

## THE SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKER'S AGENDA THROUGH THE EYES OF TEACHERS

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**Abstract:** The aim of the presented part of the research is to map teachers' views on the problems of pupils and their families falling within the competence of a social worker, as well as to focus on the activities of school social workers that are desirable in solving children's problems. The research sample consists of 398 respondents from primary and secondary schools in the Košice and Prešov regions, with the average age of 38.9 years, and the average length of respondents work experience of 13.4 years. Based on the analysis of the results, it can be concluded that the scope of work of the school social worker primarily includes the area of counselling on the social security system and social and legal protection of children provided to pupils, parents, teachers; assessment of the family environment of pupils; cooperation with the pupil's family, social welfare authorities, other institutions, organizations and activities aimed at preventing socio-pathological phenomena at school.

**Keywords:** School social work. Activities of school social workers. School success. Children from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

### 1 Introduction

At present, the profession of school social worker in Slovakia does not enjoy a good position. The current situation features the absence of legislative enshrining of this job position, which results in, for example, the integration of work tasks into other school environment professions not fully prepared in terms of time and expertise to face the current problems of children and youth. In this context, the present paper introduces selected results of the research carried out in the academic year 2018/2019. The paper aims to offer partial findings of the research on identifying the factors of institutionalization of school social work in Slovakia, which show teachers' view of activities and problem areas characteristic of school social work in our country. The interest is focused on two of the basic levels of school social work, which are also considered as conditions for its institutionalization.

There is no doubt that school social work has an irreplaceable role worldwide in addressing the diverse problems of children and youth. The establishment of its theoretical foundations dates back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and is related to the definition of the school social workers workload, which would include key areas concerning the optimization of school conditions and the child's position in the school system, school attendance support and children's literacy. The list of scholars, whose research activities have made it possible to shape the competency model of school social workers worldwide includes the following authors: Oppenheimer (1925); Alderson and Kirshef (1973); Costin (1969); Allen-Meares (1995; 2004); Dupper (2003); Constable (1999); Webb (2003); Openshaw (2008); Speck (2009) et al.

In Slovakia, social work is currently developing in diverse spheres in accordance with its multidimensionality and transdisciplinarity<sup>1</sup>. However, the school environment remains the domain of teaching and other assisting professionals. The absence of the definition of school social work in the school environment and in the area of legislation is also reflected in its absence in public awareness.

On the other hand, it is worth noting that, within the European context, we are facing a number of challenges today, as reflected in the National Action Plan for Children 2013-2017. These

challenges relate in particular to the lack of provision of services for children and their families and the lack of child protection. As a result, phenomena such as exploitation, neglect, exclusion, discrimination, limited access to information and education or social protection and health care persist. At the national level, there are also many current issues relating to the protection of the rights of, in particular, vulnerable groups of children and extending to the sphere of social work, which could contribute significantly to their solution in cooperation with other relevant actors.

### 2 Methodology

In view of the above, we focused on teachers' views on the issue of school social work, as they are the key actors spending most of their time with children and knowing the school environment intimately or the current problems of the educational process. The main objective was to find out the factors of institutionalization of school social work in selected primary and secondary schools in the Košice and Prešov regions in Slovakia.

The research questions posed in the present paper concerned the definition of the range of problems of pupils and families the solution of which falls within the competence of school social worker and what activities performed within this profession are desirable in solving the problems of individual subjects. The research sample consisted of 398 respondents, 71 (18%) men and 297 (75%) women, while 30 (7%) respondents did not respond. The average age of respondents was 38.9 years and the average length of work experience was 13.4 years in the positions of headmasters, deputy headmasters, class teachers, teachers, educational advisors and special education pedagogues.

The selection of the research sample was non-random, occasional, while primary and secondary schools in Košice and Prešov region of Slovakia were addressed. The data collection was carried out in the academic year 2018/2019 using a questionnaire created by T. Matulayová, which was modified and supplemented on the basis of Skyba's preliminary research and research works. More closely to the research methodology Skyba (2014).

#### 2.1 Specific issues falling within the competence of school social workers

The following part of the questionnaire directly verified the perception of the position of the school social worker by identifying specific issues that the school social worker should be involved in. We focused our attention mainly on the question whether respondents consider it desirable that the school social worker should participate in solving specific selected problem areas. Because of the scale chosen, based on the average score obtained (Figure 1), we can conclude that the higher the average score obtained, the more respondents consider it potentially desirable to involve the school social worker in solving the problem area. According to the respondents, the work of the school social worker is particularly desirable in the following problem areas: truancy, learning problems resulting from the socially disadvantaged environment of the pupil's family, learning problems resulting from different language and cultural environment of the pupil.

