

THE ROLE OF THE SOCIAL WORKER IN THE TRANSITION PROCESS OF A CHILD WITH AUTISM TO THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

ÚLOHA SOCIÁLNEHO PRACOVNÍKA V PROCESSE PRECHODU DIEŤAŤA S AUTIZMOM DO ŠKOLSKÉHO PROSTREDIA

Barbora KOLKOVÁ

ABSTRAKT

Príspevok si kladie za cieľ zistiť, akú úlohu má sociálny pracovník pri prechode dieťaťa s autizmom do školského prostredia z pohľadu riaditeľov špeciálnych škôl a špeciálnych tried základných škôl. Opýtali sme sa riaditeľov špeciálnych škôl a špeciálnych tried základných škôl, ako vidia prínos sociálneho pracovníka pri prechode dieťaťa s autizmom do školského prostredia. Na tento účel sme použili kvalitatívny výskum. Z rozhovorov vyplynulo, že sociálny pracovník v rôznej miere ovplyvňuje dieťa, rodinu a školu. Sociálny pracovník ovplyvňovaním dieťaťa podporuje jeho rozvoj v sociálnom prostredí, zabezpečuje kontinuitu v procese prechodu. Práca v multidisciplinárnom tíme podporuje efektívne vytváranie sietí a podporuje inkluzívnu klímu v školskom prostredí. Sociálny pracovník poskytuje rodine poradenstvo, podporu a ponuku participácie na fungovaní školského zariadenia. Do budúcnosti ostáva na Slovensku otvorená téma školských sociálnych pracovníkov, ktorí sú spravidla členmi multidisciplinárnych tímov v zahraničí.

Kľúčové slová: dieťa s autizmom, sociálny pracovník, tranzitné procesy.

ABSTRACT

The paper aims to find out what role the social worker has in the transition of a child with autism to the school environment from the point of view of principals of special schools and special classes of primary schools. We asked the principals of special schools and special classes of primary schools how they see the social worker's contribution in the transition of a child with autism into the school environment. We used qualitative research for this purpose. The interviews showed that the social worker influences the child, family and school to varying degrees. By influencing the child, the social worker supports his / her development in the social environment, ensures continuity in the transition process. Working in a multidisciplinary team supports effective networking and promotes an inclusive climate in the school environment. The social worker provides the family with counselling, support and an offer of participation in the functioning of the school facility. Until the future, the topic of school social workers, who are usually members of multidisciplinary teams abroad, remains open in Slovakia.

Key words: a child with autism. social worker. transit processes.

INTRODUCTION

Every child has the right to an individual approach that respects his differences, health status, social situation, abilities and possibilities. Our legislation defines three groups of children or pupils who need special support. These are children with

disabilities, children and pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and gifted children and pupils (Gymerska et al. 2019). These children need comprehensive support in inclusion, but at the same time, they need to be supported in maintaining their uniqueness. This paper aims to

describe the role of the social worker in the process of a child's transition to the school environment. Facuna (2016) states that there is a discussion in Slovakia about the introduction of social work in education. We can state that social work in schools is definitely a promising area, which needs to be given due attention in Slovakia as well.

1. Social worker at school

"A social worker and a social work assistant apply approaches corresponding to the goal of the performed social work and the knowledge of the social work department using professional methods of work depending on the focus of the social work. Social work is work performed by a social worker and social work assistant in connection with other professional activities in the field of psychology, law, medicine, pedagogy, sociology and other areas."

§ 2 par. 3 of Act No. 219/2014 Coll. on social work and professional activities in the field of social affairs and family – wording effective from 01.11.2019

The social worker mobilizes the child's strengths, family, school and community to overcome the obstacles that arise with the transition process. The social worker meets the needs of the student and the family as well. The social worker and the whole team of professional and pedagogical employees use strategies, forms and methods for individual and effective support of the child. When a social worker helps to solve problems that affect the functioning of the child and his family, he helps to develop their potential and also exercises their right to an education that respects the value of each individual (Gymerska et al. 2019).

