerge from the idea that social work in Kazakhstan is considered to be *less developed field* and thus making it hard to upgrade one's competence.

"...in terms of development plans, in our country, there are few or almost none, you could say. Probably because this field receives little attention. As social workers sometimes feel that we are not noticed." (Social worker 7)

In this response, the participants expressed a concern that in the country, there is limited focus on their field, suggesting that communication skills training or development plan may be scarce. Consequently, it can be assumed that such fundamental problems in the development of social work profession could cause what the participants referred to as *lack of education, lack of competence and lack of experience*.

"Some people work in the field temporarily as they don't have enough knowledge to understand if social work profession is for them. One of these factors why they don't continue in this field, also it's probably not that they lack competence, it's just that they probably couldn't understand their communicative competence." (Social worker 1)

The speaker implied that some individuals may struggle to understand their own communicative competence, leading them to question their fit in the profession. This highlights the significance of effective communication in career satisfaction and as another participant pointed out junior social workers feel that their competence is *incompatible* with the professional requirements in social work.

Nevertheless, none of participants could deny the personal and emotional factors that hinders the improvement of communication competence. *Lack of motivation* and *lack of time* to upgrade the knowledge, were mentioned as the reasons of why social worker might lack communication skills. As one participant explained, she seemed to become more *judgemental* and less empathetic as she met a lot of clients a day and thus it makes her feel like she is *putting less effort* than it was in the fresh beginning of her career.

"...I feel like now I look at everything more neutrally, at the beginning I used to feel empathetic but now I don't have such stronger feelings in this helping profession." (Social worker 3)

The nature of social work practice could be linked to why participants were mentioning lack of time and motivation. It is reasonable why social workers described their job as *energy-consuming, demanding*, and that include *time-consuming documentation*. One participants said that she doesn't have time properly talk with clients as she also has to manage time for documenting the meeting. Another social worker described her experience with some parents who require more attention in communication making the process a lot more *energy consuming*.

Discussion

The responses reflect the complexities and obstacles social workers encounter in their interactions with parents, particularly those exhibiting non-cooperative behavior. Communication between the professionals and service users require readiness, engagement and positive attitude from both sides. In the context of childcare intervention, the participants shared instances where they had unpleasant encounters with families due to hostility and resistance from parents during the interaction with the social workers. It is argued that the reason behind such reactions could be past negative experience with social welfare and child protection services where parents felt powerless and ashamed (Wilkins & Whittaker, 2017). According to one study where parents were interviewed about their experience with social services, some percentage of respondents recalled when social workers exhibited unfriendly and unprofessional treatment towards the family judging their life conditions (Maiter et al., 2006). Even if the study can be outdated, the status quo of the social work institution in Kazakhstan and participants' responses suggests that the practitioners in the country are not informed about non-judgemental and anti-oppressive approach in talking to families. Therefore, during the interview, some participants acknowledge how they tend to unconsciously express judgemental attitude and thus making the communication with parents even more challenging.

Overall, studies on professional-client communication acknowledge that there is a significant risk of exposure to power disbalance that negatively affects mutual understanding. Saar-Heiman (2023) points out the inherent power imbalance between social workers and parents while interacting with families regarding the child protection system. On one hand, social workers are seen as authority figures with the power to make significant decisions affecting the family's life, which can intimidate or alienate parents. On the other hand, as the interviews revealed the social workers had to navigate the fine line between authority and support, often without overstepping or under-engaging. Social workers, as representatives of the governmental authorities, hold jurisdiction to intervene in families' lives, whereas parents often feel powerless and vulnerable. When parents perceived that the social worker has all the power or when they feel powerless, they might respond by either becoming overly dependent on the social worker or by resisting the intervention altogether. This power imbalance can lead to feelings of distrust, resentment, and resistance from parents, making it challenging for social workers to engage them in child welfare interventions effectively. In other cases narrated by the interview participants, such power imbalance to some extent prevented the formation of a partnership where responsibilities and decision-making should be shared on equal terms. Social workers must be aware of these dynamics and often have to approach carefully to define boundaries and

responsibilities, without promising more than they can deliver and gently use their professional self (Saar-Heiman, 2023).

According to the responses, some of the challenges with parents' attitudes could also be from the lack of a practical communication approach or the lack of time to dedicate to learning communication strategies. As one participant explained why some in their early stage of career think that they are not compatible, it can also be assumed that they are not offered training and proper education to use as a tool for turning them into competent communicators and social workers. Additionally, Marcenko et al. (2010) argued that professional duties such as recording cases on documents, attending to households and working in the office take much time that could be dedicated to rapport-building with parents and clients. The participants believed that by freeing social workers from such procedural formalities, they might have had more opportunities to build trust and communicate openly with parents, helping to mitigate adverse reactions and resistance.

