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### Current Situation of Staff Providing Social Work Services to Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Vietnam

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#### Abstract

Autism spectrum disorder is a common syndrome in many countries around the world. According to the General Statistics Office (2018), Vietnam has about one million autistic people (out of a total of 6.2 million people with disabilities aged two years and over). The estimated prevalence of children with autism spectrum disorder is 1% of all newborns. To meet the need for assisting families and children with an autistic spectrum disorder, social work services have been established. However, these services are in the process of being built and are affected by many different factors. The following article presents research results on the status of social work service providers for families and children with an autism spectrum disorder in Vietnam. Service providers are important players in the service supply chain for any group of customers. They will contribute decisively to the quality and efficiency of service. The staff relies on their capabilities to create quality services suitable for each customer group. The study's results provide important suggestions for improving the quality of human resources in implementing social work service models for families and children with autism spectrum disorder.

**Keywords:** Social work services, social workers, families of children with autism spectrum disorder, children with autism spectrum disorder.

#### Introduction

Models of care, intervention, and support for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and their families in the world are moving towards a holistic approach that emphasizes the role of social work services covered by the contents of Prevention, Intervention, Recovery, and Development Program for Children with ASD and their families. Research in several countries worldwide has shown that social work services improve the effectiveness of the intervention, treatment, and method of solving complex problems for families and children (*Dymond et al. 2007, Hoagwood et al. 2001*). However, studies on social work services in the field of children and families in Vietnam are still lacking. Research in the field of children with autism spectrum disorder often focuses on interventions and integration for children, or on a few separate social work services for families of children with ASD. There has not been yet any scientific investigation that generally deals with social work services for families and children with autism (*Tran Van Cong et al. 2017, Tran Huu, Doan Minh Tuan 2012, and Nguyen Hai Huu 2016*).

On the other hand, it is necessary to have practical studies on the situation of social work service providers for families and children of ASD to develop strategies and specific solutions to improve the effectiveness of social work services for children with autism and their families. But how and to what extent is the current situation of social services in supporting families and children? What factors affect the quality of social work services? These are still questions that need more research to answer. In studying social work services for families and children with social workers, it is essential to learn about the staff providing services, specifically social workers. In the components of social work (Subjects of social work, Problems of objects, Social agencies, and Problem-solving processes), social workers participate in social agencies and problem-solving approaches. The social worker is mentioned: *"Persons who provide services or implement social assistance programs... They are trained people with professional knowledge and skills."* (Bui Thi Xuan Mai, 2014, p 99). This study describes the situation of social work service providers in several public and non-public centers in five provinces/cities, including Yen Bai, Bac Giang, Bac Ninh, Hanoi, and Nghe An, thereby giving an overview of their significant features such as age, gender, qualifications, training majors, and work experience. In addition, the results of in-depth interviews with leaders and service providers to analyze the factors affecting the effectiveness of social work services approached from the capacity factor of the staff. This is the information base to make recommendations on support activities for service providers, thereby improving the effectiveness of social work services in the field of autism spectrum disorder.

