

## SCHOOL AND FAMILY COOPERATION WITH REGARD TO SCHOOLS PROVIDING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** School and family are generally considered to be important personality shaping environments for children that co-create their personality and influence their achievements. Establishing cooperation between them is a key factor in creating good living conditions in order to ensure a child's progress. The present paper introduces the theoretical framework of the inclusive school system, emphasizing the importance of school and family cooperation, while presenting the findings of research conducted by the authors. The selected findings in the area in question indicate the justification of the profession of a school social worker as an intermediary who, in line with respondents' opinions, should address, in particular, the problems of disadvantaged pupils, provide assistance by focusing on the consequences of the clients' problem situation (pupils, parents, etc.) and by working with families and other community members.

**Keywords:** Inclusion. School social work. Cooperation. School. Family.

### 1 Introduction

School is a social institution closely associated with important societal issues reflected in the ongoing transformation of the education system. Today's education does face several problems, including the need to modernize and equip schools, as well as the need to perceive and respond to new educational challenges, especially the inclusive nature of the school system, which is one of the priorities of the reform efforts in the education sector in Slovakia. The term inclusion is sometimes used as a synonym for desegregation. As Pauliniová and Tichý (2011) point out, despite the common elements, these are two different concepts. While desegregation primarily aims to eliminate racial and ethnic segregation of pupils, achieving inclusion is a longer-term process involving school system reform intended at achieving equal opportunities within the education system for all children and education for otherness, which is perceived as a positive value. In the context of inclusion development support, the school may be understood as a system of social interactions (Havlik and Kořa 2002), which requires a comprehensive understanding of the partial changes of its individual segments with respect to several components affecting inclusion in schools. Huttová, Gyrafášová and Sekulová (2012) argue that these components at the class and school level include, for example, cooperative problem solving, heterogeneous classes, differentiated instruction based on individual educational needs, mutual cooperation, positive attitudes of teachers towards all pupils or flexible supportive measures implemented by professionals including social services workers. Inclusion is an umbrella term that affects children's progress, their educational achievements and school success. Cooperation between the school, the family and the community is an important factor in supporting the children's school success and inclusive education. Since we perceive this topic to be highly up-to-date and in order to bring new knowledge of the possibilities of (school) social work in this area, we examined how teachers approach and perceive this issue. The aim of the paper is to present, through the results of research on the factors of institutionalization of school social work, the teachers' opinions on the cooperation of school and family with regard to support of inclusive environment in schools.

### 2 Methodology

The selected results presented in the paper are based on the findings of the research conducted. The research data were collected in the academic year 2018/2019. The study methodology was created by modification of the questionnaire

by T. Matulayová, based on the research methodology developed by Skyba (2014). The data were processed using a descriptive analysis in the SPSS 20 program. The selection of the research sample was non-random, occasional, while primary and secondary schools in Slovakia were addressed. The research sample consisted of 398 respondents, 71 (18%) men and 297 (75%) women, 30 (7%) respondents did not respond. The return rate of questionnaire was 84%. 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 results presented relate to the items concerning the institutionalization of the school social worker profession, their job description and current strategies for solving the problematic situation in the school process.

### 3 School and Family Cooperation

Nowadays, there is a growing demand for a school to become a place to support the activity and creativity of a child, which is reflected in the requirement to move away from the emphasis on mechanical instruction and towards active forms of teaching. The quality of the school comes to the forefront, which is accompanied by variability given by current social needs. It covers the aspect of personnel capacities and their stability, the value aspect given by work ethics, the target aspect in terms of concrete and clear objectives, the aspect of school and family cooperation, the aspect of environment given by optimum requirements and evaluation, etc. (Turek 2005; Poklembová 2013). In the present study we focus our attention mainly on the field of active cooperation of parents and school. Based on the results of the research, the respondents consider this area to be crucial for the work of the school social worker. According to the respondents, the school social worker should, within the scope of their responsibilities, devote their time (Figure 1) to providing counseling services to parents, pupils and teachers, recording problematic cases and ensuring interconnection of relations between school, teachers, pupils and parents.

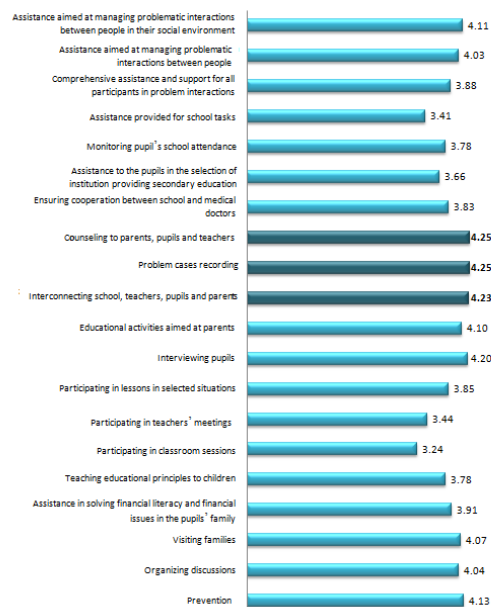


Figure 1 The average respondents' scores obtained in terms of the activities they believe should be carried out by the school social worker

The analysis uncovered two specific elements characteristic of the school and pupils' family cooperation. These include the limitation of cooperation only to the cases of problematic behavior (Figure 2) and obstacles to the cooperation process due

to the disruption of teachers' autonomy (Figure 3). Both aspects will be discussed in detail below.

