

POSSIBILITIES AND OBSTACLES IN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK OF SELECTED SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN THE NITRA REGION

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Abstract

In the Slovak school system currently, there is a job position of assistant. His task is to assist pupils with various types of learning disabilities, such as ADHD, etc. However, research shows that, in addition to the increasing numbers of learners with learning disabilities, the number of pupils growing up in social pathological environments has been increasing too. The environment significantly influences pupils' ability to meet school responsibilities, but also to adapt to the social environment. Our assumption is that the social worker understands the mechanisms of the impact of the social environment on an individual, knows the dynamism of small and large social groups and organizations, knows the risks and potentials of social relationships, has knowledge on the aetiology of risks in children and young people, especially the negative social factors. He can reliably assess the effects of a given social environment on an individual. The social worker has methods to influence the environment by social mechanisms – for example, by developing a positive peer culture, stimulating open two-way communication, developing community principles, and collaborating with families and social networks. These can be achieved through group work, intertwining the out-of-school environment and school system, the out-of-school activities, and working with a school as a social system. Based on the research study that we conducted in 2018, we show current and acute problems in the school system, and we also define specific changes that research has shown to be the most effective in eliminating problems related to the social environment. We specify the risk tendencies that can develop in schools due to the absence of interventions by social workers as well as the obstacles that prevent social workers from entering the school system.

Keywords: Social work, Secondary schools, Nitra Region.

1 INTRODUCTION

The issue of the scientific description of the current social work in the school environment is a narrowly specific problem, which, however, draws attention of both the professional and lay public. One of the key factors in the process of professionalization of school social work abroad is research in the field. It contributed essentially to the implementation of school social work in many countries where school social workers are an indispensable part of educational institutions. "Social work as a social institution reflected the current challenges and demands of the time in which it evolved. The need for school social work has already been present since the beginning of the previous century and has not changed for more than a century. Only the objective and interventions based on the political and societal contexts have been changing" [1] (translated by the study authors). Despite many obstacles, it retains an indispensable position and is generally accepted in the society. This acceptance is also supported by the presence of religious values in the society as well as the strong and linking of the religious and social contexts [2].

In 1999, the experts in Slovakia stated the legitimacy of a social worker in the school environment, because they considered the social worker to be an expert on the social environment. "He understands the mechanisms of the impact of the social environment on an individual, knows the dynamism of small and large social groups and organisations, knows the risks and potential of social relationships, and has knowledge on the aetiology of risks in children and young people, especially the negative social factors. He can reliably assess the effects of a given social environment on an individual. The social worker has methods to influence the environment by social mechanisms – for example, by developing a positive peer culture, stimulating open two-way communication, developing community principles, and collaborating with families and social networks. All this can be achieved through group work, intertwining the out-of-school environment and school system, the out-of-school activities, and working with school as a social system" [3] (translated by the study authors). He can

also create the environment of cooperation of the social with communities which are of a religious character and focus on social work, charity and social inclusion [4].

Only in 2006, we can talk about early school social work in Slovak schools. That year, through the project The School Social Work implemented by the town of Považská Bystrica, there was one school social worker at two primary schools. Furthermore, there was a social worker at the grammar school in Trnava. Later, for a short period of time, there were school social workers at schools in Nová Dubnica, Ilava and Svinná [5].

However, those positions were abolished. According to Lengyel [6], one of the main causes was the legislative amendment of the School Act in 2008 by which the position of social pedagogue was included in professional staff. School social workers were not included in the legislative amendment despite the initiative by the professional public. In Slovakia, there is currently no information about school social workers in any school. Despite the situation, the professional public has been putting efforts into the implementation of social work in the school environment. Therefore, it is necessary to attempt to scientifically support the practice of social workers at schools, and thus accelerate the process of accepting those worker. On the basis of the scientific results, it is necessary to prepare materials for future changes and legislative amendments which may entitle social workers to work at various types of schools in the Slovak Republic. These proposals will also be for schools dominated by a religious element in teaching [7].