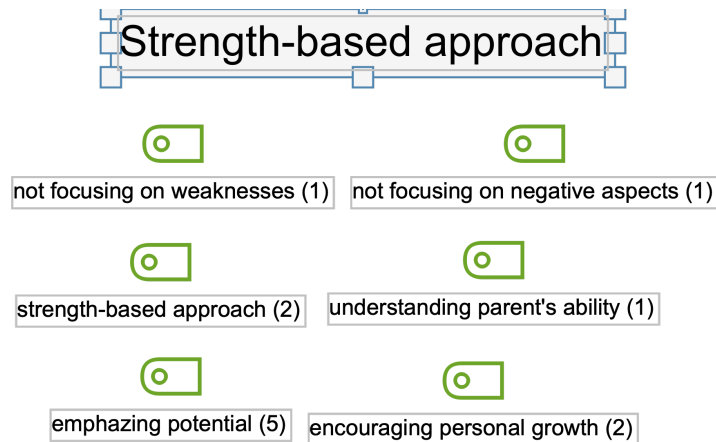
Adilova and Abitova (2019) and Tulebayev (2021) point out a significant lack of awareness about what social work involves and its role in society within Kazakhstan. This shortage of informational promotion and resources leads to an ambiguous perception of the profession. Most of the Kazakhstani community does not recognize social work as a critical component of social welfare services (Tulebayev, 2021). This broader unawareness is reflected in the specific experiences of social workers, who noted that parents often distrust them, fearing that their primary role is to remove children from their homes. The dual role of providing support for families to enhance their well-being and being the agent responsible for potentially removing children creates a significant level of distrust that affects interaction (Michalopoulos et al., 2012). This misconception underscores a severe gap in public understanding about social work's true intentions and benefits, which are to support and empower families towards self-resilience.

The link between adverse parental reactions, misconceptions about social work, and power imbalances thus creates a cycle where each factor influences and exacerbates the others. Breaking this cycle is crucial for social workers aiming to establish effective interventions. It requires clear communication, building trust, correcting misconceptions, engaging parents as partners in the process, and maintaining professional boundaries that respect the autonomy and dignity of the family. Nevertheless, the professionals need to be properly instructed and given tools to improve their communication competence in talking to families, which might become powerful facilitators in breaking this cycle.

5.3. Improving communication competence

5.3.1. Communication strategies

Strength-based approach: When tackling disbelief and resistance by parents during the childcare intervention, the informants shared their strategic approaches in communication that would foster mutual understanding.



One participant acknowledged that in practice it is common to put more emphasize on the weaknesses of a family rather than focusing on the strength that would encourage effective problem-solving.

"...many trainings, conferences, everywhere it's always discussed that a specialist should focus on strengths. If we go back in time, we would point out on problems and some weak points and say 'parents couldn't handle the responsibility'." (Social worker 1)

Like few other participants, the respondent describes what in theory is called the *strength-based approach* and highlight how it is usually taught during the educational events. She recalled how in the past social workers would talk about parents in terms of their drawback and struggles with responsibilities. However, she sees shift towards the importance of addressing these issues through a strengths-based perspective.

Some of the social worker use the communication strategy that would help parents see their own parenting *potentials*. They would tell parents that they are strong enough to take proper care of their children and that the issue can be solved. Another response emphasizes the importance of focusing on the client's strengths and encouraging parents by highlighting their past successes. This approach aligns with the strength-based perspective, which emphasizes empowering individuals by recognizing and building upon their strengths.

Lastly, one participants shared her case with one parents where she had to highlight the importance of self-awareness and *personal growth* in parenting. She suggested that difficulties in parent-child relationships

often stem from the parent's inability to understand themselves as adults and as individuals. The emphasis on personal growth and self-resilience during the social worker-client interaction aligns with the idea of encouraging parents to become stronger.

