

SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK – BETWEEN REALITY AND DESIDERATUM

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Abstract: This paper aims to present the importance of the role of the social worker in schools, for the prevention and improvement of the social problems and school adaptation of students. We have chosen a qualitative research method - the interview, in order to identify school problems and the extent to which those involved in the educational process can cope with them and whether the presence and involvement of a social worker in the mainstream school is important.

Keywords: school social worker, school adaptation, mainstream school

Introduction

Major societal changes such as the "democratization of education, the extension of civic rights to the child and the increased role of education in modern social life" meet the need for social work in mainstream school (Neamțu, 2011).

Thus, the social worker has a special role, to identify and remove the barriers to learning, to create the necessary conditions for students to meet their basic educational needs, to develop decision-making skills, to develop adaptability to change and to take responsibility, (organizing activities, discussing regulations, administrative decisions) and ensuring a teacher-student relationship based on democracy.

Child protection is a specific form of social work and the school social

worker has the obligation to supervise the rights of children, to prevent any form of abuse by teachers and parents (Kelemen, Harmant, Gavrilă et al., 2016).

The presence of the social worker in schools is an important issue because it is necessary to invest in the education and development of children, adolescents and young people so that they are ready for life, "to acquire a desirable system of moral values, adaptability to change, problem solving skills, all of which will contribute to social balance". (Nistor, 2012, p. 244).

In Romania, currently, the school social worker is mostly active in special schools. In the literature, there are models of social services offered by the social worker also in the mainstream school, this being a necessary activity due to the existence of social problems and issues in school adaptation, the purpose being early detection, amelioration or removal and of course, the prevention of such problems. The social worker looks for causes, starting with the family environment, then in the school environment, but also in the specificity of the child's age and personality (Gavrilă-Ardelean, 2014).

The emphasis will be on capitalizing on the resources available to the family and on the resources of the various connected systems. The school social worker provides support and guidance to students and parents, to cope with difficulties that have an impact on educational activity or on family and school relationships.

The potential activities can vary: preventing and alleviating school difficulties, school dropout, violence; counseling to overcome critical situations (parental separation, unemployment, family conflicts, the emergence of chronic diseases, the death of one parent, low financial possibilities, abuse and neglect of the child); informing parents in order to ensure the child's development and education needs; stimulating parents' participation in school life; preventing the separation of the child from the family; support in improving educational practices, student relations with colleagues and teachers (mediation of conflicts); measures to protect the abused child and the initiation of a special psychotherapy program. (Nistor, 2012)

In ensuring the optimal integration of children with special educational needs, the social worker is paramount in identifying the resources offered by the family and the school, proposing realistic objectives regarding the personal and social autonomy of the child, drawing up a personalized service plan and tracking the student's progress, raising awareness of parents to realistically perceive the situation and the needs of the child.

Very important in the activity of the social worker is the collaboration with the team of specialists in the school - the director, the teachers, the psychologist, the doctor, the speech therapist, the school and professional guidance counselor, the support teacher), (Gavrilă-Ardelean, Gavrilă-Ardelean,

Grivu, 2008).

Also, the social worker can be involved in developing partnerships with community institutions in order to sponsor various activities and projects of students, and in encouraging students to participate in various activities like sports or volunteering, by providing information about the existence of community resources and needs.

Likewise, the school social worker can promote a positive image for children with special educational needs, as they can face stigma and prejudgement that will create negative attitudes which will lead to discrimination. (Gavrilă-Ardelean, 2016)

There must be a wide range of educational services available in the school, to meet all the requirements of each student. Ghergut (2016, p.15), points out that "access to education is for all children".

Methodology

The purpose of the study is to determine the importance of integrating the social worker's activity into mainstream school, as a response to school problems. The objectives of the study are:

1. To identify social and school adaptation issues;
2. To establish the social worker's role in schools;
3. To understand the need for school social work.

The study was guided by the following research questions: when is the need of specialized help justified?; If the role of the school social worker is better known, can existing problems be improved?; What is the perception regarding the usefulness of the school social worker?

This study used a qualitative approach, by constructing an interview with 10 questions. The interviewees were 9 teachers from the following schools - Gymnasium School No. 25 (Timisoara), Waldorf High School (Timișoara), Giroc Theoretical High School (Giroc) Billesdon Church of England Primary School (UK), the Director of the Daycare center for children in Dumbrăvița and 2 social workers from special schools ("Paul Popescu Neveanu" School of Inclusive Education (Timișoara), "Iris" Theoretical High School (Timișoara).