One of the conditions for the successful implementation of school social work in Slovakia is the readiness of the education system and society to reflect the changing needs of children and young people, and to respond to these changes. Such readiness was one of the central aspects present during the formation and successful implementation of school social work abroad [8].

At present, social workers are perceived internationally as trained professionals who provide services related to personal, social and emotional coping with life challenges in an individual – a pupil in school and society. They connect the home environment, the school environment and the community. They support pupils and their successful management of stressful situations affecting the learning process. School social work is perceived as a specialised area of social work practice which can be performed after successful completion of further education. Competent social workers are able to provide unique knowledge and skills in the school environment. The services they provide can be divided into several levels of action which, however, may overlap in school practice with the competencies of other professionals:

Services provided to students – provision of crisis interventions; development of intervention strategies leading to school success; assistance in resolving conflicts and coping with anger; assistance to pupils in development of appropriate skills in the area of social interaction; and assistance to pupils in understanding and accepting themselves and others.

Services provided to parents and families – working with parents to facilitate their support provided to a child for successful adaptation to the school environment; alleviation of family stress; promotion of more effective functioning of pupils in school and community; assistance to parents towards the seamless access to useful programmes and services for pupils with special educational needs; and support for parents in active seeking and use of available services.

Services provided to pedagogical and professional staff – provision of basic information to school staff for better understanding of the cultural, economic, social, family, health and other factors related to pupils' performance and behaviour in the school environment; provision of expert advice on evaluating disabled students; and organisation and implementation of staff training programmes.

Services provided to the community – networking of organisations and experts, and mediation of contacts and services to pupils, families and school staff; and coordination of comprehensive support of the system to meet the needs of pupils and solve their problem situations.

Services to the general public – based on their experience and knowledge, they participate in preparation and implementation of training programmes for future school social workers and school staff. They fulfil their detecting and reporting obligations in case of suspicion or conviction and unlawful conduct – in cases of bullying, abuse, neglect, etc. In the school environment, they carry out research activities and provide the professional public with the findings.

They provide all the above stated services as part of administrative and coordination activities on the basis of observations and diagnosis; on the basis of the elaborated individual plans or preventive intervention plans and programmes, work methodologies; on the basis of their participation in teachers

and managers' meetings (e.g. school meetings, interviews), meetings with parents and other experts; on the basis of the established contacts and search for other experts whose services could be useful in meeting the objectives and tasks of social workers; and on the basis of permanent self-education (SSWAA, 2018).

2 METHODOLOGY

We focused the research problem on secondary schools and formulated it as follows: What are the possibilities for school social work in secondary schools in Slovakia? For the purposes of the paper, we focus on the results of our research which show the current negative effects of the absence of professional staff in schools, and also the obstacles which do not allow school managers to employ professional staff.

The sample consisted of the staff managers of the secondary schools, i.e. the head teachers and deputy head teachers of the secondary schools in the Nitra Region. We limited the research territorially on the basis of the sample size. In the Nitra Region, there are currently 87 secondary schools whose founder is the Nitra Self-Governing Region. We decided for these respondents because the head teachers and deputy head teachers conduct and are present at interviews with pupils and their parents. Furthermore, the key inclusion criterion was the fact that they are competent to include social workers and other professional staff in the school environment. Based on our research results, we argue that the future implementation of school social work in our conditions depends to a certain extent on their beliefs and initiatives. The managers from 16 secondary vocational schools participated in the research study. We used a qualitative research design and collected the data with the use of semi-structured interviews in 2018. We analysed the obtained data by open coding. On the basis of the preliminary results, where roughly one quarter of all secondary vocational schools in the Nitra Region had been involved, we found partial results. We state some of them.