## Research Methodology

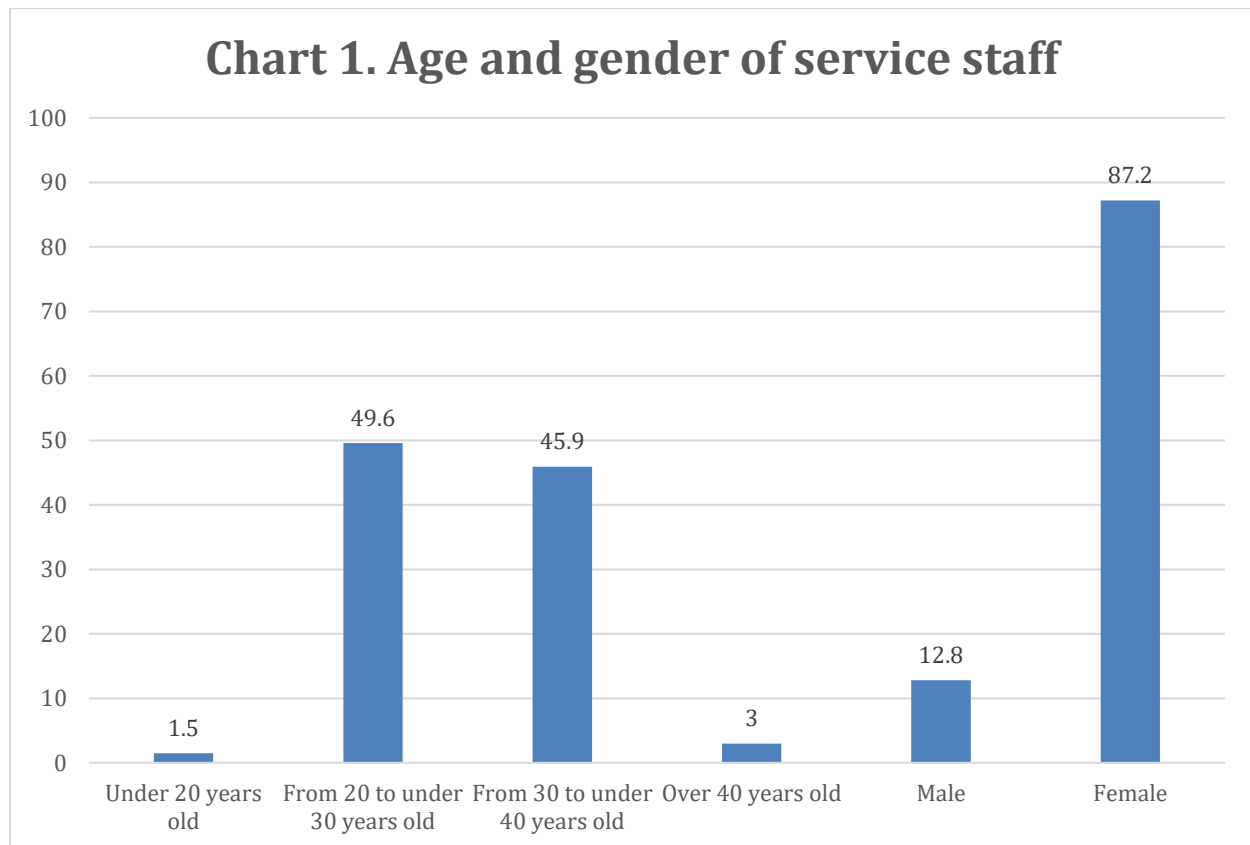
The study surveyed social work service providers at 15 public and non-public establishments in five areas: Yen Bai, Bac Giang, Bac Ninh, Hanoi, and Nghe An. There was 133 staff selected to participate in this study with the method of selecting samples as snowballs, and current job positions are employees who directly provide services to families and children with an autism spectrum disorder. The questionnaire focused on issues related to the interviewee's personal information such as gender, age, qualifications, training major, and work experience. From there, some discussions were made about how to improve the quality of service delivery for children and families through creating working conditions and how to upgrade the qualifications of the staff at service providers.

## Key findings of the study

The main findings of this study focus on the critical content, which is the situation of social work service providers in the public and non-public centres. This situation includes information such as age, qualifications, training majors, and work experience. From there, there is some discussion about improving the quality of service delivery for children and families through creating working conditions and improving the qualifications of the staff at service providers.

### *Age and gender of service staff*

When conducting research on social work service providers for families and children with autism spectrum disorder, the results of the demographic survey show that there is a gender disparity in this staff: the proportion of women accounted for 12.8% and men accounted for 87.2%. This is explained on a number of bases as follows: First, the staff working in the field of autism spectrum disorders are bachelors in psychology, pedagogy, special education, and social work. This is a female-dominated sector. Therefore, this is the reason why there is a gender disparity in the service staff. In addition, due to gender characteristics, women often have advantages in working with children with autism spectrum disorder, which are traits such as caring, sensitive, sweet, often encouraging, gentle, warm, affectionate, gentle, emotional, emotional, devoted and understanding (Braggin 1982, Burke 2009, Kite 2001, Worell 2001). These are essential qualities for social work activities.

