

Theoretical and Empirical Bases of Social Pedagogues' Socio-Pedagogical Activities in the Slovak Republic

Abstract

Despite the fact that the legislation of the Slovak Republic enables social pedagogues to perform activities in schools, at present the socio-pedagogical work in school is performed to a minimum extent. This contribution aims to highlight its benefit not only in the local but also in the society-wide scale. It specifies in more detail possibilities for activities of a social pedagogue in preventing and dealing with socio-pathological phenomena in the school environment. Its aim is to point out to the necessity of establishing the profession of the social pedagogue in schools as a significant element of professionalisation of prevention of various forms of pupils' deviant behaviour.

Keywords: social pedagogue, prevention, school environment, socio-pathological phenomena

Theoretical Bases of Social Pedagogues' Preventive Activities in Schools

The expansion of socio-pathological phenomena in the last two decades has penetrated also into the sphere of educational institutions. Every day we receive information, via the media, about pathological behaviour of pupils of ever-younger ages. Culmination of aggression among pupils, but also aggression directed against teachers, bullying, increased delinquent or, in older pupils, criminal behaviour, experimenting with drugs are phenomena that become a threat for the younger generation. Causes of socio-pathological behaviour in children and youth are

multifactorial. They may include, in short and with no claim of completeness, a dysfunctional family, negative influence of peer groups, mental disorder of the individual and many others. This situation has necessitated the need for professional intervention in the school environment, within which attention is paid to prevention and mitigation or elimination of undesirable forms of pupil behaviour.

School is one of "... the most important educational and socializing agents, however it is also an environment where various social deviations emerge in pupils. If family fails, school must put forth an increased effort in prevention. Schools and school facilities are obliged to ensure active protection of children from all socio-pathological phenomena and to carry out early prevention." (L. Kamarášová, 2009, p. 152).

The focus of prevention is on a higher ratio of protective factors (demonstrations of confidence, love, and interest) against risk factors manifested in the upbringing process. It is important to look for and find situations in the child's or adolescent's life bringing a feeling of joy, satisfaction, self-fulfilment, e.g. in various hobby activities. In prevention, effective methods are based neither on didactic rules nor on austere prohibitions or commands. They must be based on the harmoniousness of personality, thus affect not only its cognitive component (to inform, instruct), but also the emotional one (to create conviction about the correctness and necessity of behaviour that agrees with social norms and identification with them) and the conative one (to behave in accordance with social norms). (B. Kraus, 2006, p.5).

In connection with the above-mentioned idea, A. Waligóra-Huk writes: "Preventive measures should be conducted in such conditions so that teenagers' needs could be satisfied in a constructive and, more importantly, non-aggressive way." (2012, p. 69).

The significance of prevention in school is accentuated also by I. Emmerová: "The school's position in primary prevention is extremely important. There is a difference in the child upbringing by the teacher and the parent. The teacher is more disposed to not being biased, he may be expected to apply a professional approach in upbringing, he can professionally define the goal of upbringing and pursue this goal without hesitation." (I. Emmerová, 2012, p. 2).

The author also writes the following in connection with preventive actions in school: "Implementation of certain preventive action should be based on analysis of the occurrence of negative phenomena – monitoring carried out in schools, what is important is also work of the form teacher, etc. It is necessary to make a prognosis on the probability of relevant phenomenon or phenomena occurrence and to think about selection of the methods and forms of action in both primary and secondary prevention in school surroundings. Schools should include the problems of pre-

vention in pedagogical and other documentation (e.g. a prevention coordinator's plan of work, an educational counsellor's plan of work, school regulations, work regulations, etc.)" (I. Emmerová, 2011, p. 2).

In connection with the problem, J. Verbovská defines the aims of school prevention:

1. to change interaction relations in school, replace the authoritative climate with humanist creative education;
2. to support harmonious development of pupil personality;
3. to develop a healthy life style in school and out-of-school activities;
4. to create conditions for formation of the pupil's healthy personality and his/her resistance to pathological social impacts and pressures;
5. to bring pupils up to personal responsibility for their decisions;
6. to create space at school to help tackle pupils' problems;
7. to support the development of positive relations in the social context;
8. to systematically and comprehensively inform pupils about problems;
9. to develop pro-social behaviour in children in terms of prevention of addictions;
10. public education activities to improve the pupil – teacher – school – family feedback. (J. Verbovská, 2005, p. 14).

Prevention in school implemented through prevention projects and programmes, as well as by means of upbringing for responsibility, healthy life style, values, respect, pro-social behaviour should be currently carried out primarily by social pedagogues trained in the socio-educational and preventive work during their under-graduate and post-graduate studies. Until 2008, the function of a social pedagogue in schools was not enforced by legislation, a social pedagogue could perform activities only in educational prevention facilities and co-operate with schools, however they could not perform activities directly in schools. In September 2008, the Act No. 245/2008 on upbringing and education (School Act) came into effect, causing several changes in this sphere. According to the new act, a social pedagogue is, together with an educational counsellor, school psychologist and prevention coordinator, one of the components of the educational counselling and prevention system.

