DEVELOPMENT OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK IN SLOVAKIA AND THE CZECH REPUBLIC: CURRENT ISSUES*

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SUMMARY

Since the 1980s the social work profession has experienced its first quantitative and qualitative development in the former Czechoslovakia, nowadays the Slovak and the Czech Republic. One of the current issues of social work profession is its institutionalisation in the context of the school system.

The paper elaborates on the issue of institutionalisation of school social work in the postmodern society. With respect to the common history of the social work institutionalisation in both countries, the paper only depicts the situation in the Slovak Republic as a representative example. The current Slovak school legislation on the one hand defines complex professional help provided to pupils and their families, but on the other it completely fails to recognise the importance of the soci-

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al work profession. The authors discuss the causes of this unsatisfactory situation in the social work profession and outline the possibilities for its further development in the Slovak and the Czech school system.

INTRODUCTION

Following the so-called "Velvet Revolution" in 1989, Slovak schools have undergone essential changes. In their background, these changes feature the shifts in the recognition of the importance of education for the development of the knowledge-based society. Education has become a res politica. The school system reform has become a topic of discussions among specialists as well as politicians. A change may also be seen in the stances of individual persons – young people nowadays attach much higher importance to education than ever before, primarily in relation to their career advancement, financial remuneration, engagement in public affairs, etc. (Kováčová, 2007). In general, schools in Slovakia offer education for the future occupation of their graduates. At the same time, schools are expected to prepare children and the youth to become decent citizens who participate in building and developing the democratic society. In the course of pursuing these objectives, a variety of events and troubles may occur in the lives of pupils and their families hindering an efficient learning process. Nowadays, several professions provide assistance in dealing with these situations. On a global level, social work is undoubtedly one of these professions (Huxtable, 2012). Nevertheless, there are no social workers at Slovak schools. It can be concluded that social work is not institutionalised at Slovak schools as a profession that would help in tackling the problems and troubles experienced by pupils.

The purpose of the paper is to explain the reasons for the current state, so unfavourable for social work, and to outline the possible development of school social work.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Libor Musil (2008; 2012) discusses the issue of the social work identity in the Czech postmodern society. He observes the diversity of perception and an unclear offer of social work in the Czech society. He suggests that if social workers wish to gain appreciation and a mandate in the society they need to convince the society and other professions that they are able to offer unique services. Concurrently, they must be able to argue that there are specific problems at the solution of which they are experts.

On the other hand, Malcolm Payne (2005) discusses the process of social construction of social work. The stakeholders in this process do not only include social workers, their employers and clients, but also the society itself. Social workers are not the only ones who should strive for social prestige.

The process of social construction of social work is always influenced by particular conditions in a certain country. In Slovakia (similar to the Czech Republic), social work has been re-constructed as a profession since the 1990s.

Yet, the social prestige and the recognition of the need for professional help provided to pupils in relation to their school achievements in the Slovak (and the Czech) school education system took place in the 1970s. At that time social work was not considered a profession and it did not feature the basic attributes of a profession in the two countries in question.

The identification of social conditions is one the crucial issues to be discussed in relation to the possibility of establishing the social work profession in the school system and recognizing its importance.

The second part of this article discusses, based on the research findings, the selected social conditions for establishing the hitherto non-existing work position of a social school worker.

Explanation of the current state of the development of school social work in Slovakia is illustrated with the Slovak legislation on schools. The analysis thereof shows that the social work profession has not been de iure recognised in the school system yet.

Legislation on schools

The major acts which govern the primary and the secondary education in Slovakia include: Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on teaching and education, and Act No. 317/2009 Coll. on pedagogical and specialised staff. Both acts define the conditions for providing professional help to pupils and their parents. The help is provided primarily by psychologists, social and specialised pedagogues, who are most often the employees of *school facilities for school counselling and prevention* (hereinafter "counselling facilities") or direct employees of schools. The act on teaching and education distinguishes three types of help provided to pupils – psychological, special-pedagogical and social help. Social help is defined as "observation and evaluation of children's behaviour by methods, techniques and procedures corresponding to the latest findings of social pedagogy and the current state of practice; social counselling; socio-therapy; using the diagnostic methods of *social pedagogy*." Social help – as defined by the act – is the content of work of a social pedagogue. Social work as a profession is not defined by the act.

The act on pedagogical and specialised staff, which exhaustively defines professions which provide professional help to pupils, does not include the social work profession. It clearly defines only the following professions: psychologist, speech therapist, special pedagogue, social pedagogue.

The analysis of the content of individual professions leads to the conclusion that there is equivalence between these professions and the activities that are performed by school social workers in other countries. The highest degree of equivalence is found in the activities of a social pedagogue. This profession, as defined by the act, carries out prevention, intervention and counselling. Professional help provided by the social pedagogue is focused primarily on pupils exposed to socio-pathological phenomena and those from socially disadvantaged environments. The social pedagogue performs the tasks of social education, support of pro-social and ethical behaviour, social-pedagogical diagnostics of the environment and relationships, social-pedagogical counselling, prevention of social-pathological phenomena and re-education of behaviour. They also perform expert and awareness-increasing activities.