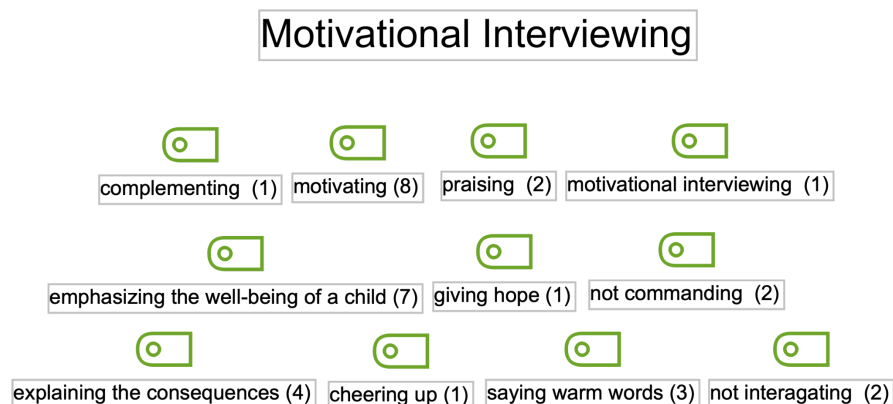
Motivational interviewing: Motivating parents to take a better care of their kids were considered as one of the important communication strategies by the participated social workers. When a parent saw no light or hope, one practitioner found it very helpful to *praise, motivate* and *give hope* to the client.

"... she only saw the problem and the negativity saying 'nothing is working". And during the motivational conversation, I say 'I know that you are good at this and that, maybe if you improve your skills you can start earning money for your kids'". (Social worker 1)

In this exempt, the practice of motivational interviewing was explained as an approach in dealing with a communication challenge in which the parent only perceives the negative aspects of a situation, unable to express enthusiasm. The social worker tried to encourage the parent to use her skills in sewing as solution to their families' financial situation. Another of motivating the parents seemed to be *emphasizing the well-being of a child* that gives reasons for parents to not give up in the face of difficulties. The participants also suggested that when conducting motivational interviewing the professional should be *not commanding* or *not interagating* a client.

"When parents are not following our recommendations, we tend to say 'if you don't attend the meetings, then we'll be forced to inform that to the juvenile affairs inspector. Therefore, it's better if we start take actions now by cooperating together and solve this problem without reaching such consequences'". (Social worker 1)

The social worker is using a combination of accountability and sense of duty to motivate the client to listen to the professional. By explaining the potential consequences of not doing as instructed, such as involving the



child protection officer, the social worker describes this method as a way of motivating the parents to establish rapport with her.

According to other responses by participants, “*cheering up*” and “*saying warm words*” seemed to work as a way of encouraging and motivating parents to believe in themselves and cooperate during the intervention. By acknowledging the parent's strength and resilience, they are validating their abilities and accomplishments. The social workers attempt to foster a sense of hope and optimism, which can further motivate the parent to continue their efforts.

Active listening: This communication pattern was one of the most mentioned during the interviews as the participants were sharing their communication strategies for building a rapport with parents. This behaviour helped many social workers to effectively communicate with families as what most parents wanted was to be heard with no judgement.

“In universities, theory is mainly taught. I am not saying that theory is not important but practices of active listening is very crucial in our work.” (Social worker 2)

The speaker appears to acknowledge the importance of theoretical knowledge while emphasizing the value of practical skills, particularly active listening. Another similar statement emphasizes the importance of broadening one's focus beyond the intervention agenda when visiting families and instead be ready to first actively listen to the specific problems and concerns expressed by the family members. As one social worker also added “*active listening is the most crucial skills in the worker-client communication*”. The behaviour was demonstrated in both verbal and non-verbal ways by the participants, as some of them try to show with attentiveness and follow-up questions to what parents are expressing.

“A mother came, I tried to carefully listen to she was saying. We clarified some things with her, and then I asked a follow-up question, giving advice. She understood what the problem was herself. I reassured her that acknowledging it is already good and said ‘look, you can solve the situation yourself.’” (Social worker 7)

This excerpt demonstrates elements of active listening in the interaction between the social worker and the mother. In this participant's perception, active listening involves fully concentrating on what is being said, understanding the message delivered by the user, and responding thoughtfully with clarifying questions. As another respondent argued if social workers do not showcase their full attention and try to actively listen to what the clients expressing the concern, then the service users might get upset and be uncooperative with the services.

Empathy: This quality was second the most mentioned factor in discussing communication competence in talking to clients.

"So, we also talked about how empathetic a social worker should be, where the boundary lies, where it can be crossed, where it cannot. Sometimes, we take some situations too personally, while others don't take cases with clients to heart." (Social worker 2)

With this response, the social worker admits that empathy is a quality that they keep in mind when attempting to connect with service user. However, as pointed out the nuanced balance that social workers must strike between empathy and maintaining professional boundaries to ensure effective practice.