<sup>1</sup> The issues are also discussed by Poklebová (2013), who puts them in the context of interdisciplinary cooperation.

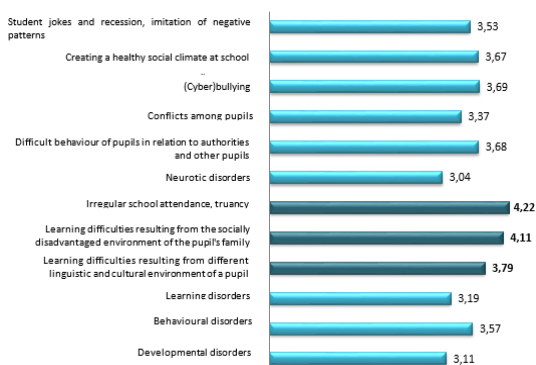


Figure 1 Average respondents' scores on the issue of school social worker role in selected areas

Similar results were obtained in the research conducted by Skyba (2014). The problem areas identified by the respondents can be included in the issue of social disadvantage, which is particularly relevant in Slovakia in the context of children's school success (e.g., Skyba 2014; Gažovičová et al. 2010; Vančíková, Havířová Balážová, Kosová, Vaněk and Rafael 2017; *National programme for the development of education 2018-2027*; Huttová, Gyarfášová and Sekulová 2012, etc.).

Within the framework of legislation, socially disadvantaged environment is considered to be one that does not offer the child optimal conditions for its development for several reasons, which may concern the area of fulfilling individual family functions, financial security, education of parents and their employment, housing, language ability of a child, segregation and social exclusion<sup>2</sup>. Children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are thus characterized by the social status of the family, which may be a disadvantageous factor. The lack of resources and unsatisfactory conditions disrupt the interaction between parents and children, as well as parents and school (see e.g. Zipper and Simeonsson 2011). Children from different cultural and social backgrounds often have reduced motivation to attend a school where they often face misunderstanding, mockery, prejudice, etc.. There are a number of closely related circumstances that reduce the school success of these children.

As stated by Gallová Kriglerová (2010), it is difficult to accurately determine the number of children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. A certain clue may be provided by monitoring the statistics with regard to meal- and education subsidy program. Although the statistics data imply a slight decrease<sup>3</sup> if compared with last year, the children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds still represent a significant number, which may partly explain the respondents' inclination in identifying the issues mentioned above. Other explanations may be offered by some research results (e.g. Skyba 2014; 2018), according to which teachers' work overload and their responsibility constraints are accountable for the need for involving a relevant professional in order to ensure the cooperation with families thus addressing the social aspects of the selected issues even of children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

## 2.2 Assistance of school social workers in pupils' school success

One of the aims of the present study was to discover to what extent a school social worker is perceived as an expert in fulfilling specific tasks in the educational environment. The assembled questionnaire battery included six items with closed

questions. The respondents could choose from a set of assisting professionals and indicate who, in their view, ought to be responsible for specific activities. Through analyzing the frequency of respondents' individual responses (Table 1), it is possible to infer that the respondents consider a social worker an expert whose chief responsibility is regarded as that of providing counseling for pupils, parents, teachers in the matters of the social security system and social and legal protection of children, assessing of a pupil's family environment if certain issues arise, cooperating with a pupil's family, welfare authorities and other institutions, and being involved in the activities aimed at preventing socio-pathological phenomena in schools. Consistency with the results given by Skyba's (2014) research conducted in 2012 was observed also in this particular case.

Table 1 Analysis of the frequency of tasks undertaken with regard to a person's expertise

	Teacher	Special education teacher	Psychologist	Social worker	Σ
Assessment of a pupil's family environment in case of occurrence of certain issues	37	29	87	245	398
Organization of activities aimed at preventing socio-pathological phenomena in schools	55	80	105	158	398
Cooperation with a pupil's family, social welfare authorities, and other institutions and organizations	116	41	40	201	398
Providing counseling for pupils, parents, teachers, with regards to the social security system and social-legal protection	26	49	58	265	398
Assisting pupils with emotional problems and behavioral disorders in joining a peer group	45	63	237	53	398
Promoting a school, contributing to its positive public image	286	16	28	68	398
Σ	565	278	555	990	

Similarly, based on the average score obtained (the higher the score, the more desirable the item), it may be concluded (Figure 2) that, as indicated by the respondents, the responsibility of social counseling, a responsibility of all school social worker' selected responsibilities, is the one that would contribute most considerably to pupils' school achievement; this responsibility aims at early diagnostics and provision of counseling for parents and pupils in the matters of material and social needs.