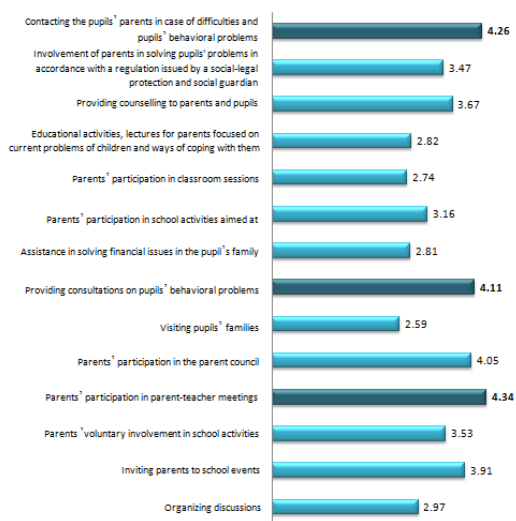


Figure 2 The average respondents' score obtained in terms of identifying the most common way of cooperation between school social worker and parents

Brezovská and Gránska (2018) point out that the relationship between parents and school should not be limited merely to contact and cooperation in the event of problems. They also note that the most common forms of contact in Slovak schools are in the form of parent-teacher meetings. Collaboration in the sense of showing regular interest and inquiring about the child's conduct in the school and family system, its progress, etc., is backgrounded. Positive examples in this respect, according to the authors, are the countries in which parents co-create an inclusive school system by taking the initiative themselves through the creation of formal institutions in which they address diverse topics and manifest interest in school life. Similarly, schools engage parents in school life by allowing them to organize extracurricular activities and to participate in promotional activities aimed at changes in the education system. The benefits of cooperation are evident for both school and parents. The authors stress the fact that, on the one hand, parents acquire partners in the school system to participate in solving the problems of their children, which eliminates the burden of feeling of non-shared responsibility in solving various issues of their children. On the other hand, the school acquires partners for organizing various activities for pupils, deeper insight into the family environment and information necessary for the development of an individual approach to pupils. The overall picture of successful cooperation in the context of increased interest in home and school life is also reflected in the positive image of school in the eyes of children, children's respect for teachers, and is a factor affecting their school success. Brezovská and Gránska (2018) state that in this context dominant attention should also be paid to children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and the cooperation of the school and their parents, given that this increases the chances of children in education and successful completion of schooling.



Figure 3 The average respondents' scores in terms of obstacles in the current cooperation with pupils' parents

As Scholzová (2012) states, the partnership between school and parents has several benefits, such as planning joint activities, improving school success, creating opportunities for developing communication and coherence, etc.. However, it is questionable to what extent the cooperation and partnership between school and family is of positive value and when it can have negative consequences for the development of the child. This aspect is discussed in detail by Vagačová (2018), Skyba (2018), Majerčíková (2015) and others.

There are several models describing and analyzing the relationships between school and family. Today, the most debated model is a model of shared responsibility, which accentuates providing more space for parental involvement in school-related affairs, as well as the shared responsibility of school and parents for school achievement and pupil's progress (Rawn 2003, in: Majerčíková 2015). However, too much emphasis on these aspects also causes some difficulties. In this context, Majerčíková (2015) mentions, in particular, the blurring of differences between the socializing environment of the school and the family and the disruption of their roles, the disadvantaging of families and parents in their relationship with the school (pupil's success due to the involvement of parents carries the risk of excluding the children whose parents do not engage in school activities).

Another difficulty is the limitation of the teacher's pedagogical autonomy in terms of excessive interference of parents in the teacher's competence. The latter dimension has also been proven by the preset research results, showing that teachers consider the failure to respect their autonomy to be one of the major obstacles to the current cooperation with pupils' families. Other relatively frequent answers included an obstacle related to parents' lack of interest and undermining the teachers' professional judgment.

#### 4 The role of school social work in the development of an inclusive school

Based on the individual findings, the following question was posited: What responsibilities, in teachers' views, should a school social worker have if those are to correspond to teachers' notion of the relevant assistance and its forms? Out of the available options, our starting point was the current necessity to support inclusion in schools. It is one of the key topics of reform efforts concerning the issues of the Slovak system of education. In the Slovak context, the topic of inclusion in schools was analyzed by Kriglerová, Medřová, Rapošová and Šedovičová (2015), Gallová Kriglerová and Gažovičová, eds. (2012), Huttová, Gyárfášová and Sekulová (2012) and some others. We share their understanding of inclusion as a phenomenon in which pupil diversity is considered a positive feature that is rewarding to all the interactants. What is more, the term also encompasses the necessity to address a variety of children's needs, which would prevent their exclusion.