At Slovak schools, direct professional help to pupils in solving their social and life problems is also provided by pedagogues, i.e. teachers and assistant teachers. The assistant teacher is a relatively new position, defined in legislation since 2009. The content of this position is to work together with teachers in contributing to equal education opportunities and to help pupils with overcoming various kinds of barriers.

Nearly every school provides educational counselling through its pedagogues – school counsellors. The objective of this professional help is to contribute to the management of personal, educational, professional and social needs of pupils. The school counsellor also provides career guidance. Counselling is provided not only to pupils but also to their statutory representatives and the school staff.

To summarize, the *social work profession is unrecognised in the Slovak legislation on schools*. Activities which are identified at the international level as those of school social workers are, in Slovakia, carried out by other professions, primarily by pedagogues.

Obstacles to the development of school social work in Slovakia and the Czech Republic – selected research findings

School social work is defined as a specific area of the social work practice (e.g. Speck, 2009; NASW, 2012). Its development in individual countries is always determined by the specific social environment. Michaela Skyba (2013), inspired by

work of Gary L. Bowen (2004), emphasises the use of the eco-system perspective in relation to the institutionalisation of school social work. Several frameworks/systems need to be taken into account at constructing school social work. The social framework encompasses the analysis of the structure of an individual community or a region and the processes taking place within them, socio-economic and demographic characteristics, resources, standards affecting the school functions and availability of services. The organisational framework is formed by the school promoters. The institutional framework is represented by the state policy on education with its legislative and financial tools.

The present identification of social obstacles to the development of school social work refers to the social construction of social work (Payne, 2005). The main groups of these obstacles are searched for at the level of profession, especially the intra-disciplinary discussion on identity, at the level of society as expressed, for example, by the prestige and the recognition of the social work professional mandate, and at the school system level. Michaela Skyba (2013) has made a pilot field study within the framework of her doctorate. She focused on the possibility of establishing the social worker position at school in the selected region of Slovakia. She used the methodology developed by Tatiana Matulayová, which was also employed in the design-research examination carried out within the framework of the SGS FP project at the Technical University of Liberec in two selected regions of the Czech Republic.

In both studies, respondents were asked to express the degree of their agreement with certain claims (on a scale from 1 (very important) to 5 (completely irrelevant)). To interpret the findings, it may be of importance to mention that the Slovak research group was comprised of elementary school teachers in a selected city (N = 187). The Czech respondents, apart from the teachers (accounting for 70 % of the research sample, with a total of 648 respondents), also include psychologists, special pedagogues and social workers.

Table 1. Conditions for institutionalisation of the school social worker position

Statement	Median Slovak Republic	Average Slovak Republic	Median Czech Republic	Average Czech Republic
Legislation on schools needs changes.	1	1.75	4	3.55
It is necessary to earmark some financial resources for covering the labour cost of school social workers.	1	1.58	3	2.61
It is necessary to prepare schools and counselling facilities for introduction of the new profession.	2	1.94	3	2.57
It is necessary at the initial stage to establish the conditions for acquisition of proper qualification to carry out school social work.	2	1.92	2	2.33
It is necessary at the initial stage to carry out representative researches to identify and confirm the need for school social work in Slovakia.	2	2.28	1	1.55
It is necessary to arrange for cooperation between the ministry of education and the ministry of social affairs.	1	1.63	3	3.41

In spite of the aforementioned disproportion between the two individual research groups, the acquired data is interesting. It, at least, indicates certain differences in the way of perceiving the importance of individual obstacles to the institutionalisation of the position of school social workers on the part of the Slovak and the Czech respondents.

The Slovak respondents see the financial resources as the most important prerequisite, followed by the inter-ministry cooperation and the amendment to the legislation on schools. On the other hand, the Czech respondents emphasise the importance of the representative research which would confirm the need for school social work. The second most important prerequisite is to establish the conditions for the acquisition of proper qualifications to carry out school social work.

Absence of research in school social work

In the Slovak specialised literature in the field of social work, the coverage of issues concerning school social work is lacking (with a few honourable exceptions, e.g. Labáth, 1999; Matulayová, 2006; Matulayová, 2008).

We think that the aforementioned absence corresponds to the missing public demand. As demonstrated, the legislation on schools does not define the social work profession, and social workers are not of school employees.

In contemporary Slovakia, there is no representative research which would respond to such crucial questions as:

- What are the arguments in favour of the institutionalisation of school social work?
- What are the obstacles that hinder the institutionalisation of school social work?
- Do the pedagogical and specialised staff declare a need for the institutionalisation of the school social worker position?
- What duties and competencies are expected from school social workers?
- What kind of pupils' problems would call for an intervention by school social workers?
- What are the target groups which school social workers should work with?