Abroad, we usually come across school social workers in school facilities. Dupper (2010) considers it crucial in the practice of a school social worker to maintain open communication between the family, the child, the school and other professionals. Strengthening families in solving social problems makes it much easier for them to provide social counselling in various forms. This also assists parents in fulfilling their parental roles. Duppler also considers the development of community services or the planning and organization of prevention programs to be a key area (Tirpkáková

2019). Allen-Meares (2004) points out the values of social work that determine the behaviour of school social workers:

- a) The value of human dignity - the student is a unique being;
- b) The right to self-realization and self-determination enabled to participate;
- c) Respect for individual aspirations;
- d) Respecting differences.

School social work is necessary at school, which develops at the micro-, meso- and macro levels (Speck 2009). Ensuring continuity between levels is challenging, but a coherent system of services supports efficient transit transitions (Beth et al. 2012).

Entering the educational process is a new experience and, therefore, a challenge for the child and his parents. This is not a one-off activity but a long-term process (Vogler et al. 2008; Palkovitz 2009). Transit processes take place vertically in the individual stages of a child's life (change over time) or horizontally across children's families, schools and communities (changes in a given period of time); transition represents a wide range of changes (Kagan 1992). The transition process is a complex phenomenon that requires coordination of activities and cooperation. The active involvement of parents in the whole process is also essential. Communication between the child's family and the service provider, teacher, special pedagogue, assistant and so on or and so forth improves cooperation. Beth et al. (2012) state that the transition process is significantly influenced by the cooperation of all stakeholders (Schulting et al. 2005, Rosenkoetter et al. 2009).

Continuity brings a better transition to children and families. The changes that children must naturally undergo in early childhood are predicted if there is a link between the various transition processes. In order to achieve continuity, the cooperation of parents, service providers, the community and the child itself is necessary. This idea keeps in focus the important life situations of the child and the family. Creating continuity from an early age becomes a common goal for all those involved in transit processes (family, caregivers, education, health and social services) (Adreon and Stella 2001). For

children with autism and their parents, transit processes are important turning points (Hanline et al. 1989; Johnson 1986; Adreon-Stella 2001). In the transition process, the social worker does not replace Labath (1999) other professions, but he works purposefully with areas that no one works through his interactions.

2. Methodology

We aimed to find out what role the social worker has in the transition process of a child with autism into the school environment from the point of view of principals of special schools and special classes at primary schools.

We used a qualitative research strategy for our research, the essence of which is to examine a broadly defined phenomenon and provide the maximum amount of information about it (Silverman 2013). The basis is inductive logic, which means that only after we had sufficient data did we begin to look for the regularities that occur in this data. According to Strauss and Corbin (1999), qualitative research methods are used to reveal and understand the essence of phenomena about which we still do not have enough information as well as about phenomena about which we have information, but we want to update their conclusions.

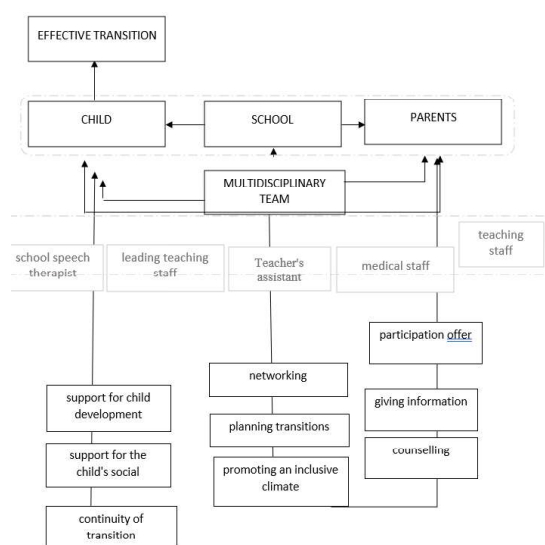
For data collection, we chose the in-depth interview technique, as Malinowski emphasized. It is important to understand the perspective of our participants (Silverman 2005).

