

School Social Pedagogue in a Theoretical Reflection, Problems and Educational Needs of a School Social Pedagogue in the Slovak Republic

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Abstract

Social pedagogues' activities in school have already been anchored in Slovak legislation. Professionalization of preventive socio-educational work in school is a prerequisite for its increased effectiveness and prevention of pupils' problem behaviour. It is regrettable that school practice so far does not fully respect the school legislation and social pedagogues are rather sporadic in schools.

Keywords: *social pedagogue, school social pedagogue, preventive socio-educational work*

The profession of social pedagogue is classified as a so-called helping profession. Since its inception in the mid-19th century, social pedagogy has placed emphasis on combining social assistance with educational care and self-help. According to B. Kraus (2008, p. 137), the assistance may have the character of:

1. Providing support – willingness to listen, taking up a non-judgemental empathetic attitude, effort for stabilization, creating an atmosphere of trust;
2. Educational activity – explaining the causes of, contexts of and possible solutions to a given situation, giving motivating examples, providing new information;
3. Counselling – joint search for possible specific ways to solve a problem on the basis of a previous analysis of its causes and contexts, contacting other institutions and organizations that could help to solve problems.

The development of the profession of social pedagogue in the Slovak Republic has been stimulated by a social need. The current state of our society is marked by expansion of negative phenomena, to which society must respond promptly. The rapid increase in socio-pathological phenomena, high unemployment rate, transformation of the Slovak family, change in the value orientation, and other impacts have called for more intense development of helping professions assisting family and school to deal with problem situations they are not able to manage without help. There is need for social pedagogues in many areas, including elementary and secondary schools.

The Slovak Republic may draw inspiration from the situation of the school social or socio-educational work in Germany, where social pedagogy has the longest history. Various concepts have been created there (Drilling, M., 2009; Zemančíková, V., 2012): social work in school (its aim is to solve arising problems and its target group are pupils from socially disadvantaged environments), social pedagogy in school (focused on all pupils with the aim to prevent various problems, including socio-pathological phenomena) and socio-pedagogical school (essence of the concept being that teachers themselves should supplement their competences by socio-pedagogical skills). The second concept – social pedagogy in school – is closest to the Slovak reality.

In Poland, too, social pedagogy has a longer history than in Slovakia. However, there is no legislative anchoring of social pedagogues in schools. At present, in Polish schools there is only the function of school pedagogue in place, despite the fact that social pedagogues study at many higher education institutions.

The history of Czech and Slovak social pedagogy is very similar. Activities of social pedagogues in Czech schools have not been treated in legislation. In the Czech Republic, there is a function of school prevention methodologist in place. It is regulated by the Decree No. 72/2005 on provision of counselling services in schools and school counselling facilities. It defines standard activities of the school prevention methodologist: methodological and co-ordinating activities, information activities and counselling activities.

The current situation in Slovak schools is presented also in the *Report on the State of Education in Slovakia on Systemic Steps to Support its Further Development*, of September 2013, stating the following:

- Threatening the safety of pupils, teaching and non-teaching staff of schools (bullying of pupils, attacks by pupils or their legal representatives against teachers) is considered a major problem of education.
- Schools have no tools for increasing the safety in terms of the physical and mental safety of pupils and school staff.

- School staff point out to their insufficient education and practical training in dealing with acute crisis situations, despite the fact that the Act No. 317/2009 on teaching staff and specialists imposes such an obligation on the employer.

Therefore, the question of current interest is the requirement for professionalisation of prevention processes, indicated by several Slovak and European documents. As stated by P. Ondrejko*vi*č (2013, p. 12) “the incompetence by which the current state is marked results in particular in the low efficiency, insufficient effectiveness of prevention in all the three types (primary, secondary and tertiary).” We agree with J. Hroncová*s* opinion (2013, p. 68) that “shifting the responsibility for prevention in school to school prevention co-ordinators, who are overburdened with their teaching loads, and even have no financial motivation, is only a formal, not actual solution. It is reflected also in the low effectiveness of prevention reported often formally by schools, but pupils are mostly not aware of such activities.”

School plays an important role in upbringing as well as prevention. As noted by B. Kraus (2014, p. 91), the influence of family on children is weakening, and on the other hand, the influence of media is increasing, school becomes almost the only environment able to guarantee an “optimum or even scientifically thought-out” effect on an individual, consistent with the interest of society. Further, B. Kraus states (2014, p. 95) that the issue of being disciplined reflecting a person’s relationship with people around is an undervalued category nowadays, order of any kind has slipped away from life. This may result in an increase in deviant conduct.