"And a client should see in me not just a social worker, but perceive me as a person who genuinely wants to help. Communication is indeed about empathy." (Social worker 4)

This statement highlights the importance of empathy in the social worker-client relationship where a service user shouldn't only see the social worker as a professional fulfilling a job role, but as someone who sincerely cares and empathizes with their situation. This illustrates how social workers understand the strategic role of empathy in fostering connection with the client, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of the support provided.

Additionally, choosing which communication strategies to use depends on the living conditions or level of vulnerability of each family. In cases where a parent has a kid with disability or is exposed to domestic violence, some social workers stated that they try to be more compassionate with them and empathetic. While during their weekly visit to parents with newly born children they might not put a lot of emotional investment and become more straightforward in talking to the family.

Overall, most of the participants believed that without the sense and demonstration of empathy, social workers cannot fulfill their duties as helping professionals.

Relationship-building: For most of the participants, effective way of engaging parents in the social worker-client communication was to first form relationship with them. Some of strategies thus involved fostering *mutual understanding* or *favourable environment*. It suggests that people tend to open up more when interacting with individuals who are easy to understand and with whom they share common ground. As shared, the social workers often strive to create a comfortable and supportive environment where clients feel understood and validated.

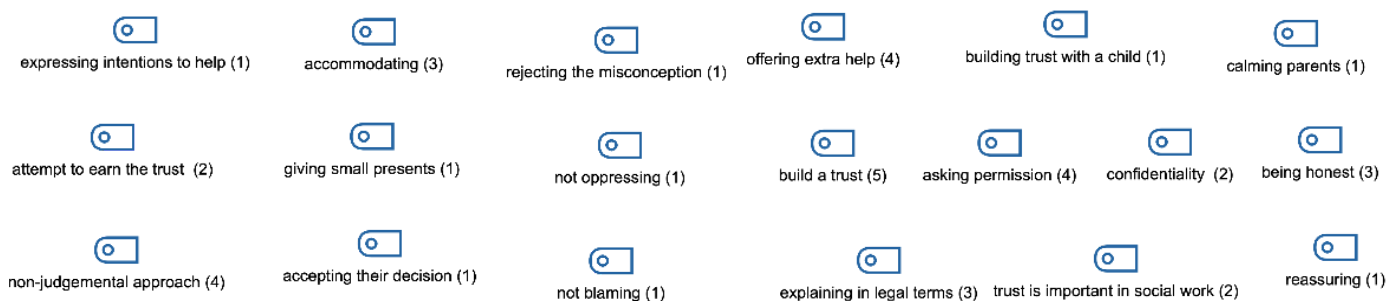
“Yes, and in this regard, it's not about preparing, but simply imagining that you're going to have a conversation with a friend, with someone whose future you care about.” (Social worker 2)

This statement can be considered a relationship-building approach as it encourages social workers to approach their interactions with clients in a manner that fosters connection, empathy, and genuineness to help. The participant further emphasized how it is a common approach in the USA where a social worker can be considered as a friend to a family they are visiting. By *building a partnership* where both parties are on *equal footing*, some statements highlighted the value of mutual respect, cooperation, and shared decision-making.

“I came with a small gift, and the mother is very happy. And this also affects the environment and we have already become a friend, like a member of the family. And over time, you can start asking questions, learning about the past, about the future. And during the conversation, they will open up that you yourself will not even understand how you did it, so to speak.” (Social worker 2)

This suggests that small gestures of kindness and thoughtfulness can go a long way in establishing a connection and building rapport with parents. Furthermore, the responses emphasize the transformative nature of developing a relationship with the family. By becoming a friend and a member of the family, the social worker gains a deeper level of communication and engagement. Another participant also suggests to form *team* and *partnership* where both sides can work and contribute to the intervention efforts equally.

Trust-building approach:



The critical importance of trust in the client-social worker relationship was also mentioned the most as a way of effective communication. Based on the responses, trust was conceptualized as the cornerstone of effective social work practice, facilitating open communication, collaboration, and meaningful engagement between the client and the professional. Some of interviewed social workers tend to consider helping families with

administrative and bureaucratic tasks as way of building trust-based relationship and effective communication. Most importantly, one participant suggests that the intervention won't progress unless trust is established in the communication.

"It is necessary to provide feedback to the client in order to establish this trusting relationship, so that she knows she can write at any time, can call at any time." (Social worker 1)

The statement suggest that being responsive to the requests of clients nurtures trust-based relationship between the worker and service users. According to the respondents, *reassuring* and *rejecting misconceptions* played a crucial role when parents were doubting and had wrong idea about what a social worker actually performs in home-visiting services.