We asked the participants a question that they could freely answer: "What do you see, how does a social worker affect the process of transition a child with autism into the school environment?"

The choice of the research group was intentional; our participants were the principals of special primary schools or classes at elementary schools in the list as of 15.9.2020 for children with autism. We contacted 19 schools, of which 15 principals from special primary schools and special classes for children with autism gave us an interview. Figure No. 1 lists the individual schools that we addressed.

3. Results

The next figure No. 2 shows a diagram of how the social worker affects the child, parents and the school through a multidisciplinary team of professionals. Based on the participants' responses, we created three main categories. A / Social worker and child. B / Social worker and family. C / Social worker and school. Each category affects the child's transition process to varying degrees, through different interventions, strategies and methods.



The social worker and child: Participants agreed that smooth transitions are key to ensuring positive outcomes in the transition process in children with autism. Smooth transitions are achieved by planning (Rosenkoetter et al. 2009). That is why planning the transition process is one of the areas where the social worker can find employment. If the social worker supports the child's social environment, it affects not only his effective transition to the school environment but also comprehensively in all areas. It is important for the child to create suitable conditions in the home environment. If the child has an environment of support and acceptance, it will strengthen him in overcoming obstacles. The social worker builds students' self-confidence, gives them courage in building relationships, supports them in their personal progress in

Figure No. 1: List of primary schools and special classes of primary schools as of 15.9.2020



The school is not a closed building; on the contrary, it cooperates with a number of experts. It is accessible through various activities throughout the day, not only for children but also for parents.

Gymer's statement (2020), and our participants also confirmed the answers. The social worker and school: The social worker creates equal opportunities in the school environment, thus promoting an inclusive climate. This provides information to the school about the pupil and the family as well as information about the school to the parents, which creates and strengthens the relationship between them. It ensures cooperation between individual institutions and experts in solving individual cases by the networking method. Effective, planned cooperation of several assisting entities to achieve a common goal. Networking is a type of multidisciplinary cooperation in the case of a child and his family and other important persons for the client. The definition of categories of professional employees is regulated by § 23 of Act No. 138/2019 Coll., Who ranks among professional employees: psychologist and school psychologist, special pedagogue and field special pedagogue, career counsellor, speech therapist and school speech therapist, medical pedagogue, social pedagogue. The cooperation aims to exchange information, joint analysis of the situation, and the search for a suitable solution to the problem (Tirpkáková 2019).

The social worker and parents: Supporting the child's adoption by the family is one of the key areas in which the social worker works. Being able to accept a child as he or she is, focusing on his or her strengths can be challenging for the family in some situations, and the social worker can find suitable help for the family. Working with the family is a very important part of the quality of the educational process. The social worker also meets parents outside regular class meetings. Often, the goal of a meeting is not just a consultation about the child, but parents usually participate in the functioning of the school. As it is assumed that parents know their child best, they can work together in a multidisciplinary team to create the most effective strategy for the child's functioning. The relationship between the social worker and the parents is professional and a partnership. The social worker provides parents with social counselling, can recommend professional counselling services of specialized institutions. This creates effective social support not only for the child but also for the family. It purposefully prepares different types of assistance for the family in order to solve the situation comprehensively.

