

School Preventive Socio-Educational Work of Social Pedagogues in the Slovak Republic and an Outline of Their Activities in the Other V4 Countries

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Abstract

The profession of social pedagogue is classified as a helping profession. Social pedagogues can prove their worth in various sectors and work with various target groups. The study analyses legislative possibilities and actual activities of social pedagogues in schools in Slovakia. Social pedagogues working in Slovak elementary and secondary schools carry out primary and secondary prevention, deal with pupils' problem behaviour, screen for threatened pupils, provide counselling, actively work with pupils from socially disadvantaged environments, co-operate with pupils' parents and with specialists. The author also briefly elucidates school preventive socio-educational work of social pedagogues in the other V4 countries comparable geographically, historically and culturally.

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

Introduction

Helping/supporting professions are a relatively wide set of different professions characterized by direct work with people, both in the social and educational as well as health-care areas; they are a service and mission rather than routine work. The concept of a helping profession includes an area of professional work with

people, based on an interpersonal relationship, the essential function of which is helping the person or group to deal with various difficult situations. The profession of social pedagogue is also such a profession. In 1994 the OECD recommended intensifying the development of helping professions to all post-communist countries, thus also the V4 countries - the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic.

Profession of social pedagogue as a helping profession in the V4 countries and social pedagogues' activities in schools

The profession of social pedagogue has been closely connected with the development of social pedagogy as a science and with the definition of its subject. The wide orientation of social pedagogy to the solution of many socio-educational problems in the past, but also today, is reflected in various approaches to the definition of its subject, but also in the lack of unity in the definition of a social pedagogue's competences and work description.

In today's post-modern times, social pedagogy can be characterized as a science the subject of which is socio-educational care and help to children, youth, but also adults in difficult life situations requiring help of society. It integrates the science of educating children and youth – pedagogy, and the science of society – sociology. Social pedagogy participates in helping, educational, preventive and re-educational activities. It analyses the dynamic relations between a person and the environment and intervenes in the processes of socialization, especially in threatened and socially disadvantaged groups of children and youth, but also adults.

In all the V4 countries, social pedagogues are trained at higher education institutions. Graduates can be employed in managerial functions within state administration and self-government, facilities of social services, cultural and public-education facilities, re-educational facilities, facilities of educational prevention, and facilities of substitute education, as educational and teaching staff in the field of socio-pathological behaviour prevention. They are also professionally trained to be able to act as school social pedagogues.

The development of the profession of social pedagogue in the Slovak Republic has been prompted by social need. The current state of our society is marked by expansion of negative phenomena society must promptly respond to. Their increase requires intervention by the so-called helping professions including also the profession of social pedagogue. The steep rise of socio-pathological behaviour, high unemployment rate, transformation changes 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 difficult situations they are not able to manage without help. The situation is similar in all the V4 countries.

Social pedagogues can prove their worth in many areas, including elementary and secondary schools. Of the V4 countries, activities of social pedagogues in schools in the Slovak Republic have the best legislative anchoring. Within the V4 countries, social pedagogy has the longest history in Poland, where it has been developed with varying intensity since 1903, when H. Radlińska published her contribution, but the profession of social pedagogue in school is not adequately legislatively anchored, similarly in Hungary or the Czech Republic, where, however, social pedagogy has a shorter history. B. Kraus (2008) believes that the greatest boom of social pedagogy in the Czech Republic was in the period after 1990. Hungarian social pedagogy has been influenced the strongest by German social pedagogy; Slovak and Czech social pedagogy has been strongly influenced, in addition to German, also by Polish social pedagogy.

In Hungary, the school social pedagogue means a professional in school social work (Fodor, L., 2016). What is highlighted is the social pedagogue's preventive activity (Müller, M., 2013), co-operation with insufficiently stimulating family (Varga, I., 2014), and great emphasis is laid on protection and help to threatened children and youth.

In Polish social pedagogy, the preventive dimension resonates strongly (Radziejewicz-Winnicki, A., 2008). The profession of social pedagogue, however, is not pursued in schools; it is substituted by school pedagogues.

In the Czech Republic, social pedagogues are employed in schools only rarely, in particular owing to projects. Š. Moravec et al. (2015) mapped cases of the profession of social pedagogue pursued in elementary and secondary schools. They were mainly the OP EC project "Providing Individual Support" and the OP EC project of Masaryk University in Brno "Creation and Innovation of Training Programmes and Professional Practice", within which social pedagogues were employed in elementary and secondary schools. Their employment is not defined legislatively. In Czech schools, socio-educational work is carried out only within activities of educational counsellors or school methodologists for risk behaviour prevention.

School social pedagogue in the Slovak Republic

In accordance with the Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on upbringing and education (School Act) of May 22, 2008, Section 130, the profession of social pedagogue is added to other components of the educational counselling and prevention system and the Act No. 317/2009 Coll. on the teaching staff and professional staff classifies the social pedagogue as a professional. Section 24 specifies 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 school 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." Schools should employ professionals, social pedagogues, to deal with prevention and problem behaviour of pupils. Social pedagogues know the risk and protective factors of children and youth's optimum development; they should influence pupils' personal development and develop their social skills.

