

SUMMARY

In the context of current social changes, social work is faced with various challenges related to the consequences of modernization for the socialization of children. The emergence of new risks associated with maturing and acquiring of values of postmodern culture requires from social workers creative approach and flexible responses to the diversity of issues related to social functioning of students and their families. Therefore, sensitive assessments of the client's life situation, adaptation to new trends by using all available means and innovativeness in work with client become, in an effort to ensure the complexity of provided interventions, an essential part of the performance of social workers when working with different target groups in various environments. With regard on this, school social workers are an important part of teams of experts. They focus their attention on elimination of barriers in education, optimization of social interactions in school and outside the school environment and improve the quality of life of children and youth.

School social work is greatly enhanced in many countries. In some of them this profession has a stable position, while in other countries it represents a new, evolving sphere of social work practice seeking its role and place in the education system (Huxtable 2007). Several determinants that supported the entering of social work into the school environment and promoted its further development belong to the decisive factors stimulating its development. These mainly include social and educational problems of students, developing interdisciplinary cooperation, legislation, adoption of standards for school social work services, conferences, national and international professional associations, research, publishing activities, etc. The school has begun to be perceived as an important place for the intervention of social workers especially in the context of raising awareness of the circular causality between meeting the needs of children and their school success. Promoting the right to education as

a basic human right has become one of the key principle regulating the practice of school social work. The main impulses for its establishment in the early 20th century were the enactment of compulsory school attendance, recognizing of individual differences of students and the growing importance of education (Allen-Meares 2004). Perspective of school social workers on problems of pupils was strongly determined by socio-political situation during its development. Despite the diversity of perspectives on optimal dealing with the life situation the school social workers are always trying to improve the quality of life of children with an emphasis on promoting their personal fulfillment, potential and maintaining the dignity. School social work is considered for specific and applied sphere of social work which is trying to achieve an equal educational opportunities for all students. Its importance lies in the preventive activities with a focus on providing services to all students in an effort to eliminate threats arising from unsolved difficulties in social interaction.

The school social workers intervene in social and school environment of the child and at the same time they shape and optimize the conditions favorable for interaction between students, teachers and parents. They are involved into the identification of the children needs, intermediation of necessary services and building partnerships with families and the community in order to maximize resources, facilitate the effective provision of appropriate services and ensure communication between different actors (*School Social Work Association of America* 2014). Despite of the evidence about increasing difficulties of children in social functioning and in interaction with the school environment, the potential of school social work in Slovakia is still not recognized as a fully accepted and respected profession in the schools. School social work is also not explicitly anchored in the current legislation in the field of social work and education.

Overall, it can be stated that the social work faces several challenges today related to the low level of professional identity and unclear picture of its executive sphere. In the context of new social conditions, diversity of social practice and the weakening influence of traditional social expectations and directions of social behavior it is not easy to

define the current role and specificity of the profession. The process of postmodern institutionalization in our conditions is difficult also with regard to unclear position of social work during its previous development (Musil 2010, 2013). Different ideas of the establishment of professions in modern and post-modern era evoke the need to recognize this fact also in consideration the possibilities of establishment of school social work in the current circumstances. It is possible to build upon theoretical basis concerning postmodern institutionalization and professionalization of social work. In this context active involvement in negotiation process related to the conditions of performance is expected especially from the social workers. Promoting engagement of current and future social workers and their participation in supporting institutionalization processes of social work seems to be a necessary precondition for the gradual acquisition of legitimacy of school social work in Slovak schools.

It is possible to look on the topic, in addition to the theory of institutionalization, also through the lens of the ecological perspective, which is considered by leading authors as one of the key reference frameworks of school social work with an emphasis on reciprocal interactions among individuals and their environment. Concern not only about the client but also about environment is a specific domain of an action of social workers in schools. In an effort to adjust and optimize the interactions between all participants and to apply a holistic approach to solve problematic situations, school social workers are interested in students, parents, teachers, other teaching and professional staff as well as the classroom environment, school, family or community. The ecological perspective is present in key documents governing the performance of school social work abroad and is also reflected in the research and practice of social workers. Research topics are so focused, for example, on detection of risk and protective environmental factors that affect the resilience of children and their school performance. Consequently, the results of research and ecological context affect interventions based on strengths rather than on deficits. They are focused comprehensively and holistically and reflecting different dimensions of an individual's life situation.