Section 131 of the School Act defines social activities that can be perceived as legislatively defined confines of a social pedagogue's action. They are the following:

- monitoring and evaluating children's behaviour by methods, techniques and procedures consistent with the current knowledge of social pedagogy and state of practice;
- social counselling;

- sociotherapy;
- application of diagnostic methods of social pedagogy.

We are of the opinion that the above definition is too stringent and general, while offering only a fraction of actual socio-educational activities social pedagogues should perform based on their training. In her publication, I. Emmerová offers an extended range of the social pedagogue's activity in school, which should include the following:

- implementation of primary prevention of socio-pathological phenomena, and also implementation of secondary prevention in schools with the occurrence of problem behaviour;
- organization of free-time activities of children and youth;
- social counselling;
- cooperation with other specialists;
- active work with pupils from disadvantaged family environments;
- cooperation with parents;
- mediation of conflicts. (I. Emmerová, 2011, p. 104)

In addition to the Act No. 245/2008 on upbringing and education, activities of the social pedagogue are specified in Section 24 of the Act No. 317/2009 on teaching staff and professional staff, which states that: "The social pedagogue performs professional activities within prevention, intervention and counselling in particular for children and pupils threatened by socio-pathological behaviour, from socially disadvantaged conditions, addicted to drugs or otherwise disadvantaged children and pupils, their legal representatives and teaching staff at schools and in other school facilities. The social pedagogue fulfils tasks of social education, support of social, ethical behaviour, socio-educational diagnostics of environment and relations, socio-educational counselling, prevention and re-education of socio-pathological behaviour. The social pedagogue performs expertise activities and adult education activities."

The major part of the social pedagogue's work in school consists in preventive actions through an extensive palette of activities he/she can perform. As indicated by P. Böhmová, they are primarily counselling and educational plus social-educational activities with children and youth, in particular with children and youth in problem situations or with children from dysfunctional families." (P. Böhmová, 2011, p. 55).

Within his/her socio-educational activities in school, the social pedagogue should primarily pay attention to the following groups of pupils:

- children and youth from disadvantaged socio-cultural environment;
- pupils with sociopathic behaviour: drug abuse, delinquency and crime, truancy and bullying, etc.

- children and youth with attention deficit disorders;
- pupils suffering from the CAN Syndrome;
- all pupils by organizing free-time activities;
- pupils in a problem situation. (I. Emmerová, 2009, p. 104).

The work of the social pedagogue in school is very challenging, requiring, in addition to professional knowledge and skills, also that the person is a sufficiently mature, strong personality able to win the attention and interest of children and youth, impact and influence them in the direction of desirable development.

Interpretation of Empirical Findings

From April 2012 to May 2013, nationwide research was done into the problem of “professionalizing prevention of socio-pathological phenomena in the school environment”. One of its goals was to identify the number of social pedagogues in the research sample and to analyse in detail their professional activities in conditions of the schools under review.

The major research method was the questionnaire method. Some versions of online questionnaires were made using the application Google docs, which were distributed to 300 elementary schools, 93 secondary vocational schools and 49 grammar schools. A total of 540 elementary and secondary schools were addressed, where 12 professional employees in the function of a social pedagogue could be found.

As an additional method for deeper penetration into the problem, a semi-standardized interview of our own construction was used. The interview was given by three female social pedagogues.

In compilation of the research sample, mechanical selection was used; every seventh elementary and secondary school was addressed.

In the following part of the contribution, the empirical findings will be subject to a complex analysis.

Preventive Activities of School Social Pedagogues

Teachers and preventive workers have to deal with disregard for norms and authorities, cheating, defiance, offences against school regulations, indiscipline, aggressiveness, experimenting with drugs and a number of other forms of undesirable behaviour in school every day. Despite the fact that school is considered the

second most significant socializing agent in addition to family and participates, to a great extent, in child upbringing and education preparing the child for due fulfilment of future social roles, it is also the environment where there is, as in the case of family, an accumulation of pathological behaviour.

The increase in deviant forms of behaviour, educational problems in children and youth in the last decades requires increasing attention to pupils from form teachers, prevention co-ordinators, social pedagogues and other specialists.

The school teaching and professional staff face an already existing problem of the pupil, the cause of which may lay in many factors, such as bad climate in family, problems at school, or certain genetic predispositions. Tackling a problem situation requires much effort, time and in some cases also funds from those concerned.

The school environment should be a place where mainly primary prevention is carried out. It should be noted that the present time is characterized by high occurrence of undesirable forms of behaviour among children and youth, which is a consequence of the fact that many pupils get into the position of already threatened individuals. In this case secondary prevention comes to the fore. It is indicated also by the interviewed social pedagogues.

