

Possibilities of social work in the school environment with students with risk behaviors

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Abstract The socio-political changes that took place in the second half of 20th century had an impact even to the perception of the school as the basic institution in society. Ever since this period, increased emphasis has been placed on the cooperation of pedagogues with the other professionals working with the children and youth. Such multidisciplinary teams are merging and in the foreign countries (mainly in the USA, Great Britain, Germany, the Scandinavian countries, etc.) are social workers a fundamental part of them. Social workers are absent in the school environment in our conditions (Slovak and Czech republics). The purpose of this paper is to highlight why social workers should be established specialists in the school environment and part of multidisciplinary school teams. The paper presents a point of view of the elementary school pupil in the context of his social environment. Authors have therefore applied the mentioned problematics into the ecological perspective, in which it is appealed to the importance of ecological thinking while solving client's problem. This exactly emerges as the crucial issue in relation to prevention and intervention of problem behavior of children and youth. Authors consider it important to realize the broader links of relationships between the pupils family and the school as well as the pupil's environment, where the social and cultural systems and institutions belongs, that can be predictors of pupil's social risk behavior. Presented paper has theoretical as well as empirically-application character. In the theoretical part, the elementary school pupil and its social environment are characterized with an emphasis on the stressful situations in this development period. The empirical part of the article presents the main results of a pilot study aimed at finding the coherence between perceived social support and stress management strategies, as possible predictors of problem behavior of pupils in elementary schools.

Keywords: Ecological perspective. Socio-therapy. Social work in school. Coping.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The start of the school attendance, altogether with increasing requirements, poses for the majority of the pupils considerable volume of load. This load is massive mostly for the children who did not attend the kindergarten (Langmeier, Krejčířová, 2006). The child is under pressure as it has many responsibilities and

accountability for school results. Handling all school responsibilities requires certain effort, which is important for the child in order to gain confidence in their own abilities. What stays in the competence of the school and family is to support this effort, so that not handling of certain task will not evocate the feelings of failure and inferiority for child that would negatively affect his psychological development (Oravcová, 2006). Dupper (2010) draws attention to the fact that the school environment is founded on the authorities of the teachers, sometimes even fear from the authority of the teacher, which must be respected by pupil. The pupil finds himself in the passive role, what could expressively evoke the stress for some pupils. Medved'ová (2004) adds that the strict school order, testing, demands for the results from parents and even the school class environment can be stressful. Good or bad results at school furthermore affects the position of the child in the collective, which is very important for his/her relationships to others and to himself/herself (Langmeier, Krejčířová, 2006). At the beginning of the school attendance child gains the subordinate role of the pupil, which it must accept as well as the authority of its teachers. Child starts to be evaluated according to his/hers results, which must be deserved, not acquired automatically, which can be rather stressful (Končeková 2007).

According to Hanuliaková (2016), the school environment itself can be the trigger mechanism for social problems of the pupil. It might come to this in case that school lacks the space for individual self-realization, enforces patterns of behavior or disproportionately evaluates pupil behavior. Cold manners of teachers in the process of teaching and inappropriate communication with them, such as humiliation, threats, mockery and lack of positive motivation, can negatively affect the pupil too. For pupils, it may be can be stressful the demandingness of study or even inappropriate approach of teacher, for example, the preference of frequent exam or not objective assessment. Pupils needs to gain a regular positive motivation to study in order to better deal with the learning process. The absence of positive motivation can have a negative impact on the school results of the pupil. Matoušek (2003) points out that at the start of child's schooling, the family enters next development phase, what can cause the transitory family crisis. Parents begin to focus their attention on the school results of their children in this period, which can lead to the problems in two cases. Firstly, the case that family overloads the child with the intellectual demands (foreign languages class, tutoring, hobby groups etc.) or secondly,

the case that family resigns from childcare and all responsibility and control is left to the school. Fontana (2014) adds that the beginning of schooling can be stressful primarily for those children whose family has imprinted them different standards from standards prevalent in the school environment. This probability is increasing in families belonging to an ethnic minorities or to a groups of socially and economically deprived citizens, or in case that family with aggressive behavior is concerned. If the child starts to bring over the school values and norms to home, it can encounter the mockery or even punishment. The same applies vice versa, when the child from the family respecting different values and norms starts to enforce this behavior in school.

The conflict between different home and school standards can be solved by the child only if he or she will behave differently at home and at or rejects home or school. In case that child rejects the standards that apply to his family, it will cause personal identity problems, but in the latter case it will cause problems at school. The conflict between home and school is usually not caused by the child itself. It is extremely important for the school to find out in time that such a conflict has occurred and to involve the child in the intervention to mitigate the consequences of this conflict. As a suitable type of intervention, socio-therapy, which we consider to be the key method of intervention to solve the problem of pupils' behavior, as according to Šoltésová (2016) the goal of socio-therapy is to focus on improving relationships, activating the client, improving the client environment and the client itself. That is why we offer an ecological perspective application in the following section.

2. STUDENTS IN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

The application of the ecological perspective seems to be a good example of the intervention of problematic and risky behavior of pupils, as emphasis is placed on the importance of ecological thinking when solving the problem of the client. Interest in ecological concepts as well as their direct application to social work as a helping profession started in the 60s of the 20th century. The ecological perspective is a specific view of the profession of social work. The base is to look at human and his environment as a unified system that exists in a particular cultural and historical environment. We can understand human beings and their environment only if we look at them in the context of their relationship, which is called the ecosystem (Levická, 2012). The connection between humanity and nature is pointed out through the ecological perspective (Wronka, Bernasconi 2012). Pardeck (1988) characterizes the ecological perspective as a strategy for improving the social functioning of the client. This is an approach that allows a social worker to move from a micro level to a macro level of social intervention. According to Germain and Gitterman (2008), the ecological perspective aims at ensuring compliance between environmental requirements and the ability of an individual to cope with these requirements. Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2007) demonstrate that each individual is part of a multisystem consisting of a family system, group, organization and community. At the same time, they add that social work based on an ecological perspective has three basic orientations:

- a) client orientation and capacity to solve its problems,
- b) orientation on the interaction between the client and his surrounding systems,
- c) orientation to the system in order to contribute to the effective fulfillment of the client's needs.