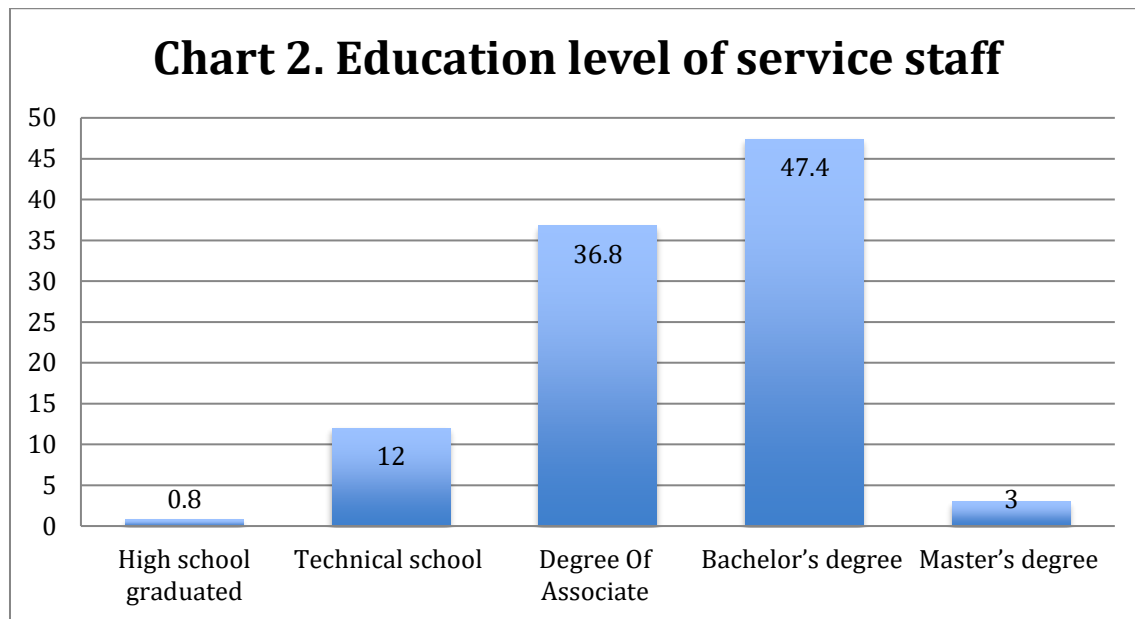


Regarding the age of the staff, currently the number of young cadres from 20 to under 30 years old accounts for the highest proportion (49.6%), cadres from 30 to under 40 years old account for 45.9%, cadres over 40 years old with a rate of 3%. This is strength of the social service staff. Young staff will be human resources that quickly absorb new knowledge and new technologies in the working process, adapt easily to different conditions and circumstances, and have abundant health. Besides, the staff from 30-40 years old is also expected to be a human resource with rich working experience. This will be an additional resource besides the young staff. These two forces will complement each other's support in the work process, contributing to the effectiveness of providing the best services for families and children with an autism spectrum disorder.