3 RESULTS

Table 1 Acute problems related to the functioning of schools

<i>Semantic units</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>N =</i>
Merging classes for lack of funding; reducing standards and requirements for pupils as a result of a battle for students; schools accept all, regardless of their academic abilities; financial and labour insecurity of the school staff; inadequate material facilities of schools; dilapidated school buildings; un realistic possibility to employ professional staff;	Acute lack of funding	12
Lacking interest to tackle the educational problems of pupils in primary schools; useless Year 9 at primary schools; pupils' knowledge from primary school is not consolidated; admission tests at secondary schools are not motivation for pupils; the respondents' doubts about the compatibility of the curriculum with the possibilities and abilities of pupils to manage them; the necessity to reduce requirements for pupils when they start to study at secondary school; the amount of knowledge that pupils are able to acquire decreases;	The issue of primary schools	14
After pointing out errors in the administration of secondary schools, individual schools are sanctioned by the Self-Governing Region; threats of cutting the budget if the unrealistic conditions, such as to professionally teach the subjects of Education to Citizenship, Ethics, History and others, are not met; the Self-Governing Region does not provide space for schools to express their views, comments on planned changes, and name their specific needs;	Non-functioning relations and communication with the Self-Governing Region	10
At present, the tendering procedures are likewise not sufficient to assess the qualities of the prospective pedagogical staff; a small choice among the candidates for the position of the pedagogical staff; the low interest in teaching among men; an inability to employ the necessary number of teachers required by the legislation, because a large number of them would have to be employed part-time;	Problems in employing teachers	9

Out-of-date teaching materials; lack of professional resources to prepare for teaching; absence of requalification courses; frequent legislative changes; absence of retraining aimed at clarification of legislative changes and related actions;	Absence of materials and trainings for teachers and school managers	11
Cumulating problems at the end of the school year; distrust of external institutions; the teachers' real abilities and skills of tackling social risk factors do not meet the requirements of practice; excessive load by printed documentation despite electronization; lacking financial motivation and fair financial rewards for teachers; stigmatisation of the teaching profession;	Overloaded teachers	12
Too many secondary schools; a funding system that degrades the level of the education system; in a written school-leaving examination, prepared by the Ministry, the real level of knowledge of secondary vocational school students is not taken into account; absence of a functioning support network to tackle social risk factors in schools; inadequate conditions to employ professional staff;	Shortcomings in the education system	16

In the interviews, the issue of primary education also resonated significantly. The teachers clearly perceive pupils' serious problems related to transition to a secondary school education system.

In the interviews, the respondents stated that school must substitute parents in education, especially because they perceive the acute need of children to have around them people and the environment where they can open, communicate their feelings, solve their problems, make important life decisions, however, they do not have this space mainly because their parents are busy. And as a result of this deficit, both the school managers and teachers see as pupils make bad decisions and fail to resist the temptations they are exposed to at school. They see open threats directly in schools where the pupils themselves, as they gradually find out and detect, are not only drug users but also dealers, where there is an atmosphere in which those who at least do not try a drug are excluded to the edge of the group and exposed to psychological and in some cases also physical attacks for their decision. Furthermore, an important finding was that the same situation and threat were not a result of only the inadequately stimulating family environment and the lacking presence and attention by parents, but also the lacking attention and interest by teachers and school managers. According to the participants' statements, many schools in their area deliberately turn a blind eye to the threats which their pupils are exposed to directly in the classrooms, or they do not detect even the current situation on these issues, or the incidence rate of individual social risk factors, because on the basis of this, they may presume that these problems are not present in their schools and therefore there is no reason to employ professional staff for that purpose.