Trust also was established, when participants talked about the *confidentiality* with parents and ensured that personal matters will be kept in secret, unless it is some serious issue harming a kid and parent. Therefore, *being honest* and *expressing intentions to help* were helpful behaviors in the trust-based communication with users. As one participant explained when you are not genuine about your intentions with parents, they feel it and that a professional is very timid so they wouldn't want to open up as well.

Based on the response of one social worker, they tend to encounter families who are very educated and informed thus they might not trust every recommendation given and first will check it for credibility. Consequently, the social worker had to explain the procedure in legal terms and in a very professional way, so that the family could see the specialist who know her work well.

Anti-oppressive and non-judgemental approach were mentioned in the context of trust-based communication strategy.

"...a specialized worker should not look down on their clients and be like 'I'm a specialist, I'm qualified, I have a master's degree or I have 8 years of experience, I know more, you should never do that'". (Social worker 1)

By rejecting superiority attitudes and emphasizing the value of every individual's perspective and experience, social workers can create a more inclusive and collaborative environment. As further discussed, this approach helped the professional to foster trust, cooperation, and effective communication with families involved in the intervention process.

5.3.2. Recommendation for professional development

As one participant highlighted from her experience, the *support from the team* and *interdisciplinary communication* helped her a lot to establish successful professional-client relationship.

“Support can be provided comprehensively when a social worker has some connections work-related ones, that is, getting acquainted with some other specialists from another organization. I was acquainted with the head of the organization's legal department, and I asked him to consult me on how I can help this family in legal terms” (Social worker 1)

This excerpt emphasizes the importance of building relationships and networking in social work practice. The social worker recognizes the value of collaboration and seeks support from other professionals to strengthen their intervention efforts. By leveraging existing connections and reaching out to colleagues from other organizations, the social worker demonstrates initiative and resourcefulness in addressing the needs of their clients.



Some participants stressed out how sometimes their colleagues might not have the intentions to improve their skills, thus arguing that there is a need to recognize *importance of motivation* to work harder on communication strategies. Some social workers tend to not have the desire to be more self-aware about their tactics in talking to families even when they see that the communication is not going through. Nevertheless, as it was pointed out in the interviews, *practical knowledge* and years of experiences can already make a difference in the ways how a social worker communicates easily with parents.

Even as social workers try to improve their communication strategies in talking to clients, there are fundamental factors that needs to be developed in the profession in order to equipped specialists with all the necessary knowledge to thrive in communication.

“Even at a basic level, at my current job, I really like that we have constant training sessions, briefings, panel discussions. We learn something new, something that our, for example, colleague has encountered, couldn't handle this situation, and doesn't know what to do next. In this regard, briefings and panel discussions are very well developed here.” (Social worker 2)

In this passage, the social worker highlights the importance of continuous learning and professional development in the context of social work intervention practices. By actively engaging in training sessions and *fieldtrips*, social workers believe that they can have the opportunity to exchange experience and

knowledge with other colleagues, hence elevate their professional skills in working with diverse group of clients.

Discussion

Based on the analysis of findings, the social workers listed qualities and communication approaches in avoiding and tackling parental resistance towards childcare intervention. As relevant studies argue, the success of home-visiting services depends mainly on the workers' interpersonal skills of demonstrating empathy, genuine care and active listening in building trusted relationships with clients (Hall & Slembrouck, 2009; Dunk-West, 2018; Lishman, 2009). Consequently, the most mentioned contributing aspects of effective communication were the ability to empathetic listening and building trust with the users. By advising against solely sticking to the program the social worker initially came with, the responses suggest that the childcare intervention requires attentiveness to each family's current realities and needs. In the core of their responses, the perspectives from humanistic and person-centered approaches can be identified. Carl Rogers' person-centered perspective suggests building relationships between professionals and their clients, which can be applied in social work practice (Howe, 2009). As participants described, their communication strategies should be about making parents feel understood and heard, thus creating a safe space for interaction. Person-centered approach also suggests that relationship can be built when every client is treated as an individual merely seeking support as fully formed person with his/her own complexities, desires, and potential to deal with challenges (Payne, 2005). As analysed in the findings, the social worker's effort to encourage and support parents with non-judgemental behaviours while acknowledging their struggles and abilities to cope reflects this principle. Consequently, as one of the participants shared, by acknowledging a parent's potential to overcome challenges previously, the specialist could instil confidence in the client to face the present difficulties.