The philosophical underpinnings of inclusive education are based on not considering pupils' problems as their traits, but rather on taking into account especially the characteristics of the situation, the school and the social context in which there are barriers hindering the children's full participation in the educational process and thus violating their right to the same quality of education. The rudimentary principles that should enhance inclusion comprise the micro-level taking the form of encouraging the participation of all pupils in education as well as of those deemed different for various reasons, as well as the macro-level in the form of policy-making and policy-setting for the diverse needs of the pupil population. Other principles according to Huttová, Gyárfášová and Sekulová (2012) include the requirement to study diversity as an ordinary phenomenon or to provide quality education in the form of teaching and assessment strategies aimed at increasing the potential of all pupils. The items in the questionnaire echoed the features of an inclusive school, among which the present authors rank a variety of factors, such as collaboration among school assisting professionals, application of cooperative learning and problem solving, differentiated attitude to learners' needs and alternative

and innovative learning strategies, involvement of straightforward and active school management, application of a flexible system of support measures (having inevitable professionals including a social worker), cooperation with families and the community, etc.

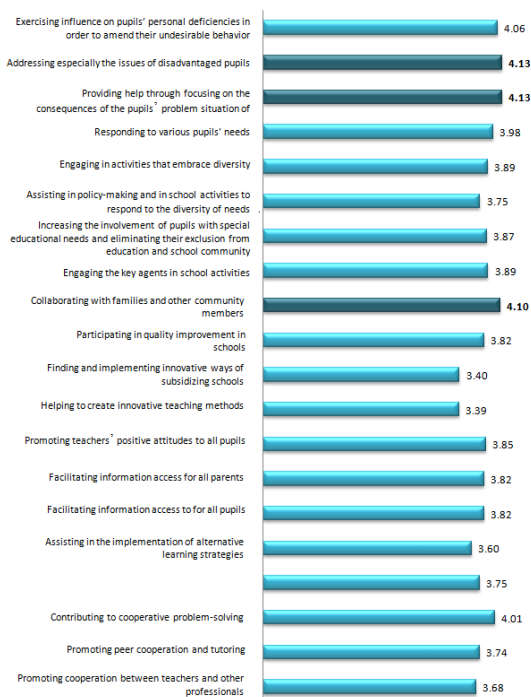


Figure 4 The average respondents' scores in terms of the goal the individual work tasks carried out by a school social worker

According to the respondents, a school social worker (Figure 4) should address the disadvantaged pupils' needs; provide assistance through focusing on the consequences of their clients' (pupils, parents, etc.) issues and working with families and other community members.

The respondents' ideas correspond with the results of the research study conducted by Skyba (2018). In addition to the obligation to focus on collaborating with pupils of pupils' families, the respondents also stressed such an idea of social work that does not primarily address the problematic interactions of a client with the entities in their neighborhood. Rather, they consider the social work as an activity that is associated with clerical activities and the provision of benefits in terms of focusing on the consequences of a problematic situation of a client. Such an understanding of social work often results in assisting entities' expectations that do not correspond to the mission and specific features of social work as a complex activity. It is its specific nature capturing the multidimensionality of a client's life situation including various circumstances or obstacles both on the client's side and the environment which may be responsible for a client's problematic situation. On a pragmatic level, a narrower understanding of social work may negatively affect the interaction between social workers and other assisting professionals and between assisting professionals and pupils and their families. It can also undermine the social work potential in enhancing a social change. At the same time, this is a circumstance preventing the full institutionalization of social work under current postmodern conditions<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> For more information see e.g. Musil (2010; 2013), Růžicková and Musil (2009), Skyba (2018). The issues of professionalization and establishment of social work are dealt with in more detail in Balogová (2013), Matulayová (2013), Levická (2017), Repková (2010), Navrátil (2005) and others.

## 5 Conclusion

Effective cooperation between school and family is an important aspect in the development of a child's personality. If there is no correspondence between the values promoted in school and in home environment, a conflict may arise, which, if left unresolved, may result in pathological phenomena in a child (Yaşaroğlu 2016). Based on the theoretical background and partial results of the authors' research, it is possible to conclude that the post of a school social worker is justified since s/he may potentially act as an intermediary between a school and a family. According to the respondents, the obstacles that hinder the implementation of this important prerequisite responsible for pupils' school success include a lack of respect for teachers' autonomy and undermining teachers' professional judgment.

The respondents believe that the factor hindering the development of the current school-family cooperation is the parents' disinterest in such a cooperation, which may also be clarified by the current trend in schools which tend to reduce the cooperation to counselling and attending the pupils' problematic behavior. In the respondents' view, a school social worker's responsibility is based on helping pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, and on providing connections between schools, teachers, pupils, parents and other community members. According to the respondents, a school social worker should primarily focus on the consequences of the children's problematic situation when tackling their issues. Such an understanding significantly narrows the scope of a school social worker's work and may be a factor that hinders the institutionalization of school social work in Slovakia as well as the dissemination of ideas of school social work as a profession which contributes to the advancement of inclusion in Slovak schools.

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**Primary Paper Section: A**

**Secondary Paper Section: AM**