SPG1: "At our school, there are problems at such a stage that it is necessary to deal with secondary prevention. Primary prevention is left to the Centre for Psychological and Educational Counselling and Prevention."

SPG2: "Pupils drink alcohol, smoke, even experiment with drugs. We tackle problems of bullying, truancy. We and the teachers often must extinguish already burning problems."

The forms of prevention carried out by school social pedagogues are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Prevailing level of prevention carried out by school social pedagogues

| Primary | | Secondary | | Tertiary | | Total | |
|---------|------|-----------|------|----------|------|-------|-----|
| n | % | n | % | n | % | N | % |
| 5 | 41.7 | 5 | 41.7 | 2 | 16.7 | 12 | 100 |

As can be seen in Table 1, the same number of social pedagogues focuses both on primary and secondary prevention.

It is interesting to perceive the problem in terms of schools. Three out of six social pedagogues in elementary schools reported that they focused on primary prevention, which is caused by the age, lower occurrence of pupils coming in

contact with social pathology and greater possibilities to influence them towards desirable development.

The same number of social pedagogues in secondary vocational schools focuses primarily on secondary prevention, or they reported a combination of primary and secondary prevention. No secondary vocational school pays attention to primary prevention of socio-pathological phenomena, which may be caused by the fact that a considerable part of students attending the schools under review belongs to risk groups with an increased risk of pathological behaviour. Dealing with already existing problems deprives the social pedagogues of the time and effort they would spend on primary prevention in normal circumstances.

Within our research, we attempted to find out what forms of deviant behaviour school social pedagogues focus on within the limits of prevention in individual regions of the Slovak Republic. The respondents had the option to give more answers, which is why the number of responses exceeds 100%. The results of our findings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Deviant forms of behaviour paid increased attention to by school social pedagogues

| Deviant forms of behaviour | BB | | TR | | BA | | PO | | TN | | Total | |
|---|----|------|----|------|----|-----|----|-----|----|-----|-------|------|
| | n | % | n | % | n | % | n | % | n | % | N | % |
| Bullying | 4 | 66.7 | 3 | 100 | 1 | 100 | 1 | 100 | 1 | 100 | 10 | 83.3 |
| Drug addictions | 3 | 50.0 | 2 | 66.7 | 1 | 100 | 1 | 100 | 0 | 0.0 | 7 | 58.3 |
| Truancy | 2 | 33.3 | 1 | 33.3 | 0 | 0.0 | 1 | 100 | 1 | 100 | 5 | 41.7 |
| Modern non-substance related addictions | 3 | 50.0 | 1 | 33.3 | 1 | 100 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 5 | 41.7 |
| Crime and delinquency | 1 | 16.7 | 2 | 66.7 | 1 | 100 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 4 | 33.3 |
| Aggressiveness | 3 | 50.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 3 | 25.0 |
| Gambling | 2 | 33.3 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 2 | 16.7 |
| Eating disorders | 2 | 33.3 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 2 | 16.7 |
| Smoking | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 1 | 100 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 1 | 8.3 |
| Suicidal behaviour | 1 | 16.7 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 1 | 8.3 |
| Theft | 1 | 16.7 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 1 | 8.3 |
| Total | 6 | 100 | 3 | 100 | 1 | 100 | 1 | 100 | 1 | 100 | 12 | 100 |

Partial results of the research, presented in Table 2, indicate that bullying is a socio-pathological phenomenon number 1, paid increased attention to by social pedagogues. Bullying is a result of internal aggression in the individual, desire for power, effort to have control, or to gain an advantage against another individual.

As A. Waligóra – Huk sets forth, aggression is “... a simple way of coping with frustrated needs and bitter emotions”. (2012, p. 69). Bullying can be characterized by three substantial indicators: the intent to do harm, repeated physical or verbal aggression and, last but not least, an imbalance of power between the aggressor and the victim. It is a very severe form of deviant behaviour in pupils. The “*Methodological Guidelines No. 7/2006-R on preventing and tackling bullying in schools and school facilities*” point out to the fact that: “... bullying may in some cases constitute a criminal offence. In particular, it may be a criminal offence of defamation, bodily harm, restriction to personal freedom, coercion, extortion, robbery, gross coercion, theft or damage to the property of another, unlawful enjoyment of a thing of another.”

Within their preventive actions, school social pedagogues pay considerable attention to the problem of drug addiction. This was reported by 58.3% of the respondents. If this problem is analyzed in relation to the schools where prevention is carried out, drug addiction prevention is most frequently dealt with by social pedagogues in secondary vocational schools, where this option was indicated by 100% of the social pedagogues and such preventive activities are the least frequently focused on by the social pedagogues working in elementary schools.