<sup>2</sup> Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on Upbringing and Education sets out three criteria that must be met in order to identify the environment as being socially disadvantaging for the child in the educational process.

<sup>3</sup> In 2018, 53,554 children facing the risk of social exclusion received a subsidy to support the development of their eating habits; a subsidy to support education and meeting school obligations was provided to 51,286 children (Report on the Social Situation of the Population of the Slovak Republic for 2018). In total, the above-given numbers represent 13% of the total number of all pupils.

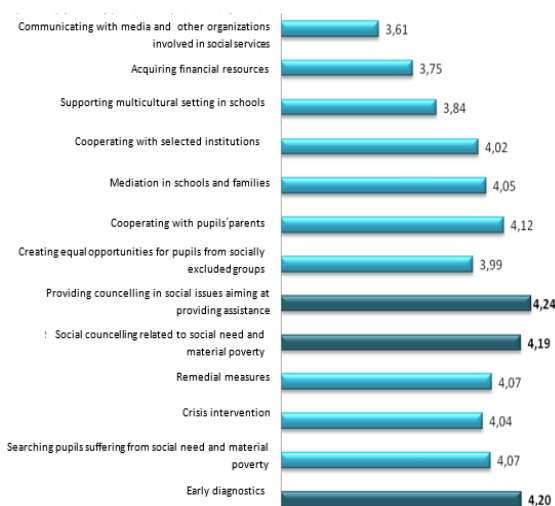


Figure 2 Description of the average respondents' scores regarding the question on the role of a school social worker in enhancing a pupil's success

It is necessary to pay particular attention to the school success of children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds because it predetermines their opportunities for successful management of their everyday life in terms of finding a job and minimizing the risk of reliance on social assistance.

As Dubayová and Čekanová state (2014), school success and school failure are important factors influencing the integration of pupils into society in terms of their future employability on the labor market. School success is a complex phenomenon whose components are difficult to precisely define. Efforts to conceptualize school success have resulted in the development of various diagnostic tools. Pupils' school success profile (SSP) is specified through identifying the relationships among its multiple determining areas. One of them is a pupil's social environment comprising various factors such as parental support, peer acceptance, family environment, etc.<sup>4</sup>. In order to determine success, its impact on the results achieved by pupils in the school environment is examined. Based on the survey results, certain programs with positive impact on the selected determinants are prescribed; these programs are accessible to school social workers.

A number of scholars have tried to define the concept of school success (e.g. Giavrimis and Papanis 2008; Helus 1982; Stork and Mares 2001 and others); they associate it with school results, a child's potential, motivation to learn, etc. Two Slovak scholars (Dubayová and Čekanová 2014) also attempted to define the concept. On the basis of their research, they identified several perspectives of the concept including a child's personality, and their emotional, social, working and behavioral characteristics. According to the above-mentioned scholars, the possibilities and perspectives of school social work may be chiefly seen in developing the social aspect of pupil's school success related to communicativeness, cooperation with peers, and respect for authorities, conflict resolution or assistance to peers.

The respondents of the present research expect the benefits of school social work in enhancing school success, particularly in cooperation with families and organizations, as well as in counseling, diagnostics and assessment, which, we believe, could contribute to identifying the major school success factors through determining and developing social support, children's strengths or their motivation to learn.

### 3 Conclusion

According to the National Association of Social Workers/School Social Work, school social workers play a significant role in addressing a variety of pupils' needs in their educational environment. The profession of a social worker may serve as an inseparable link interconnecting school, home and community. According to the Association, a social worker's responsibility is to assist pupils in achieving school success. School social workers work directly with school administration, as well as with pupils and their families thus providing mental health intervention, crisis management and support services. With regard to the given definition of competence, partial results of the present research may indicate that the profession of a school social worker in Slovakia is justified. In the present research, several areas were considered desirable for school social workers to deal with, namely counseling for pupils, parents, and teachers in the matters of the social security system and social and legal protection of children; assessing a pupil's family environment in case of issues; cooperating with a pupil's family, with social welfare authorities and other institutions and organizations; and, last but not least, taking preventive measures aimed at inhibiting socio-pathological phenomena at school.

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**Primary Paper Section: A**

**Secondary Paper Section: AM**