Despite the strong position of the ecological perspective in school social work, it is also possible to see it using various theoretical approaches as in the case of social work. Perhaps this fact is the most obviously reflected in models of school social work, which integrates various reflections on providing services of school social workers. As well models represent the cognitive schemes revealing variable perspectives to ensure the continuity of everyday life and coping with problems in social functioning. Similarly as ecological perspective, the models based on differentiated theoretical positions have the strengths and the limits at the same time. As Alderson (1972) notes, the existence of a unified model is just a kind of illusion. Their real purpose is rather to create a platform for seeking professional orientation of school social work and to develop more efficient ways of working with clients.

The school social workers operate at the intersection of social and educational practice. It is therefore natural that their performance in school system is influenced by reforms and modernization of the education system. Demographic trends and additional changes accompanied by a shift to the issues of individual free choice, individual self-realization, weakening of solidarity, penetration of consumerism and commercialization into the life of children, significantly affecting the quality of childhood as an important concept of educational policy. In the context of current understanding of childhood and the position of the child several related issues arise. Drawing on the authors Buckingham and Tingstad (2007) we formulate the following issues: Does children's participation in a consumer culture mean weakening of continuity of the inter-generational relationships? Is it possible in the context of current trends that childhood would be free of commercial influences? What impacts does have the preference of consumer culture on healthy child development and their life trajectory? All these issues have fundamental importance for the adoption of policies in the field of education with aim to apply effective forms of access to children and youth and to ensure quality in their educational preparation with regard to their optimal integration in society.

Human rights dimension of this topic is also related to other risks threatening quality of childhood in our conditions. Although the new philosophy of education is based on the concept of equality in education, the learning outcomes of many children are affected by phenomena that they cannot influence. To this large group also belong children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds who are an important target group for social work striving to eliminate the handicaps arising from socially disadvantaged environment. Educational tracks of these children are interrupted by barriers in families but also in the education system. According to current research reports the school setting and education system reinforce an inequality in education of these students. Although according to the law several support services for the elimination of this phenomenon should operate in schools a common practice in schools is mostly different and mainly teachers have to deal with everyday problems of these pupils. Taking this situation into account it is relevant to consider that the existence of the position of school social worker could support the strategic objectives of the state policy in terms of protecting children and youth from negative social phenomena and early detection of factors determining the emergence and deepening problems of children in various aspects of their lives. We consider the opening of this discussion to be significantly relevant in the current period, when major emphasis in the context of school reform is on creating and ensuring inclusive school environment in practice of Slovak primary schools.

Relevant argumentation platform for further development of the presented topic is certainly research. In addition to systematization of knowledge base and specification of theoretical and methodological aspects of this issue this monograph is thus devoted to the identification of factors involved in the establishment of school social work in Slovakia through the opinions of experts working with children and youth. In the conducted research four areas were analyzed and interpreted: problematic situation of students and their families, target groups of school social work, tasks of the school social worker and conditions affecting the establishment of the position of

social worker in primary schools. Research findings revealed the need of systematic addressing of the issue of improving mutual interactions between the school and the student's family in the context of an increase of selected children's problems and low efficiency in their elimination from the side of current responsible practitioners and stakeholders. In this context a stronger reflection of several factors affecting the establishment of school social work and school success of students is also needed. These are particularly related to an increasing problems in the pupil population especially those related to the truancy and learning problems arising from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, teacher's overload, lack of communication and collaboration with parents, lack of awareness about school social work among practitioners, absence of legislative anchoring, lack of funds in the education sector, lack of preparedness of child protection workers for possible cooperation with schools social workers and lack of cooperation between schools and department of social affairs and among different professionals.

Effective cooperation helps not only to the stability of a team of professionals providing services to children and families but especially to meet stated goals. The school social workers abroad are considered for valuable members of the interdisciplinary team in order to address actual problems and to create innovation that may be helpful in the context of developing quality education systems sensitive to the current needs of children. The question is to what extent the need for school social work is reflected by the responsible actors in our country. Partial answers to this question are offered by this monograph. But we consider the conducting of further researches that could support the institutionalization of school social work and bring relevant answers to the questions on the need of social work services in schools as necessary. The main objective should be to develop the education system, which would respect and implement into practice the concepts of equality in education and equal opportunities that nowadays can be regarded as essential to promoting social cohesion.