New technologies have brought, no doubt, a great number of advantages and positives, as well as certain risks. They threaten children, youth and adults. Also, things that are a normal part of our lives: mobile phones, texting, the Internet, electronic mail, chatting, computer games, etc., pose risks. A serious problem of present times are technological addictions developed by over-use of modern equipment and technologies or the very content mediated by them. In addition to the addictions, there are other risks, including an adverse impact on the physical and mental health, desensitisation, an increase in cyber-bullying, weakening contacts with family and peers, etc. From the pedagogical point of view, too much free time spent at the computer at the expense of other, more appropriate free-time activities or school duties can be appreciated. The problems of cyber-bullying via the Internet and mobile phones have been drawn attention to by S. Juszczyk (2014, p. 213), accentuating the need for prevention.

The computer and Internet are used daily. The Internet, computer games, mobile phoning, texting may be potential sources of pleasant experience and the

attachment to them may, in persons unaware of the imminent risk, take the shape of addiction.

The increase in socio-pathological phenomena in society has manifested itself also in increased problem behaviour of children and youth – from small transgressions to serious socio-pathological phenomena.

Alarming are also the findings by M. Pétiová (2015, pp. 11–12) about relationships between pupils and teachers. In 2014, as compared to 2005, the number of respondents – pupils liking their teachers and having respect for them fell down (from 17.1% to 10.0%) and there was an increase in the number of pupils disliking their teachers (from 6.0% to 9.2%) or to whom teachers were indifferent (from 3.0% to 8.1%).

Schools should employ social pedagogues, who would deal with prevention and pupils' problem behaviour at a professional level. Social pedagogues have the knowledge of risks and protective factors of children and youth's optimum development; they should influence pupils' personality development and develop their social skills. Social pedagogues are qualified to carry out primary and secondary prevention, as well as other socio-educational work.

The social pedagogue's activity in school has already been anchored in Slovak legislation. The Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on upbringing and education (School Act) of May 22, 2008, Section 130 includes the *social pedagogue* in other components of the system of educational counselling and prevention and the Act No. 317/2009 Coll. on teaching staff and specialists classifies the social pedagogue as a specialist. Section 24 reads: "A social pedagogue performs professional activities within prevention, intervention and counselling, specifically for children and pupils threatened by socio-pathological phenomena, from socially disadvantaged environments, drug addicts, or otherwise disadvantaged children and pupils, their legal representatives and the teaching staff of schools and school facilities. A social pedagogue fulfils tasks of social education, pro-social, ethical behaviour support, socio-pedagogical diagnostics of environments and relations, socio-pedagogical counselling, prevention of socio-pathological phenomena and re-education of behaviour. A social pedagogue performs expertise activities and public education activities".

On the basis of our own research as well as analysis of activities of social pedagogues working in elementary and secondary schools (social pedagogues have already worked in schools in Banská Bystrica, Lučenec, Trenčín, etc., for a longer time), the basic activities of social pedagogues in school settings should, in compliance with applicable legislation, consist in:

- **Carrying out primary prevention of socio-pathological phenomena, also secondary prevention in schools with problem behaviour**
Carrying out prevention of socio-pathological phenomena can be considered the prevailing sphere of a social pedagogue's socio-educational activity in school. At present, the burden of responsibility for prevention rests on prevention coordinators – teachers, who mostly also teach having a full teaching load, are not financially rewarded for the performance of this function and often lack the required erudition. The increase in the socio-pathological behaviour in children and youth, however, calls for professionalisation of prevention even in the school setting, where it is the social pedagogue who should act, who is professionally trained for this activity.
- **Active participation in dealing with problems in pupils' behaviour**
Another sphere of action of the social pedagogue is dealing with pupils' problem behaviour – it is a wide spectrum of inappropriate, problem behaviour of elementary school pupils and secondary school students, not yet falling into the group of behavioural disorders or socio-pathological behaviour. It includes theft, damage to property and vandalism, delinquent behaviour (where a pupil comes into conflict with the law), aggression and bullying, truancy, running away and wandering, lying and cheating, abuse of legal or illegal drugs, computer, the Internet or mobile phone and other potential sources of non-substance addictions, sexual risk behaviour, etc. To deal with problem behaviour properly, effective procedures and approaches are sought. Some ways of intervention are appropriate only for certain problems or behavioural disorders, certain school settings or types of teachers or pupils (with regard to the age of the pupil). Selection of strategies also depends on the professional competence of the teacher, social pedagogue or school psychologist. A social pedagogue as a helping professional is competent to work with pupils with problem behaviour by means of re-educational and re-socializing activities.
- **Social counselling**
A social pedagogue working in an elementary or secondary school can provide social counselling to pupils, students, parents, teachers and educators. In addition to guidance, he/she is competent to refer them to other specialists in helping professions. A social pedagogue provides socio-educational counselling to pupils, students, teachers and parents. Counselling a pupil who has a problem is particularly beneficial. School social pedagogues from practice point out to the fact that frequently it is them who listen to the pupil and who the pupil can confide in.