### ***Professional qualifications***

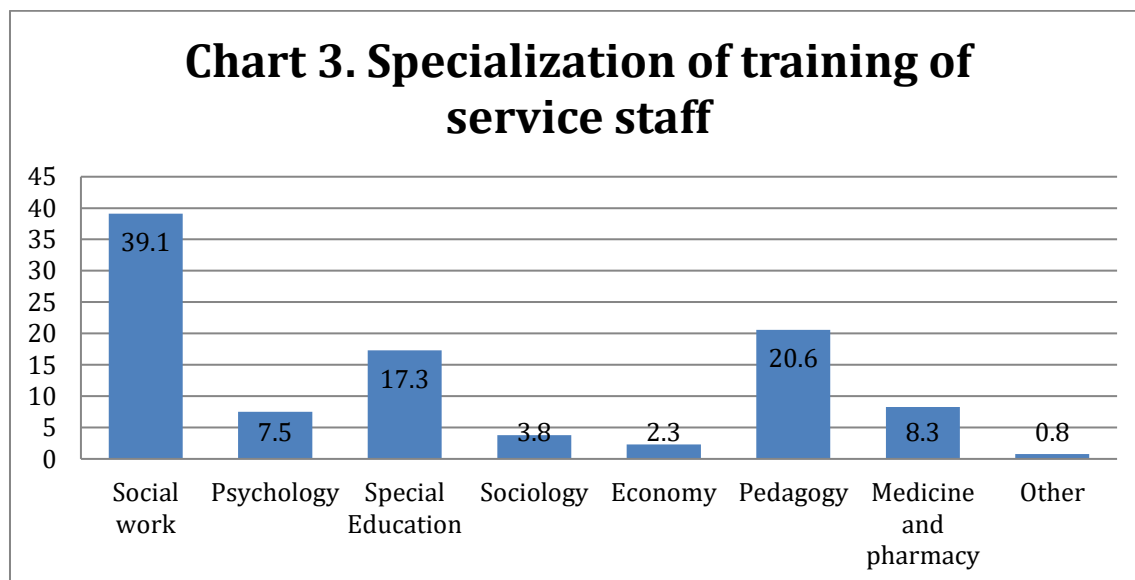
The survey revealed that the percentage of employees with a bachelor's degree from was the highest (47.7%), while the percentage of social workers with a master's degree was the lowest (3%). Thus, the human resources are quite high quality. Other qualifications such as graduation from high school, technical school, and college accounted for a total proportion of 50%, of which the lowest were those who graduated from high school (0.8%) (Cf. Fig. 2). With a high proportion of staff with university degrees or higher, it is a positive signal that the staff and the institutions have planned and invested in capacity development for the staff through recruitment and creating conditions for them to participate in capacity building courses. A high level of expertise is one factor that ensures the quality of staff in the provision of services.

With a team of service providers with education, mainly college and university bachelors (accounting for 84.2%), this is the foundation to provide intensive training in the field of autism through short-term and long-term training courses to improve the quality of service delivery. Methods to improve and update knowledge and skills for intensive social work fields through specialized training courses are also being used and brought effectively in many areas in many countries around the world, for example, social work in the field of disability, drug rehabilitation, and judicial assistance.



### *Specialized training of service staff*

One of the issues assessed through previous summary reports related to the field of social work is the limitation of the right qualifications of the staff. The reason is that the new social work was officially recognized in 2010. When establishments switch functions to perform social work activities and services due to limited staffing, it is difficult for establishments to recruit new ones. Thus, staff needs to recruit from other departments whose professional qualifications are not following the field of social work. This problem has been recently overcome due to the awareness of expertise in this area. Therefore, non-public and public institutions have paid more attention to the issue of recruitment, emphasizing people with degrees in social work. Specific results showed that the number of staff with specialized degrees in social work accounted for the most significant proportion (39.1%).