Specifically, strength-based approach described in the interviews can also align with the strength perspectives that dictates helping profession to empower a client by emphasizing his/her strong qualities in handling the difficulties. According to Hepworth et al (2013), the communication strategy directing social work practice should be driven by the principles of social work profession which is to guide a client to navigate through his/her life challenges and find strength to change the situation. As participants themselves acknowledged, social workers tend to work with the negative aspects and weaknesses of families rather than mobilizing the resources and self-resilience of the services user. The strength-based perspectives can give a powerful tool to establish professional-client relationship where both parties try to take advantages of the

critical situation and make positive change (Dunk-West, 2018). One of pillars of Universal Patronage of Home-visiting also states that each parent possesses the capacity to foster healthy development of their child and yet many require assistance to unlock their potential, enabling them to recognize strengths (Babayeva et al, 2018).

Motivating and encouraging parents were discussed by the interviewees in terms of communication strategies in the intervention. Those descriptions of approaches in connecting with parents can be linked with the key principles of motivational interviewing. As participants pointed out, this approach is helpful in cases where behavioral and childcare practices need to be changed by parents. For example, the social workers incorporated various motivational approaches, such as holding clients accountable and fostering a sense of duty, to encourage clients to listen to their guidance and change for the better. Motivational interviewing is utilized in a similar logic where the approach is to effectively engage clients in the intervention, aiming to empower them to explore their inner motivations for change and make decisions aligned with their values and goals (Forrester et al., 2019). In the responses of participants, this motivational approach was used as a way of positive reinforcement and empowerment to encourage the parent to cope in their parenting journey. Moreover, empathy and active listening are also mentioned as the core concepts of motivational interviewing, especially in the context of dealing with resistance (Forrester et al., 2008).

In the interview, building trust was indicated as a crucial factor in social worker-client relationship formation. It was emphasized that trust is not just a pillar, but the foundation of the relationship between social workers and clients. When social workers were asked to share their strategies in successfully interacting with parents, the process of first establishing trustworthy communication was highlighted. For some, reassurance about confidentiality played a crucial role in building trust while communicating with parents as they shared personal struggles. For other participants, offering extra help and unconditional support were key trust-building strategies. Maiter et al. (2006) studied parents' experience with social workers and found that they felt they could trust the workers when they were provided with exceptional help and resources when needed.

Overall, the study by Saar-Heiman (2023) emphasized the importance of empathic and honest communication patterns in the development of trustworthy relationships with parents as a social worker exercises the balanced usage of power. Being aware of the perceived power and an influence of their profession on the worker-client relationship, as well as strategies for dealing with it, could be beneficial for social workers communication competence improvement. Being respectful towards the views and culture within a family, as well as pointing out to the clients their strengths and improvements create a positive

interaction outcomes for childcare intervention practices. However, it's important to take into consideration the suggestions mentioned in the interviews regarding the current state of social work practice where there is a lack of platforms and informational resources for improving communication skills among social workers in Kazakhstan.

6. CONCLUSION

Communication in social work practice with clients requires possessing set of communicative skills, practical knowledge, sensitivity and professionalism. In various relevant studies, the importance of constantly evaluating practitioners' communication competence is emphasized in approaching the specialist-client relationship and creating positive outcomes in an intervention. Talking with parents in childcare intervention brings even more perspectives in examining effective communication in social work. This research focused particularly on exploring communication competence of social worker in Kazakhstan in talking to parents in childcare intervention. The primary data was collected from 7 social workers working in different areas of childcare intervention around the country to understand how they view their communication competence when encountering parents. The data helped to further pursue specific research objectives which are: to examine the modes of communication used in the helping profession, to understand the role of communication in establishing relationship with parents and to identify communication strategies applied in tackling obstacles in childcare-related interactions with parents.

As the analysis on findings explored the modes of communication social workers use in the interaction with parents, it can be concluded that there is an insufficient focus on non-verbal elements of communication. Instead, verbal communication strategies were commonly mentioned such as asking questions to facilitate assessment and starting with proper self-introduction. Explaining the purpose and procedure of the social worker's visit to the family was highlighted as a typical aspect of verbal communication, aiming to ensure mutual understanding and agreement on objectives. Nevertheless, non-verbal communication, often overlooked but crucial, was emphasized in the literature and by participants. Few social workers were mindful of their body language, facial expressions, and appearance, as these can influence perceptions of power dynamics and influence first impression about the professionals. Moreover, the analysis highlighted the importance of avoiding persuasive behavior in verbal communication to prevent stronger resistance from parents. Both verbal and non-verbal communication were identified as

essential components in establishing rapport, addressing concerns of clients, and conveying information comprehensively.