Table 2 Necessary changes in the education system from the respondents' perspective

<i>Necessary changes in the education system from the respondents' perspective</i>	<i>N =</i>
Stop funding by the number of pupils	16
Centralisation of the secondary education system directly under the Ministry of Education	7
Assigning the secondary schools to individual municipalities	2
Involvement of school managers in drafting legislative proposals	12
Cancelling Year 9 at primary schools	8
Obligation for all schools to employ a professional staff member	14
Reduce the number of schools	16
Reconsidering the priorities in education	6

Table 3 Negatives of employing a professional staff member

<i>Semantic units</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>N =</i>
Reduction of teachers' work load at the expense of the salary for a professional staff member; decision making whether to employ a necessary teacher or professional staff member;	Draining the school budget	9
Non-acceptance and mistrust by teachers; perplexed responses by teachers; requiring delicate information about pupils; expectations that professional staff members will agree with teachers on everything; failure to respect the advice and recommendations provided by a professional staff member;	Rejecting attitudes among teachers	7

Persistent social risk factors; the results of work came up gradually, in some cases after a longer period of time; pupils needed more time to get used to a fact that there was a professional staff member in their school and before they realised that they could visit him with their problems; many pupils still address their teachers or school managers with the problems that are the responsibility of a professional staff member;	Absence of immediate results	6
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According to each of the respondents, it was important that the state provides schools with real possibilities to employ a professional staff member. His importance and benefits for schools are evident to them; however, in seven schools where they did not have any professional staff members, they will not be able to employ a professional staff member even in the near future because of the poorly set up system. They do not have financial and material possibilities, even if they perceive a constantly increasing need for their presence.

Table 4 Negative consequences of absence of a professional staff member at school

<i>Semantic units</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>N =</i>
Exhaustion of the respondents, teachers; working beyond the paid working time; transfer of problems to the home environment; enormous workload of the staff; the emphasis on teachers' education, not only for the purposes of enhancing their skills, but also for the purposes of providing quality interventions in dealing with social risk factors; directives, prevention materials addressed mainly to teachers;	Employee burnout	12
Non-professional interventions by the respondents, teachers; identification with the pupil's parent's role; acting outside their competence; failure to fulfil obligations in reporting social risk factors; lacking professional diagnosis of social risk factors; self-help problem solution; lacking cooperation with external institutions; the problems are only spoken about but there is no action; lacking preparedness of staff for a wide range of social risk factors occurring in the school environment;	Non-professional procedures in tackling social risk factors	10

4 CONCLUSIONS

The importance of the presence of professional staff members in schools was confirmed by the fact that all the respondents cooperate with external organisations, such as pedagogical and psychological counselling and prevention centres, or specialised pedagogical counselling centres, only in extreme situations when they are not able to tackle the situations on their own, or they cooperate with police in cases which must be reported. In addition, intermittently they use some of the offers they like, including one-time workshops, concerts, or professional lectures. According to the respondents, they lack the confidence that the intervention may actually help the pupil and, in many cases, they think that it would be correct to act in a different way than suggested by an expert, but they have no impact on the change. If such an expert is right in the school and is an employee of the school, the respondents have an opportunity to express their opinions, intervene in the process, or discuss the correctness of a chosen strategy, or see what the reaction of the pupil or his family to the expert's intervention is, and see the results in the long run.

The respondents in our study (N = 16) clearly stated that, from their point of view, the only possibility was to employ a school social worker by the school management. As they repeatedly stated, they did not trust the external institutions. For them, it is problematic to maintain active and open cooperation with a particular expert or organisation, and to communicate with them all sensitive problem situations, or their own failure. In the respondents' statements we identified their fear and concerns related to revealing the system of functioning of the school to a foreign entity. Furthermore, as the greatest advantage of this option they perceived the permanent presence of an expert at school and the opportunity to analyse the current situations and also the individual social risk factors together, and on a daily basis and in the long run.

From our point of view, we can argue that whether a social worker is an employee of a school, a municipality, or another organisation, an important factor is that his professional recommendations are binding for the school and that he has space at school to effectively identify the necessary information and communicate with everyone in order to provide interventions and operate effectively from his position as soon as possible.