The ecological perspective is based on the fact that the change in one part of the system causes change throughout the system, and hence this change occurs reciprocally (Howe 2009). Reciprocity of the system causes environment homeostasis. In the application to school social work, it is important to note that the pupil adapts to his or her environment as well as the environment is adapted to the pupil. They are constantly changing systems. In the case of a conflict between the pupil and his / her environment, a social worker should assess the pupil's environment and identify external resources that can help him to solve his / her problem (Jarolmen 2014). Bland and Esmalle (2012) point out that it is important to be aware of the broader connections between the pupil's and the school's family and the environment of the pupil, including cultural and social systems and institutions that can cause social problems for pupils. Skyba (2015) summed up individual definitions of foreign authors who deal with the environmental perspective in social work (Allen-Meares, Hollstein-Brinkmann, Bowen, Germain, Howe, Payne) and concludes that the ecological perspective helps school social workers:

- a) understand the organization of the school and its subsystems,
- b) understand the impact of the institution on the social functioning of the pupil,
- c) to acquire knowledge about a pupil from different sources and to systematize them,
- d) identify the influences that are involved in the pupil's problematic behavior,
- e) ensure comprehensive intervention at all levels,
- f) focus on pupil interaction and interaction - environment.

Several authors, whether foreign (Dupper, 2002, Openshaw, 2008, Franklin, Gerlach & Chanmugam, 2008, Bland & Esmalle 2012 atď.) or Slovak (Lábath, 1999, Matulayová, 2006, Kosurová 2013, Skyba, 2015) Point to the fact that indeed social workers are social welfare experts and appeal for the necessity of establishing social work in the school environment. Lichner and Šlosár (2017) use an ecological perspective in social work to explain the causes of specific risk behaviors of youth. They point to the fact that risk factors, whether at the level of the individual - pupil or at the level of the environment - family environment, school environment, community, etc. can help the social worker to explore, strengthen or change the social environment. Bland and Esmalle (2012) claim that socially-oriented social workers working with children and young people, whether in school or out-of-school environment, should focus on developing a pupil's coping strategy, developing their skills and competencies, but should also focus on school, so it would be sensitive to the needs of their pupils.

Generally speaking, the ecological perspective helps social workers in the school environment to look at the individual through his relationships with other people and the environment, which is the most effective view of the practice of school social work.

3. PILOT STUDY

Based on the analysis of social work in the context of the ecological perspective and the social problems that arise in the school and family environment, we have conducted a pilot study to look for a connection between perceived social support and coping strategies as potential predictors of problem behavior of children at elementary schools. In the following section, we offer basic results from the pilot study.

The survey sample consisted of 27 students at the second level of elementary schools aged 10-12. These were respondents who were in the puberty phase of development and transition to the second

stage of elementary school and at the same time the changes associated with it could act as stressful factors that can predict the occurrence of risk behaviors. The results of the pilot study suggest tendency that there may be a link between an incomplete family - a low level of social support - and risky behavior of pupils. Respondents from an incomplete family perceive a lower level of family social support than pupils coming from complete family. Also, pupils from an incomplete family achieved a higher risk behavior rate than pupils from a complete family ($x = 1,921$). The moderate positive correlation relationship also suggests that children with higher risk behavior score use maladaptive coping strategies that are also associated with low parental social support, confirming a strong negative correlation ($p = 0.005^{**}$). A strong negative correlation ($p = 0.006^{**}$) also occurred between relationships with parents and the use of maladaptation coping strategies, while the negative relationship of correlation suggests that the lower the score on the range of positive relationships with parents, the more often they used maladaptive coping strategies. A strong negative correlation ($p < 0.001^{**}$) shows that the lower the perceived rate of social support from parents, the higher the child's risk behavior. A strong negative connection was confirmed by the relationships with parents and risk behavior of pupils, while those respondents who have negative relationships with parents achieve higher rate of risk behavior.

As we have already outlined in the theoretical part, it is of the utmost importance for a primary school pupil to feel collectively accepted in school and accepted by his classmates. The results indicate the tendency for those pupils who achieve higher social acceptance scores to use more adaptive coping strategies, as opposed to respondents with low social acceptance in the classroom. For children in the pubescent period, it is also important to have a friendly relationship. A strong negative correlation suggests the link that those pupils who achieve a low score of perceived social support from friends have tendency towards risk behaviors. The results of the pilot study confirm the prediction that the low level of perceived social support is related to children's risk behaviors and the use of maladaptive coping strategies.

In the following section, we offer an author-created Model of Social Work in the School Environment, which was created based on the analysis of social work in the context of the ecological perspective and the results offered by the pilot study.

4. CONCLUSION

Social work in the school environment in Slovakia represents a relatively incomprehensible area of social work. Based on the fact that the school is a fundamental social institution and completes the educational process by which a child passes, we consider it necessary to respond to changes in social and school environment arise. Just Establishment of social work in the school environment, would enable to respond to the needs of students in solving their academic, social, emotional problems and intrapersonal conflicts that can be a predictor of risk behavior of students.

In this paper, we point out an elementary school pupil in the context of social environment and we have pointed to the possibility of prevention and intervention, which would social workers in the school environment can be applied, thus reducing the risk and socio-pathological behavior of children and youth.

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