Secondly, the participants emphasized the diverse nature of communication competence, highlighting the importance of personal traits, interpersonal qualities, and professional competence in effective communication. Emotional behaviours such as kindness, calmness, and patience play a significant role in conveying intentions and maintain professional attitude with service users. Social workers recognized the importance of demonstrating confidence, even in times of uncertainty, and being genuine and honest with clients about their abilities to address issues during the conversations. Stress resistance was highlighted as a crucial emotional ability in managing challenging interactions, and ensuring positive outcomes, particularly when clients are with complex demands. According to the literature, these elements in communication skills of the practitioners contribute to the formation of working relationship between a social worker and service users that foster pleasant reactions from both sides.

Furthermore, while studying the role of communication competence in effective social work practice, communication was seen as serving various purposes. Based on the findings, it included gathering information from clients about their family situations, providing information about potential solutions, and empowering clients in efficient decision-making processes for a child. Participants recognized the crucial role of communication in gaining essential perspectives from parents, providing support tailored to each parent's unique needs, and empowering them to make positive changes in their lives. Overall, social workers in Kazakhstan perceive the purpose of communication in social work as establishing meaningful connections with clients for better outcomes of intervention. The study thus was able to align with another research objective by highlighting the unique blend of personal qualities and professional competence that each social worker brings with their communicative skills and their key purposes in achieving positive family outcomes.

To address another research question, the findings shed light on the complexities and challenges social workers face in their interactions with parents during childcare interventions, particularly with parents. One significant barrier identified is the power imbalance evident in social work interactions, where social workers are perceived as authority figures with the power to make significant decisions affecting families' lives. As participants shared, it causes feelings of distrust, resentment, and resistance from parents, making it difficult for social workers to engage them effectively. Social workers thus have to maintain a delicate line between power and support in their interaction with users, frequently without stepping beyond or under-engaging, which complicates communication. Furthermore, obstacles arise from a lack of understanding of social work's actual function and existence of misunderstandings about how the field

operates in Kazakhstan. As participants shared, many parents fear social workers, believing that their primary goal is to separate children from their families. This assumption tends to foster a high level of mistrust, affecting communication outcomes and intervention efficacy. Hence, as secondary studies suggest social workers should aim to use their professional power in a respectful, empowering, and collaborative way rather than controlling or manipulative.

The interview findings further reveal that social workers recognize the role of trust-based relationship with parents on the successful outcome of childcare intervention. Therefore, the instrumental function of communication in establishing such rapport was also indicated as an important causal factor. By exploring strategies for enhancing communication between social workers and parents, it was identified that effective communication is pivotal in addressing and overcoming parental resistance towards childcare interventions. Relevant findings emerged, including the significance of empathetic listening, approaches in building trust, and adopting person-centered and strength-based approaches. Drawing from Rogers' person-centered perspective, social workers aimed to create a safe space for interaction, acknowledging parents as individuals with their own complexities and potential to address challenges. The strength-based approach was discovered as an effective communication strategy for building close professional-user interaction. The core idea of the approach is to empower clients by focusing on their strengths and resilience in dealing with difficulties. By recognizing and cultivating parents' potential, social workers could encourage confidence and support positive transformation. Motivational interviewing approaches were also suggested as helpful ways to engage parents in changing their behavior and childcare practices. This method aims to encourage parents to analyze their true intentions for change and make decisions that are consistent with their beliefs. Empathy and active listening were identified as critical components of motivational interviewing, especially when dealing with resistance and non-cooperative behaviour. Recommendations were made for improving communication skills among social workers, highlighting the need for accessible platforms and informational resources to support professional development in this area, particularly in the context of social work practice in Kazakhstan.

6.1. Recommendations for further studies

This research underscores the critical role of effective communication in social work practice, particularly in childcare interventions with parents, highlighting the importance of ongoing training and support for social workers in Kazakhstan. The analyzed findings suggest that there is a need to establish regular open dialogues where social workers can engage in discussions, share challenges, and exchange insights on effective

communication strategies in Kazakhstan. It will ensure the ongoing yet fast development of the field and its status in the country. Moreover, it is necessary to advocate for continuous professional development opportunities for social workers in Kazakhstan by promoting participation in workshops, seminars, and conferences that focus on communication skills and the unique challenges of childcare interventions. Communication competence of social workers should be addressed by the unified and profound guideline covering all evidence-based findings on the topic and practical implications.