As demonstrated, the Slovak and Czech pilot study indicates a missing demand for research on the part of the professions within the school system. The said finding confirms our thesis that in the Slovak as well as in the Czech school system the social work profession is not recognised as necessary for solving pupils' problems. The described situation may correlate with the relationship between social work and social pedagogy.

Relationship between social work and social pedagogy

Social work has developed in Slovakia in the form of a scientific discipline and a tertiary school study since 1991 (when the first Department of Social Work was established at the Faculty of Education, Comenius University in Bratislava) as a reaction to the public demand caused by massive changes in all the spheres of social life following the so-called Velvet Revolution in 1989. Social work as a profession and a science is completely new in the Slovak society. The process of institutionalisation is still pending, for instance, in legislation. The intra-disciplinary discussion about its identity is still in progress (e.g. Musil, 2008).

In the Slovak discourse, the question of identity and definition of social work is addressed through the comparison with social pedagogy (e.g. Határ, 2009). At present, both disciplines are seen as independent. Unlike social pedagogy, social work is not institutionalised in terms of the Slovak and the Czech legislation on schools.

In the academic discourse, issues of convergence of social pedagogy and social work are rarely discussed; as well as the issues of educologisation of social work.

Anna Tokárová (17) emphasises and explains the educologic dimension of social work. "The paradigm emphasising the educologisation of social work is based on the opinion that a social work activity is always of educational or teaching nature..." Social work and the traditional as well as the modern pedagogy (educology) correlate and are close to each other (Tokárová, 2003, 55–57).:

- historically – they have developed concurrently (in both practice and theory),
- many goals of social work are achieved through the process of teaching and education,
- the core of many social work activities lies in education and teaching,
- they jointly, but in their own specific manners, ensure qualified intervention in the process of socialisation and re-socialisation.

Absence of education of social workers – specialists in school social work

At present, the very first prerequisites for the preparation of future social workers who may perform the position of school social workers once they finish appropriate education are emerging. In the framework of undergraduate study programs, many universities offer a social work course focused on school social work. The objective of the course is to teach students how to identify social groups meeting one another in the school social environment, to be familiar with their interests and problems which they bring into the school environment or which they generate as a result of the coexistence in the common school rooms, and to teach students what the opportunities of social work in the school environment are.

At present, the bachelor's study program within the Slovak tertiary education of social workers is too general according to the education standards. The specialisation in a certain field of social work may only be achieved as late as in the master's study program. School social work is not available for specialised study at all. In the Czech Republic, the study program focused on school social work has been available within a master's program at the Technical University of Liberec since the academic year 2012/2013.

Potential for further development of school social work in Slovakia and the Czech Republic

The potential for further development of school social work in Slovakia and the Czech Republic is seen on a theoretical level rather than in school practice. In

Slovakia, there are some isolated projects aimed at examining the introduction of the school social worker function, but the profession as such has not been institutionalised yet.

The future development of school social work as a specialised discipline and profession is dependent on the abilities and willingness of social workers to negotiate and argue in favour of its recognition.

Social workers have multiple tools to use. Research is undoubtedly one of these tools. Namely, research would provide evidence on opinions of individual stakeholders in the social construction of social work about the potential for its further development in the school system.

Top quality specialist periodicals, which would stimulate discussion within this specialised area of social work, are also very important for the development of social work. In the Slovak environment, there are no specialised magazines for individual fields of social work as yet. Slovak experts have so far published their academic articles in the joint Czech-Slovak magazine Sociální práce/Sociálna práca (Social Work). The second issue of the magazine published in 2013 dedicated to the issues of school social work has shown the potential of the topic for the intradisciplinary discussion.

The development of social work may also be supported by the tertiary education institutions, e.g. by offering study programs focused on the issues of school social work.

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RAZVOJ ŠKOLSKOG SOCIJALNOG RADA U SLOVAČKOJ I U ČEŠKOJ REPUBLICI: AKTUALNI PROBLEMI

SAŽETAK

Profesija socijalnog rada u bivšoj Čehoslovačkoj, danas u Republici Slovačkoj i Češkoj Republici, od kraja 80-ih godina 20. stoljeća kvantitativno i kvalitativno se razvija. Jedna od aktualnih tema je uključivanje socijalnog rada u školski sustav.

U prilogu se raspravlja o uvođenju školskog socijalnog rada u postmodernom društvu. S obzirom na zajedničku povijest socijalnog rada u obje zemlje, prikazana je situaciju u Republici Slovačkoj kao primjer. Iako aktualno školsko zakonodavstvo definira pružanje složenih oblika stručne pomoći učenicima i njihovim roditeljima, ne prepoznaje važnost profesije socijalnog rada.

Autorice raspravljaju o uzrocima ovog nezadovoljavajućeg statusa profesije socijalnog rada te opisuju mogućnost daljnjeg razvoja profesije socijalnog rada u slovačkom i češkom školskom sustavu.

Ključne riječi: *institucionalizacije socijalnog rada, školski socijalni rad, socijalni radnik u školi.*