J. Hroncova's (2015) empirical findings revealed that all school social pedagogues participating in her research (N=64) performed counselling, diagnostic and preventive activities, which is in compliance with the applicable legislation.

In the 2015/16 school year we carried out interviews with 15 school social pedagogues. Based on analysis of activities performed by social pedagogues working in elementary and secondary schools (social pedagogues had already worked in schools in Banská Bystrica, Lučenec, Trenčín, etc. for a longer time) and in compliance with the Slovak applicable legislation it is possible to define social pedagogues' activities in the school environment.

Social pedagogues carry out primary prevention of socio-pathological behaviour, and also secondary prevention in schools with problem behaviour. Professionalization of socio-pathological behaviour prevention in the school environment has been accentuated in several Slovak and European documents focused on the prevention of socio-pathological phenomena, e.g., the National Drugs Strategy (2013–2020) pointing to the professional character of prevention implementation and the EU Drugs Strategy (2013–2020), to mention some.

Social pedagogues are qualified to perform primary and secondary prevention, as well as other socio-educational work.

Carrying out preventive work effectively requires prediction of the probability of a given phenomenon or phenomena occurrence and consideration of the choice of methods and forms of action in the field both of primary and secondary prevention in the school environment.

Currently, there is still a considerable problem of elementary and secondary school children experimenting with drugs, whether legal or illicit. TAD and ESPAD school surveys elucidate the situation not only in Slovakia, but also in other countries. Their outcomes show that implementation of effective prevention of drug addiction is inevitable.

It is typical of the current situation that also new negative phenomena are becoming widespread. Media and information technologies have a vast positive potential; they have penetrated and keep on penetrating into many areas of our lives. Their use has brought, in addition to many benefits, also various risks or threats, especially to children and youth (Borowska, T., 2009, Huk, T., 2012, Juszczak, S., 2012). At present, a serious problem is the so-called cyber-bullying, i.e., electronic bullying (Kyriacou, Ch., Zuin, A., 2016). It is abuse of mobile phones and internet to send aggressive, hateful and harming messages or intimidate persons, as the case may be. Especially the anonymous environment of the Internet is a considerable danger in this respect. Electronic or cyber bullying, despite the absence of actual physical strength, is very mean and dangerous. The following can be given as examples: harassing and threatening by e-mails or text messages, posting humiliating pictures or videos on the Internet, blogs (Internet journals), spreading false or misrepresented information, modified photos, etc., spreading various information under the name of an unsuspecting victim, etc.

Cyber-bullying can grow into cyber-stalking. Stalking is a term meaning repeated, long-term, systematic and escalating persecution of various forms and intensity. We speak of cyber-stalking when the attacker uses ICT (chat, social networks, etc. to induce a feeling of fear in the victim). Another type of risk behaviour is sexting, the possible negative consequences of which young people are not aware of. It occurs also among preadolescents and adolescents (Kopecký, K., 2012). Sexting is electronic distribution of text messages, selfies - photographs or videos of oneself, with sexual content. Most frequently it is distribution of erotic photos or videos between partners. However, after a break-up either partner may spread such materials via mobile phones or the Internet. In relation to the virtual space, one should be warned against cyber-grooming, which is an Internet user's action evoking false trust in the victim and persuading the victim to meet personally. The purpose of such behaviour is sexual abuse, physical violence or abuse of the victim for pornography or prostitution.

The core of the prevention of inappropriate use and risks of the Internet, computer games, mobile telephony and texting is in the following steps: recognize early warning signs (school work getting worse, fatigue, loss of interests and good friends), set clear rules for work with the computer, as well as use of the mobile phone, place the computer so as for it to be seen by adults and prevent its improper use (pornography, violent games). It should be explained to elementary and secondary school children that the Internet may be dangerous. They must be aware of the fact that they can never know for certain who is on the other side. They should observe the rule not to disclose personal data, photographs, financial situation, etc. on the Internet or via the mobile phone.

Social pedagogues in schools actively participate in dealing with pupils' problem behaviour and intervene in the case of pupils' problem behaviour. Elementary and secondary school teachers encounter more or less serious problem behaviour in pupils more and more often (Rahman, S. & Abdulah, Z., 2013). Pupils' deviant behaviour and violation of school rules are becoming a serious problem requiring continuous attention from the point of view of preventive activities as well as effects of sanctions and effective solutions.

Currently, the increase in pupils' aggressive behaviour is becoming a considerably serious problem (Forsberg, C. & Thornberg, R., 2016, Hollá, K. & Kurincová, V., 2013). The aggressive behaviour of elementary and secondary children may lead even to crime. Such conduct by pupils is getting increasingly daring and cruel. While in the past aggressive behaviour and bullying were widespread especially among pupils, at present there are many cases of aggressive behaviour towards teachers.