- **Cooperation with specialists**

Cooperation with specialists is another sphere of action of the social pedagogue – especially in prevention and dealing with pupils' problem behaviour. Dealing with problems in pupils' behaviour is demanding and time consuming. It requires considerable patience and professionalism. When dealing with problem behaviour, school and family are assisted by various facilities and institutions.

- **A social pedagogue should pay special attention to pupils coming from socially disadvantaged environments and actively work with them.**

Pupils from socially disadvantaged environments should be paid appropriate attention to within socio-educational care in school, and they should be actively worked with. According to the School Act, pupils from socially disadvantaged environments are pupils living in social, family, economic and cultural conditions that do not adequately stimulate the development of their mental, volitional, emotional faculties, do not encourage their socialization and do not offer them adequate incentives for the development of their personality. In accordance with the applicable legislation, the social pedagogue often carries out socio-educational work in the field.

- **Cooperation with parents**

At present, improvement in the cooperation and link between school and family in socio-pathological phenomena prevention has become an important requirement. School should organize class meetings where parents would meet specialists providing them with information about behavioural disorders and socio-pathological phenomena, as well as about tackling of related problems. The problem of school-family cooperation in prevention seems to reside in parents' unrealistic expectations of school (e.g., school will take care of prevention itself, if school has problems with a child, it will solve them without bothering parents, etc.), and, on the other hand, school's unrealistic expectations of parents (family will take care that school is attended only by non-problem pupils, parents will automatically agree with anything offered by school within prevention as well as in other areas, etc.). School-family cooperation is extremely important in general, but also in the prevention of socio-pathological phenomena. It is inevitable when dealing with problems in pupil behaviour.

- **Mediation of conflicts**

The social pedagogue in school as a mediator – neutral person – may help parties of a dispute to negotiate settlement of the dispute in the school setting.

According to K. Kropáčová and J. Hroncová (2013, pp. 62–88), socio-educational work of social pedagogues in schools and school facilities focuses on the prevention of socio-pathological phenomena, socio-pedagogical work with an individual, socio-pedagogical work with a group, socio-pedagogical work with teachers, socio-pedagogical work with family, socio-pedagogical diagnostics, socio-pedagogical counselling, socio-pedagogical therapy, socio-therapy, socio-pedagogical rehabilitation.

It can be appreciated that since the school year 2014/2015 social pedagogues have been employed in elementary schools within the project PRINED (PROject of INclusive EDucation). The task of the national PRINED is to support inclusive environments in kindergartens and elementary schools with the aim to ensure prevention of misplacement of Roma pupils in the system of special education. To encourage inclusion of pupils coming from marginalized Roma communities by formation of inclusive teams in elementary schools.

Professionalization of socio-pathological phenomena prevention has become a topical requirement due to the current situation. School practice confirms justification of the function of school social pedagogue, which, among other things, also enables teachers to carry out the process of upbringing and education better. Feedback by head teachers and teachers about the work of social pedagogues in the city of Trenčín may be given as an example. According to B. Tomanová and J. Baláž (2012, pp. 199–201), its positives include: reduced truancy, pupils' reduced aggressive behaviour, relief of head teachers from communication with special facilities, institutions and offices, parents' appreciation of the presence of the social pedagogue in school, etc.

Since there are considerable problems in pupils' behaviour, reduction of the problems in pupils' behaviour can be considered satisfying. Truancy is particularly wide-spread. Prevention of truancy is very important, because truancy is closely related to other socio-pathological phenomena of a more serious character. Truancy may become one of the factors encouraging crime; pupils who play truant may spend their free time in various ways, from relatively harmless watching TV or reading at home through wandering (alone or with a group) to smoking, drinking alcohol, visits to pubs and gambling-rooms, even delinquent behaviour. Another negative aspect has been noted by M. Hronec (2014, p. 239), according to whom "lack of education is, to a considerable extent, caused also by a negative attitude of pupils to school and their truancy, which is later reflected in a generally low capacity of the person to compete on the labour market".