Excessive consumption of drugs by some secondary school students puts them in a position of risk groups which may later develop drug addiction. This fact can be confirmed also by reports of the social pedagogues in secondary vocational schools indicating secondary prevention as the dominant level within the intentions of their preventive actions.

Over 30% of the social pedagogues reported that within prevention, they paid attention to such phenomena as truancy, modern non-substance related addictions, or crime and delinquency. We shall deal in more detail with the problem of modern non-substance related addictions where currently considerable expansion can be observed. Long-term, excessive use of media and information-communication technologies may have a negative impact on harmonious, all-round development of children and youth. Potential threats of modern media have been discussed by two authors, P. Slowik and P. Passowicz, stating in this connection that this form of behaviour in combination with social and cultural factors may result in alienation:

- at the level of emotional identification: when a person remains in the world of fiction helping him/her to stave off their constant fear of failure;
- at the cognitive level helping to “stay cool”, live carelessly and with no obligations whatsoever, neglect traditional hierarchies, be one’s own master and create one’s own principles. (P. Slowik, P. Passowicz, 2006, p. 101).

The fact that school social pedagogues pay attention to a wide spectrum of socio-pathological phenomena can be evaluated positively.

In this connection, in the following part of our research we primarily tried to find out what forms of prevention were carried out the most frequently in the addressed schools.

Table 3. Most frequently carried out forms of prevention in school, based on reports of school social pedagogues

| Forms of prevention | ES | | SVS | | GS | | Total | |
|--------------------------------|----------|-------------|----------|-------------|----------|-------------|-----------|------------|
| | n | % | n | % | n | % | N | % |
| Occasional events | 5 | 83.3 | 2 | 50.0 | 2 | 100 | 9 | 75.0 |
| Discussions with specialists | 6 | 100 | 2 | 50.0 | 1 | 50.0 | 9 | 75.0 |
| Lectures | 4 | 66.7 | 2 | 50.0 | 2 | 100 | 8 | 66.7 |
| Prevention work projects | 3 | 50.0 | 2 | 50.0 | 1 | 50.0 | 6 | 50.0 |
| Prevention by hobby activities | 3 | 50.0 | 1 | 25.0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 33.3 |
| Other | 1 | 16.7 | 2 | 50.0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 25.0 |
| Prevention by teaching | 3 | 33.3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 25.0 |
| Peer programmes | 0.0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 50.0 | 1 | 8.3 |
| Total | 6 | 37.5 | 4 | 37.5 | 2 | 25.0 | 12 | 100 |

From Table 3 it follows that the organizational forms of prevention carried out by the social pedagogues were variously structured in terms of their intensity. Our analysis of the empirical findings will briefly focus on selected organizational forms of prevention. The most extensive prevention by the school social pedagogues in the research sample is that carried out by means of “occasional events” and “discussions”. Occasional events may be of various forms, ranging from cultural and sports activities to themed one-off events such as “No Smoking Day”, “World AIDS Day,” etc. Their positive effect on children’s and youth’s development is obvious, however, there is a problem arising from their substance – that this is not a systematic and long-term preventive action. On the other hand, occasional events are a suitable complement to the system of preventive actions.

Social pedagogues also carry out *preventive projects and programmes* of an extensive scope, which was indicated by 50% of the social pedagogues addressed. Preventive programmes play a very important role in the prevention of socio-

pathological phenomena in children and youth. A social pedagogue should be able not only to apply already existing preventive programmes, but also participate in their development within their educational competencies.

“*Prevention by means of teaching*” is covered by 25% of the social pedagogues. Prevention by means of teaching is an integral part of the teaching process mostly in the hands of teachers. In this case, social pedagogues may be involved at two levels:

- substituting an absent teacher in class;
- having pedagogical qualifications, provided social pedagogues work half-time, with the other half covered by teaching activities.

This argument is supported by the information obtained from a social pedagogue during an interview.

SPG2: I completed supplementary pedagogical studies to obtain the certificate of teaching competence. So I teach a few hours per week.

As for prevention by means of the teaching process, in most cases direct activities of social pedagogues are cut down to methodological guidance of teaching staff.

Conclusion

Despite legislative possibilities to employ social pedagogues in school, their current number is still insufficient, which is a considerable problem in the context of increasing deviant forms of behaviour in children and youth. Effectiveness of preventive actions is based, among other things, also on its professional implementation, which is one of the priorities of current social pedagogy and its representatives in Slovakia.

List of abbreviations

SPG1: interviewed social pedagogue No. 1

SPG2: interviewed social pedagogue No. 2

SPG3: interviewed social pedagogue No. 3

The contribution is one of the preliminary outputs of the project VEGA No. 1/0168/12 Professionalizing Prevention of Social and Pathological Phenomena in the School Environment in the SR from the aspect of the social pedagogue profession – present situation, problems and comparison with foreign countries.

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