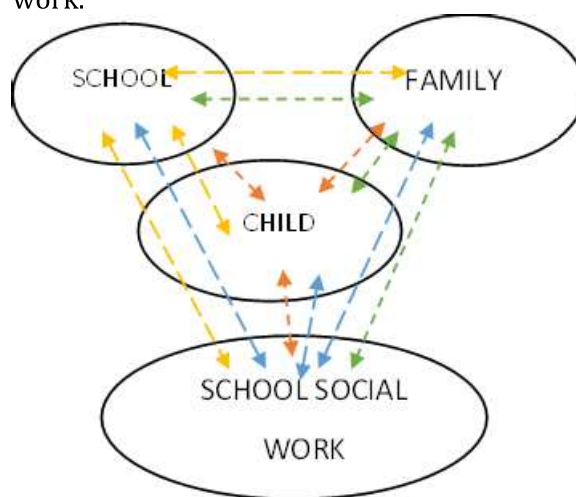
4. Discussion

The question of how to provide social services in public schools most effectively arose in the USA as early as the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries in 1906. Germany emphasized that the help of social workers in working with pupils was essential. In France, school social work can be seen since 1945; it only received legislative support in 1991. In Switzerland since 1976 and in 50 other countries, school social work has been a part of it for several decades (Tirpkáková 2019). The help of school social workers is often required abroad for implementing and providing services to children with disabilities (Openshaw 2008). Abroad, the role of the school social worker is to cooperate with teachers, school psychologists, educational counsellors, children and, last but not least, with parents. In Slovakia, the profession of school social worker is absent, even though various projects have already been implemented in several schools (School Social Work 2006) (Lengyel 2013). The importance of school social work in today's understanding stems mainly from the interaction between social work and the school environment. An important methodology for the practice of school social workers is the Standards for Social Work Service 2012, which was developed and adopted by the National Association of Social Workers in 1978.

Through preventive activities, the social worker strengthens family relationships and ensures open communication between parents, pupils, school and professionals in cooperating institutions (Tirpkáková 2019). Figure No. 3 displays the concept of school social work. The profession of social worker entails a commitment to social justice, which increases opportunities for the inclusion of the most vulnerable. This area of social work is supported by various methodologies and theoretical frameworks aimed at strengthening human and social change concerning specific groups of the population (Brekke 2012). Although the child is a central figure in the transition process, several actors participate in its successful course: parents, school (teachers, assistants), specialists, community members and close acquaintances. The smoother these processes are, the better

their benefits (Schulting et al. 2005; Rosenkoetter et al. 2009). In the short term, successful transitions positively affect the child's socialization and adaptation and school results, and in the long run, they are important for the child's later employment.

Figure No. 3: The concept of school social work.



Source: Vasil'ová et al. 2018

According to Adreon and Stella (2001) and Dettmer et al. (2000), it is difficult to design strategies for transit processes. However, they are especially important for children with autism and can be beneficial for the child himself and the parents or the workers who work with them. It is the specificity of the transit processes of children with autism that creates space for the interventions of the social worker in the school environment. The results of successful transit processes should take into account the different ways of defined experience of transition between children with autism and between their families. The results are influenced by the process of preparing children for the new environment. They should consider the perception of parents and service providers, as the designation of a successful transit process can be individual, i.e. different. Therefore, an agreement between families and professionals on goals, specific transition processes, procedures, strategies, and desired outcomes is important (Beth et al., 2012). It follows that the process of transition should be structured in terms of

content, methodology, targeted. It is a meeting of interventions of several experts whose approach to transit processes is irreplaceable and provides comprehensive care. The research carried out in 2019 by the civic association PERSONA with a sample of 80 respondents showed that an expert in solving social problems is needed in school facilities. Respondents would also welcome assistance in implementing prevention and inclusive programs in practice.

CONCLUSION

While in the USA, school social work has long been recognized and research focuses mainly on the effectiveness of interventions in Germany, a greater effort can be observed to demonstrate the need for the social worker in the school environment and define its basic methods. In Slovakia, we are almost at the very beginning of school social work (Gymerská et al. 2020). The support mechanism that plays a key role in the education system is school policy, which creates a macro-environment of school social work. The social worker at school has the task of motivating the student's family to cooperate with a multidisciplinary team. This supports the connection of information between the family and the school. Home, social environment, community, school and many other factors actually affect the long-term success of children with autism. In the current situation, when it comes to school readiness, it is important to look at the school readiness of a child with autism and at educational facilities that should be prepared for a child with autism. The idea of cooperation of a multidisciplinary team of various service providers keeps the child for whom continuity has been created since early childhood as a basic aim in the centre of attention.

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Kontaktné údaje:

Barbora Kolková
Trnavská univerzita v Trnave
Fakulta zdravotníctva a sociálnej práce
Katedra sociálnej práce
barborakolkova@tvu.sk