In January 2015 empirical research in the form of interviews with school social pedagogues (N = 28) was carried out. The research was a sub-project of KEGA

No. 030UMB-4/2014 *Elaboration and verification of the concept of update training for in-service social pedagogues, with a particular focus on school social pedagogues* (Project leader: Prof. PhDr. J. Hroncová, PhD.). It focused on two areas of current interest: 1) Problems most frequently encountered by social pedagogues and 2) Educational needs of school social pedagogues.

In terms of school social pedagogues' problems, the same problems were found that had been worrying them for some years:

- **No Professional Standard: Social Pedagogue.** At present, the activity of the social pedagogue is still much differentiated and various due to no professional standard in place. Their activity in school is frequently determined by current educational problems with pupils. Also, neither head teachers nor teachers have knowledge of the competences of social pedagogues, sufficient information on the focus of this profession, therefore they often give them tasks unrelated to their competences. The Methodology and Education Centre has prepared the Professional Standard: Social Pedagogue; J. Hroncová and I. Emmerová from the MBU Faculty of Education in Banská Bystrica have also participated in its preparation. However, it is still at the approval stage and not available to social pedagogues.
- **Lack of methodological manuals.** So far, social pedagogues have used in practice one methodological manual: Hroncová, J. – Emmerová, I., Kropáčová, K. et al.: *Preventive Socio-educational Activity in School. Methodological Manual for Social Pedagogues and Prevention Co-ordinators (Preventívna sociálno-výchovná činnosť v škole. Metodická príručka pre sociálnych pedagógov a koordinátorov prevencie)*, (2013), which is only a basic publication and does not consider individual school levels.
- **Insufficient offer of further education** for social pedagogues.
- Social pedagogues within the project PRENED reported also a problem of **overload with administrative work.**

Similar findings were also reported by J. Hroncová (2012, p. 27), according to whom school social pedagogues had to struggle with many problems in their work. The problems included a lack of professionograms of social pedagogues in school for the school levels from kindergartens to secondary schools, a lack of methodological manuals for work of social pedagogues in various types of school, and a lack of further education.

Our research focused specially on educational needs of school social pedagogues. According to V. Prusáková (2010, p. 317), analysis of educational needs is the cornerstone of the system approach to education, it is necessary also in relation to education for the labour market. The importance of and need for education of

in-service social pedagogues in terms of the conception of life-long learning was also pointed out by K. Cimprichová Gežová (2014). All respondents considered the situation in further education unsatisfactory. They would be interested in education concerning the following:

- Aggressive behaviour of pupils and bullying
- Effective school-family co-operation
- Prevention and dealing with pupils' problem behaviour (from intentional violation of school rules to serious socio-pathological phenomena)
- How to work with an ADHD pupil (this requirement occurred repeatedly in the responses despite the fact that it is an issue of special pedagogy; due to a high number of pupils with ADHD at schools a need arises to have at least basic information about how to work with them).

So far, no examination of social pedagogues' educational needs has been carried out in Slovakia. In 2012 an expert team did make an analysis of educational needs of elementary school teachers and specialists, but the research focused on the work with children from marginalized Roma communities. The following areas in which specialists (including 10 social pedagogues) wanted further education were found out (2012, p. 82):

- Practical skills in work with children from marginalized Roma communities, prevention and elimination of socio-pathological phenomena;
- New tools for upbringing and education of children from marginalized Roma communities from other countries;
- New diagnostic tools for pupils from marginalized Roma communities, new methods, information and communication technologies;
- New methods of socio-pathological phenomena prevention while respecting their individuality, culture and talent (music, movement);
- How to work with a marginalized Roma community, how to get close to them, how to win them for co-operation;
- How to motivate parents of children from marginalized Roma communities to co-operate, how to work with parents of children to make them able to do something for the children at home.

When comparing both studies, it can be stated that the issue of socio-pathological phenomena prevention and elimination prevailed in 2012 as well as in our 2015 research, due to the increase in socio-pathological phenomena in children and youth.

Conclusion: School belongs to the most important socializing factors; it should also play an important role in prevention, since pupils spend a lot of time at school.

The social pedagogue as a specialist is helpful in many ways in school (e.g., in primary and secondary prevention and dealing with pupils' problem behaviour, social counselling, co-operation with parents, active work with pupils from disadvantaged family environments, co-operation with specialists, etc.) to pupils, as well as teachers and parents. As a specialist and helping professional, the social pedagogue may play an important role also in the settlement of conflicts that could result in the pupil's aggressive behaviour. The activity of social pedagogues in schools is beneficial not only to school, but in particular to pupils with problem behaviour and pupils from socially disadvantaged environments, because social pedagogues, by means of their socio-educational activity, facilitate the process of pupils, socialization as well as improve their subsequent prospects on the labour market.

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