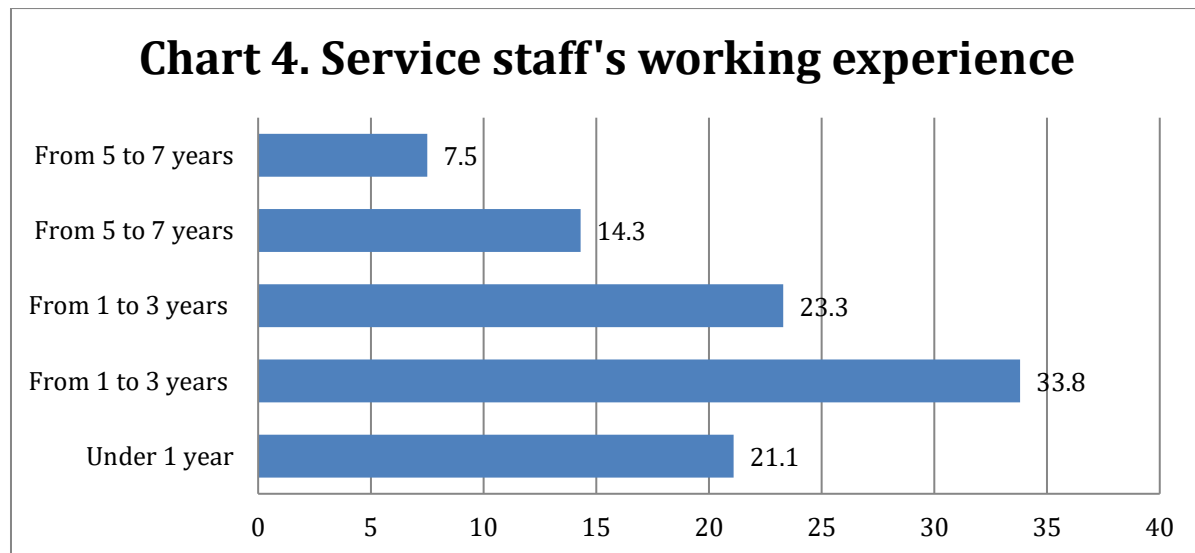


According to the survey results, the training majors of staff providing services to families and children with ASD are mainly graduates from training disciplines such as social work, special education, psychology, delinquency, medicine, and other majors. Except for particular education majors with modules directly related to the field of children with ASD, the rest of the majors do not have these modules (Nguyen Phuong Anh, Nguyen Thi Thai Lan, 2022). Therefore, the lack of well-trained knowledge at the professional level is one of the main factors that make the professional knowledge

base while working with families and children with ASD service providers unable to meet the functional needs fully. Regarding the framework of social work training programs at universities and institutes (15 institutions), the sections related to social work in the autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are almost absent. Among the 15 training institutions, only one has a module directly connected to ASD, which is the early intervention subject for children with ASD (Nguyen Phuong Anh, Nguyen Thi Thai Lan, 2022).

### **Work experience with children affected by autism spectrum disorders**

Work experience will have a direct impact on service delivery efficiency. When asked how they evaluate the relationship between their experience and work efficiency, this is the general opinion of employees. Work experience in children with autism spectrum disorder is measured by the time the officer performs work related to the child with ASD and their family, as well as working with the community on ASD. The work directly provides services to families and children with ASD and the community. For children with ASD are the following services: early intervention, autism screening/ diagnosis, intervention/therapy, community integration, case management, and rehabilitation. For young families with ASD, these are the following services: prevention, psychological counseling, resource mobilization, advocacy, policy counseling, and counseling/ knowledge level. Some specific services for the community include propaganda, raising awareness and mobilizing resources.



The results show that the work experience of the staff providing services in this field is one of the important limitations. The number of employees with work experience of less than one year accounted for 21.1%. Staff with work experience from 1 to 3 years accounted for the highest proportion (33.8%). In particular, the number of employees with work experience of 5-7 years or more than seven years accounts for a tiny proportion, at 14.3% and 7.5%, respectively. The lack of experience especially in the field of interventions supporting children with autism spectrum disorder is a limitation in ensuring the quality of services. However, that is the reality because working in this field faces many challenges and requires patience and dedication to the profession. When interviewing in-depth some center leaders about the fact that the years of experience of service providers are few, mainly less than five years, there are some reasons given that the staff often have to be replaced because they are less engaged with the profession, especially for non-public centers. The reason for this situation is that working with this group of service providers is often under a lot of pressure: pressure from the family about the child's progress, stress fatigue, and even health effects/injuries during work because of some typical characteristics of ASD children: yelling, eating when not being met, even smashing furniture, causing injury to oneself and others (Nguyen Sinh Phuc et al., 2017). In addition, according to this study's results, the staff's income is also relatively low, below 5 million VND, accounting for 14.3%, from 5 million to less than 10 million VND, accounting for 60.9%. Low income, not enough to cover life, is the factor that makes it difficult for employees to stick with the profession. The survey results also show that the fewer years

