



'Working with vulnerable children': Listening to the views of the service providers working with street children in Istanbul

H. Özden Bademci *

University of Kent, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 September 2011

Received in revised form 17 December 2011

Accepted 24 December 2011

Available online 4 January 2012

Keywords:

Street children

Service provision

Service providers

State welfare organisations

ABSTRACT

As in other developing countries with major metropolises, 'street children' have constituted one of the most important problems in Turkey, particularly in Istanbul, over the last two decades. The General Directorate of Social Services and the Child Protection Agency (SHÇEK) is the state agency responsible for street children and their protection. The purpose of the study is to explore the nature and organisation of state welfare service provision for street children in Istanbul and to develop a conceptual framework of state welfare service provision for street children in Istanbul from the service providers' point of view.

While the street children phenomenon is well documented in other national contexts, and has been approached as a socio-economic problem on both the micro and macro levels in the local literature, the field of service provision for street children in Turkey has been little investigated up to now. For this study, narrative interviews were utilised to collect qualitative data on the services for street children. The research sought the participation of all service providers, ranging from senior management and front-line workers through to the support staff employed by the SHÇEK centres. The approach taken has been richly rewarded by the data amassed on the organisational culture and shortcomings of these units. This not only supports the results of similar research globally, but also provides a useful alternative explanation of the persistence of the street children problems of Istanbul.

The most important result of the research is the demonstration that service provision cannot be assessed without the direct investigation of service providers because the service providers themselves determine the scope and the quality of the service provision. The research demonstrates that SHÇEK reproduces its own marginalisation in society, and consequently that of its employees, in a way that ultimately ensures the re-marginalisation of the service users.

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1. Introduction

As in all the metropolises of developing countries over the last two decades, one of the most important social problems in Turkey, and particularly in Istanbul, has been the street children phenomenon (Duyan, 2005).

In Turkey, the core agency responsible for the protection of street children is a state agency, the General Directorate of Social Services and Child Protection Agency (hereafter SHÇEK). SHÇEK, being a government agency and by the nature of the service it gives, is one of the state organisations which is closed to public access. Information about its services is received by the public only through the often very critical and negative comments in the media, and this can be said to stem from there having been no comprehensive study on SHÇEK's service provision to street children.

The literature on Turkish street children is mostly related either to demography, emphasising structural causes like the macroeconomic problems behind the emergence of this social phenomenon, and/or to wide-ranging studies of service models for street children at a treatment level. The voice of the front-line workers on the ground level has been neglected, and therefore the majority of research has not incorporated the experience and educational background of those most directly involved in providing the services (Kidd, Miner, Walker, & Davidson, 2007).

To redress this omission, this paper focuses mainly on the 'state welfare service' given to the street children of Istanbul by SHÇEK. It examines the nature and organisation of state welfare service provision for street children in Istanbul in order to identify the factors facilitating and/or impeding service delivery, and the nature of the links between policy and practice, by specifically engaging with the service providers. Thus, it develops a deeper understanding of the position of the front-line workers in service provision, and examines how this affects the quality of care they deliver. The findings have been formulated so as to develop a conceptual framework which describes state welfare service provision from its service providers' point of view.

* T.C. Maltepe University, 2010 Marmara Education Village 34857 Maltepe - ISTANBUL
Tel.: +90 216 626 10 50x2245/2212.

E-mail address: ozdenbademci@hotmail.com.

2. The phenomenon of street children in Turkey

A review of the global literature reveals the common features of street children being that they come from lower socio-economic strata and have unfavourable family histories (Altanis & Goddard, 2004; Aptekar, 1988, 1990, 1994; Grundling & Grundling, 2005; Le Roux & Smith, 1998; Lusk, 1992; Lusk, Peralta, & Vest, 1989; Moura, 2002; West, 2003).

In Turkey, the term 'street children' refers to both those working and/or living in the streets. Children working on the street can be classified into two groups: the first group work on the street during the day, sometimes during the evening and night, but finally go home to stay with their family, whereas the second group come mainly from disintegrated families and both work and live in the streets. Akşit, Karancı, and Gündüz-Hoşgör (2001) have written that the majority of children working in the streets in Turkey belong to the first group and are involved in selling small seasonal items, for example: napkins, chewing gum, water, nuts, ballpoint pens, etc.

The origin of the street children phenomenon in Turkey is linked to wider issues of internal migration and social change (Keyder, 2005), which Turkish society has experienced to a very significant degree since 1980 due to the impacts of the processes of globalisation on social affairs (Keyman & Koyuncu, 2005). Deteriorating economic conditions, growing poverty, increased unemployment and a widening economic gap between the rich and the poor have further intensified the discontent in the economically disadvantaged strata, and particularly among rural migrants in the city. Istanbul is not only the largest but also the most industrialised city in Turkey, and it therefore attracts many migrants from all over the country, most especially from the eastern and south-eastern regions (Erman, 2001).