We wanted to find out the opinion of those who work directly with the children in the traditional school, the problems they face, and if they need help from a social worker. Also a teacher from the UK was part of the study, as there is no school social worker in their mainstream schools, only a "designated safeguarding officer" for the child at risk, and the teachers working with children with disabilities have special training, even in mainstream schools. The choice of interviewing social workers in special schools was made because we wanted to find out their opinion about the need for a school social worker in the mainstream school (also, which would be his tasks related to the complexity of

the identified problems).

Results

For the first objective, respondents indicated that there were social problems and school adaptation issues: a difficult material situation (9 answers), the situation of the children from single-parent families (7 responses), school dropout (2 responses), acts of violence (physical, verbal) in school and family (6 responses), negative consequences of a parent living abroad (6 responses) learning (10 responses), integration of children with special needs (9 responses). The respondents described various situations, that could all benefit from the involvement of a social worker, the existence and complexity of these school problems implying the need for specialized help. A few responses are presented below:

„Autism-diagnosed at 2 year olds, with visible progress, but with episodes of violence and frequent tantrams.“

“I have supported children in the classroom with autism, ADHD, dyslexia, working memory problems and attachment disorders.” (UK)

A child from a disorganized family, with his father abroad, who is not interested in the material and educational situation of the child.“

Over the years, we have had students with special educational needs, students with certain behavioral disorders, learning disabilities and students who used verbal or even physical violence when they were disturbed by the attitudes of colleagues.“

For the second objective, through the question "What are, in your opinion the attributions of the school social worker ?" we obtained the following answers from the teachers:

- a) Identifying students at risk of school failure. (5 responses)
- b) Counselling for the family. (9 responses)
- c) Providing services for students with special requirements. (7 responses)
- e) Taking action to prevent and reduce violence and school dropout. (7 responses)
- f) Collaborating with school professionals (teachers, psychologists, physicians, directors), parents, local authorities and the media to provide social services to address the problems of children. (9 responses)
- g) Organizing and running actions and campaigns to inform, raise awareness and empower the community. (6 responses)
- h) Cooperating and offering services in the field of child protection. (8 responses)

The answers of the social workers in special schools and the director of

the Day Center, some of the identified tasks were:

Finding students with learning problems, counseling parents, students and teachers working with students, maintaining contact with parents, teachers and specialists, monitoring the evolution of students with special educational needs." Identification of children from families in difficulty; knowing the needs of the child and the family through assessments; social counseling of the family; referring cases to institutions providing social / recovery services, according to needs."

The social workers consider that the majority of mainstream school teachers are adequately trained to deal with existing problems, however, teachers require specialized support and consider that the role of the social worker, together with the entire team of specialists, can be appreciated for the purpose of alleviating the problems. Following the answers received, we can state that knowing the work of the social worker in the mainstream school can be a point of support for the appreciation of his work, in order to offer specialized services to those involved in the educational act.

For the third objective, all interviewees responded that social worker is needed in the mainstream school. Their responses are as following:

„Yes, as it would be a support for children in need in the place that they need it. Using a service like this within a school setting would cut down the time from identification of need to implementation of support/intervention, thereby cut costs and maximise benefits to child, family and school.”(UK)

'A better understanding of the problems of children with special educational needs and their integration into the educational and social process."

The social worker's activity in a mainstream school is a real help to all those involved in education (teachers, parents ...) but especially to the children, through their role as mediator, counselor, social change agent..... he could link the students' families with the rest of the institutions involved in integrating students with special educational needs, with behavioral disorders, with their parents abroad."

There would be support in making papers and informing parents about various social services, attracting community attention to school issues, linking school, family and community organizations."

As a result of the interviews, we have found that although there are a multitude of social problems, both teachers and social workers in special schools consider it „absolutely necessary" to have support from a social worker, in mainstream schools.

Conclusions

There are various problems in the school environment, regarding school and social adaptation of students. Parents, teachers but also the community must engage with responsibility in supporting children and solving these problems. Sometimes their complexity involves the need for specialized help that complements the work and dedication of those working with children. The work of the school social worker may be complex, providing a multitude of services to everyone in the school environment and the community, and if it is necessary to complete the team with a "right person in the right place", then the social worker will find his/her place in a mainstream school.

It is worth mentioning that there is a deontological responsibility to use always the „cleanest” concepts when referring to all types of beneficiaries, including children with special educational needs, being carefull not to lead to marginalization. (Tomiță & Goian, 2009).

Respect for children's rights, growth and education needs, prevention, improvement or elimination of risk situations, establishing the link between family, school and community, the advantage of a multidisciplinary team in solving cases can generate the need for social work in mainstream schools.

Social work programs in schools should help students acquire communication, critical thinking, as well as other behaviors they may need to avoid various issues (like drug related problems) (Bărbat, 2010).

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