of experience, the lower the salary. When asked about the difficulties affecting service providers, up to 41.6% of people choose the low-income factor which is not enough to cover their lives.

## Discussion

The study's results have shown that the services staffs have met the requirements of qualifications and training majors. In addition, age and work experience have certain advantages for providing services in the field of autism spectrum disorder in Vietnam today. However, this staff also has some areas that need to change to meet the needs of children and families better. From the situation of social worker services for families and children with ASD described through the main findings of the study on 133 samples above, some recommendations can be made on strengthening staff development to ensure the highest efficiency of the services provided to the beneficiaries in the field of autism spectrum disorders. The first for training institutions is to develop an interest in training social workers in the field of autism spectrum disorder, thereby providing a team of qualified human resources that meet the needs and characteristics of the subject. As analyzed above, according to the survey results, the training majors of staff providing services to families and children with ASD are mainly graduates from training disciplines such as social work, psychology, sociology, and special education. Except for special education majors with modules directly related to the field of children with ASD (*Early intervention of children with autism spectrum disorder*, *Life skills education of children with autism spectrum disorder*, *Development of communicative language for children with autism spectrum disorder*) the rest of the majors do not have these modules (Nguyen Phuong Anh, Nguyen Thi Thai Lan, 2022). Therefore, the lack of well-trained knowledge at the professional level is one of the main factors that make the professional knowledge base while working with families and children with ASD service providers unable to meet the working needs. Thus, to improve the staff's knowledge, we need to pay attention and develop a system of appropriate training institutions. After that, human resources in this field will be better ensured. This can be done through two forms: the development of professional training programs at the university level, and the development of intensive training courses in the field of autism spectrum disorder.

Secondly, for service providers, it is necessary to have a plan to train, foster, and improve the qualifications of staff working through the topics of in-depth knowledge of each type of service, working skills, and coping with stress, thereby contributing to improving the ability to adapt to the work of the staff directly providing services. A scarcity of experienced workers can be caused when individuals quit their positions for an extended time because they cannot overcome difficulties and challenges. Professional work skills are the driving factor for the job success of any profession. Working with families and children with ASD is also of great interest because this is a group of clients with many unique characteristics and the problems they face are also very diverse. However, it is currently observed that service providers are quite focused and doing well in specific skills in children's education, while skills to work with young families and communities are still weak. This is the reason why they encounter difficulties in the process of working with their families and communities. Some skill groups that are quite specific to families and children with ASD are mentioned in the process of working with the family, such as: listening, observing, asking questions, responding, handling crises, or skills working with the community: building networks, mobilizing resources, coordination (Nguyen Trung Hai et al., 2017). However, implementing these skills is still very limited because, as mentioned above, there are many reasons for this situation. First, the field of ASD children has not been well trained, so the access, learning, and practice of these skills are not much. Second, when it comes to families affected by ASD, the community only cares about children, and then often ignores the family as an important factor in raising and changing the child's condition. So all the hard pressure falls on the service providers and families expecting and leaving the children at the center. If the results are not as desired, they pressure the staff to provide services and centers. This seems to be a circle of corollary issues where the person trapped is the service provider. Because of the lack of skills to work with young families, the effectiveness of service delivery is often affected. Thus, making the family understand and accept their child's problems is also a job that requires the skills to work with the young family, thereby improving the efficiency of service delivery and bringing the best benefits to children and families.



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