The global literature reveals that street children elsewhere tend to be highly mobile and often move fluidly back and forth from street life to home life, so that it is very difficult to arrive at a reliable number of how many street children there are in the large urban centres (West, 2003). This also reflects the situation in Turkey. SHÇEK, for example, cannot provide any statistical information on the number of the children working in the streets. There are also big discrepancies in the reported numbers of children living in the streets of Istanbul. While SHÇEK claims that there are only 70–100 children living in the streets, other sources present a completely different picture. Doğru, Celkan, and Demir (2007) reported that the number of children living in the streets of Istanbul was thought to be about 1500–2000, with the counts rising daily.

3. Organisational culture: human services organisation

In exploring the service provision for street children, we will first examine the general organisational perspective in an effort to better analyse the dynamics of SHÇEK.

Studying the functioning of an organisation has been approached from three broad perspectives, including the individual, the organisation together with its form, and the systems and interactions within the organisation (Handy, 1985). However, one has to bear in mind that such division can lead to isolation, and that these three perspectives obviously affect one another. For this reason, in thinking about organisations, 'the culture concept' (Wright, 1994) is very useful since the term refers to the 'formal' organisational values and practices imposed by management as well as the 'informal' organisational values, that is, how people in an organisation think, feel, value, act and are guided by ideas, meanings and beliefs of a cultural nature. As Alvesson (2002) put it, organisational culture is one of the major issues in organisation theory as well as management practice. For him, a cultural focus offers an inspirational and potentially creative way of understanding organisations.

Organisational culture refers to diverse problems, ideas and styles of organising (Wright, 1994). Organisational culture combines both

'formal' and 'informal' organisational values which determine the quality of care delivered (Alvesson, 2002). These 'informal' organisational values are guided by ideas, meanings and beliefs of a cultural nature. Exploring the emotional life of the organisation in particular (Gibson & Swartz, 2000), provides insight into the feelings experienced by workers. It has been argued that to neglect group emotions by focusing exclusively on instrumental tasks is likely to prove ineffective and costly. Instrumental tasks and organisational emotions must be kept in a close relationship to one another. Anger, frustration, envy, fear, contempt, resentment, grief and desire are some of the many emotions that direct organisational life, so it is useful to think of the existence of an emotional culture (Hoggett & Miller, 2000).

As the present study mainly focused on the organisation of state welfare service provision for street children in Istanbul by assessing how staff views and attitudes affect the quality of services provided to this group of service users, in this paper 'the culture concept' refers to the informal 'concepts, attitudes and values' of a workforce. However, to avoid the risk of psychological reductionism, the study also pays attention to the structural factors of the organisational culture in SHÇEK.

3.1. Services for street children in Istanbul

In Istanbul, there are governmental and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working with street children. Some of the NGOs active in Turkey are weak and fragmented. Provincial governments and municipalities also take part in fighting the worst forms of child labour. The core agency however is SHÇEK, a state agency responsible for street children and their protection. When children are without parents or have dropped out of school and are living or working in the street, SHÇEK is responsible for his or her protection.

The two main aspects of service provision to street children by SHÇEK consist of street work and residential care. Street work is literally removing those children who are working and/or living off the streets and then bringing them to a SHÇEK centre. If the children are only working, then they are united with their families. If a child has a loose, impermanent or non-existent connection with his/her family, or if the family is judged to be unsuitable or unsafe for the child to return to, then the child is referred to a suitable SHÇEK centre, according to his/her needs.

Eight of the SHÇEK units in Istanbul are called "Child and Youth Centres" and provide services for a total of 250–300 children in Istanbul. Child and Youth Centres are the boarding or day-care social service units which were opened in order to serve children who live and work in the streets. They work with an 'open door' system, and a child is not forced to stay against his/her will. In addition, there is a ninth SHÇEK unit especially established for children who are in conflict with the law. Children below the age of 15 are sent to this unit. However, most of the children here have street experience and are at risk of getting involved in crime.

In terms of procedure, SHÇEK's care for the street children is organised into three phases, consisting of first, second and third step stations. The first step stations are temporary housing for the children to meet immediate needs like bathing and nourishment. If the children are convinced of the suitability of the services, they go to the second step stations where the rehabilitation process starts. These are also temporary accommodation sites for the children, the aim being to encourage the children to proceed to the third step stations where they can go to school and stay permanently until the age of 18, though on the condition that they not engage in any kind of substance abuse. The eight SHÇEK units in Istanbul for street children consist of, for boys, two first step stations, two second step stations and one third step station, and, for girls, a first step station, a second step station and a third step station.

SHÇEK also has mobile teams affiliated to the units, bringing together social workers, psychologists and teachers who are on call round the clock to reach the 'hot-spots' where street children gather.

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