The information on the current state of the preventive activities conducted in schools shows the need to make changes to the current system, and thus increase the quality of the services provided to

pupils directly in the school environment. Often, preventive activities in their nature still use a monologue method in lectures and the implementation of these programmes does not come from the pupils' experience and needs, because they are not sufficiently mapped and the reality of the school environment is not sufficiently known and explored. In the aforementioned prevention measures, the information already known and the activities no longer interesting for the pupils are repeated. However, the approach of the implementers of these preventive activities is evaluated positively despite the fact that the traditional lecturing methods dominate. The result is that pupils have little space to form and express their own opinions on problem solving. Preventive activities are carried out in large groups and therefore there is no opportunity to speak directly with the lecturer, and the possibility of an individual approach is lacking [10].

4.1 Implications for practice

At the beginning of this sub-chapter, based on our findings, we listed the implications for practice, which are subsequently described in more details:

- We recommend conducting further research on the possibilities of school social work in the Slovak conditions from different perspectives (from the perspective of social work professionals, from the perspective of experts on working with children and youth, from the perspective of the pupil's family, from the perspective of pedagogical staff, children and youth, etc.)
- We recommend that the professional public should develop the systematic preparation of technical supporting documents needed for the future implementation of school social work in Slovakia.
- We recommend making the effort to precisely and clearly define qualification requirements for the position of school social worker, his competences, activities, responsibilities, etc.
- We recommend enacting the obligation for each primary and secondary school to employ at least one professional staff member.
- We recommend submitting suggestions and calls for funding schools from the state budget to cover costs for professional staff members.
- We recommend pointing out the importance of legislative changes and the legislative definition of school social worker in the relevant acts which defines the qualification prerequisites and specific qualification requirements for individual categories of pedagogical staff and professional staff.
- We emphasise the need to develop a system for continuing education of school social workers. Some countries require certified school social work specialists.
- We recommend that social workers and the professional public promote and conduct education in the school environment, and inform the school managers, pedagogical staff, children and youth and their families about the activity of school social workers in order to increase the number of professional staff in schools (at least pointing out the possibility of employing a social worker at the position of social pedagogue, and the possibility of conducting educational counselling and prevention coordination by a professional staff member at school).

The history of school social work in the world is more than a hundred years long. According to the International Organisation for School Social Work, Slovakia is one of more than 53 countries where school social work is used. However, this information does not reflect the reality [11]. At present, this position has not been legislatively anchored yet; there is no funding available; and the pedagogical public has not been informed about this possibility. This area has not been sufficiently explored; a professional debate that would have real impacts and power to influence its implementation in the Slovak education system has only started. Several authors recommend opening a debate among professional staff, in particular a debate with social and special pedagogues to define the activities of these professionals and school social workers, and to reduce the degree of overlap in the activities of individual professionals [11], and a debate within our profession among social workers because, as reported by several authors, the need to implement the position of social worker in the school environment corresponds with the growing tendency of the incidence of social risk factors in schools which are an important cause of school failure. A school social worker is someone that focuses his attention not only on social issues in the school environment but more broadly on social phenomena, such as developing a healthy social environment, and influences not only the pupil and his family, but also the community which he lives in [12]. In our opinion, it is important to encourage such a debate

also directly in schools, even though often there are no professional staff; the teachers are those who need to learn about this possibility, and that social workers may bring them not only a relief but also benefits. That was the reason why we focused our study on school managers.

According to the respondents, the school environment is able to accept professional staff members, and thus reflect the increasing need for professional interventions in dealing with increasing social risk factors. According to our findings, the most acceptable form is employing a school social worker directly by the school. However, funding is not currently available (N = 12).

Increasing the awareness in schools is necessary; it is not possible to implement school social work in Slovakia if teachers and school managers do not want it. Head teachers are the only persons who can employ a social worker as a school employee or allow a social worker to work at school as an employee of an external institution. Head teachers are those who initiate and determine trends in their schools and the atmosphere not only among the teachers. If head teachers believe in the necessity and usefulness of school social work, then we can talk about a real perspective of social work in the school environment.

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