Social pedagogues screen for threatened pupils, especially pupils threatened by a socially disadvantaged family environment and negative peer groups. They pay special attention to missing classes, unexplained absences, naturally, but they are interested also in the causes of explained absences.

Social pedagogues as counsellors provide counselling to pupils, teachers and pupils' parents or legal representatives. Social pedagogues in schools provide educational and social counselling.

Social pedagogues as diagnosticians carry out socio-pedagogical diagnostics. They focus on the diagnostics of the school and classroom climate and the diagnostics of social relations in the classroom.

Social pedagogues actively work with pupils coming from a socially disadvantaged environment. In accordance with the applicable legislation, social pedagogues often perform socio-educational work in the field. Social pedagogues in school should pay special attention to Roma pupils coming from families failing to

adopt common socially accepted norms and failing to provide adequate conditions for the development of their children. Child development is determined by family background and therefore appropriate attention should be paid to school-family cooperation, which can be actively supported by social pedagogues. Family is the dominant factor of socialization, and, as noted by B. Kraus (2015), socialization may take place in an environment of a different standard, different quality, and therefore stimuli (persons) undesirable in terms of optimum personality development may cause the resulting conduct to divert from generally accepted norms. Precisely the family may be the source of undesirable stimuli, as well as the source of strong protective factors (e.g., strong emotional ties between parents and children, clear rules, proper care, enough time for the child, etc.).

Social pedagogues co-operate with parents and pupils' legal representatives. The school-family cooperation is extremely important in general, but also in the prevention of socio-pathological behaviour. It is inevitable when dealing with a pupil's problem behaviour. What is especially urgent is cooperation with families of pupils coming from a socially disadvantaged environment. In the Slovak Republic, it concerns especially poorly socialized Roma families. At present, despite the effort of school institutions to involve parents in the school life as actively as possible, there are still many barriers and prejudices in the family-school relationship, in particular in Roma families. As indicated by D. Kopčanová (2014), attributes of the school failures of Roma children make it clear that parents' attitude to education is of great importance. If actual cooperation is established between parents and school, positive results are being developed within the development of greater trust between school and family; parents and teachers work as a team to create positive learning experience in pupils and pupils benefit from work of adults' cooperative teams. Good cooperation with parents supports effectiveness of teachers' and other professionals' work with pupils. The cooperation should be based on collaboration and effective communication. The relationship should include mutual acceptance, respect and tolerance. School social pedagogues could also contribute to the improvement of this situation. As mentioned by L. Blašítková (2016), in the majority of schools where a social pedagogue works there is a higher percentage of Roma pupils. Cooperation with the family from a socially disadvantaged environment is demanding, which has been confirmed also by the findings of the State School Inspection. Parents focus only on care for the material welfare of their children, they care less for their academic achievement, compulsory school attendance or help with their homework.

Social pedagogues cooperate with specialists. The head teachers of schools employing social pedagogues emphasise the fact of being relieved by social

pedagogues of communication with specialists outside of the school, e.g., with the Department of Social and Legal Protection and Curatorship, Centres for Pedagogical and Psychological Counselling and Prevention, Police, etc.

Social pedagogues are actively engaged in the area of conflict mediation. They play the role of a neutral person, a mediator, to help to settle conflicts in school.

Based on the results of the interviews with the social pedagogues, it may be stated that teachers need help especially in dealing with pupils' educationally problematic behaviour and subsequently in its prevention. What is interesting is also that no difference was found between the responses of social pedagogues working in elementary schools and social pedagogues working in secondary schools. There is a more obvious difference between social pedagogues financed from projects – they are more burdened with administrative work, writing various statements and reports.

Conclusion

The profession of social pedagogue in school has been called for by the increase in socio-pathological phenomena within the general society, but also directly in the school environment. Elementary and secondary schools should employ social pedagogues to deal with prevention and solution of pupils' problem behaviour at a professional level. Social pedagogues have qualifications to carry out primary and secondary prevention as well as other socio-educational work. School social pedagogues as professional staff are helpful to pupils, school management, teachers and parents or pupils' legal representatives, which has been confirmed by schools employing social pedagogues for several years (e.g., Trenčín, Lučenec, etc.).

In the 2014/2015 school year social pedagogues were employed in Slovak elementary schools in a greater number within the PRINED project (Project of INclusive EDucation). The task of the national PRINED project was to support the inclusive environment in kindergartens and elementary schools with the aim to prevent the unjustified inclusion of Roma pupils in the system of special schools and to support inclusion of pupils coming from marginalized Roma communities through formation of inclusive teams. The fact that the PRINED project finished on 30 November, 2015 should be regarded as negative. The benefits of the function of social pedagogue are testified to also by the fact that several school head teachers retained the social pedagogues in their schools even after the project termination, thus found other sources for their salaries.

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