The recommendation for further similar research is to include parents and families' perspectives in defining communication strategies of social workers, ensuring they align with the unique needs and preferences of the families being served. The importance of collaborative engagement and partnership between social workers and families for more effective communication can also be emphasized in the prospective study on Kazakhstan's social work field and improvement of child welfare services. In order to contribute to the abundance of ongoing research and development of best practices in childcare interventions in Kazakhstan, it is recommended to facilitate collaboration between social work professionals, researchers, and institutions in the country.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A. Interview Guide

Dear participant,

I am Maral Nuridin and I am in my second year of studies in Erasmus Mundus Social work with Children and Youth, doing my masters thesis on the topic “Social workers’ communication competence in engaging parents: Childcare intervention in Kazakhstan”. First, I would like to thank you for your support and willingness to participate in this research. Your input and participation during the interview will help to explore to what extent social work is developed in the country, communication skills of social workers in Kazakhstan when engaging families in childcare intervention, and what challenges social workers face in achieving positive outcomes for child and parents. I want to remind you that your participation is voluntary and you have a right to skip some questions or even withdraw from the interview at any time. Nevertheless, your cooperation and openness are very encouraged and will be valued. Your responses will be recorded and reviewed only by the researcher with the purpose of this thesis only. Please, feel free to ask any questions and share your concerns regarding the process during the interview. Thank you once again for youth participation and for dedicating your time!

Please indicate your...

Education:

Current profession:

Where you work currently:

Years of experience working with families in childcare intervention:

1. Can you describe the modes of communication you usually use when you approach parents in childcare intervention context?
 - a. Non-verbal communication: open posture, eye contact, facial expression.
 - b. Verbal communication: voice, tone, asking open/closed questions, reflection, clarification.
 - c. Symbolic communication: Appearance, showing reliability.
2. What do you do to make communication with parents clear and trustworthy?
3. Can you elaborate on specific aspects of communication that you find particularly crucial in your

interactions with parents?

4. Have there been instances where you felt that your communication skills significantly contributed to positive outcomes for the families you worked with?
5. How do you perceive influence of the communication on relationship-building with parents?
6. How do you perceive the influence of the relationship-building with parents on the results of the childcare intervention?
7. Could you provide examples of how you communicate to show warmth, empathy, genuineness and sensitivity in building relationship with parents?
8. What communication skills do you consider to be necessary in establishing relationship with parents?
9. Describe the situation/s where you faced difficulties in communicating with parents regarding childcare intervention?
10. What kind of emotions and/or reactions from parents have you encountered in your experience that challenged your communication competence? For example, any resistance and disbelief from parents?
11. Have you considered your profession's power as an obstacle in communication with parents? If yes, how do you attempt to make the balance between your professional power and supportive role in communication with parents?
12. Do you have specific communication strategies to address these complex feelings by parents and reassure that you are here to listen and help?
13. What is your approach in assuring parents that they are capable of solving their problem?
14. What do you think is there to improve the communication competence of social workers in Kazakhstan?

Appendix B. Declaration of informed consent for fieldwork

Informed consent

The following is a presentation of how I will use the data collected in the interview.

In order to ensure that projects meet the ethical requirements for good research I promise to adhere to the following principles:

- Interviewees in the project will be given information about the purpose of the project.
- Interviewees have the right to decide whether they will participate in the project, even after the interview has been concluded.
- The collected data will be handled confidentially and will be kept in such a way that no unauthorized person can view or access it.

The interview will be recorded as this makes it easier for me to document what is said during the interview and helps me in the continuing work with the project. In my analysis, some data may be changed so that no interviewee will be recognized. After finishing the project, the data will be destroyed. The data I collect will only be used in this project.

You have the right to decline answering any questions or terminate the interview without giving an explanation.

You are welcome to contact me or my supervisor in case you have any questions (e-mail addresses below).

Student: Maral Nuridin
manuridin@stud.mruni.eu

Supervisor: Maria João Pena
Maria_Joao_Pena@iscte-iul.pt

Interviewee

Appendix C. Non-plagiarism declaration

Submitted to the Erasmus Mundus Master's Programme in Social Work with Child and Youth:

- Has not been submitted to any other Institute/University/College
- Contains proper references and citations for other scholarly work
- Contains proper citation and references from my own prior scholarly work
- Has listed all citations in a list of references.

I am aware that violation of this code of conduct is regarded as an attempt to plagiarize and will result in a failing grade in the programme.

Date: 17/05/2024

Signature: 

Name: MARAL NURIDIN