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## The Pleasures and Woes of a School Psychologist\*

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### *Radości i smutki psychologa szkolnego*

**Abstract.** The article concerns the work of a school psychologist as a self-reliant and relatively independent worker at primary and secondary schools. As the percentage of the so-called problem children grows, researchers focus on the causes of this phenomenon and map the most frequent difficulties in the area of learning, motivation and social relationships from the perspective of teachers, students and their parents. The authors described the most frequent work modes of a school psychologist associated with this function. In addition, they concentrated on the difficulties of communicating with parents and highlighted a wide range of problems which require great erudition.

**Keywords:** school psychologist; work modes of a school psychologist; problems

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**Abstrakt.** Artykuł dotyczy pracy psychologa szkolnego jako samodzielnego i względnie niezależnego pracownika szkół podstawowych i średnich. W miarę wzrostu odsetka tzw. dzieci problemowych badacze koncentrują się na przyczynach tego zjawiska oraz odwzorowują najczęstsze trudności w obszarze uczenia się, motywacji i relacji społecznych z perspektywy nauczycieli, uczniów i ich rodziców. Autorki opisały też najczęstsze tryby pracy psychologa szkolnego związane z tą funkcją. Ponadto skoncentrowano się na trudnościach związanych z kontaktami z rodzicami oraz zwrócono uwagę na szeroki zakres problemów, które wymagają dużej erudycji.

**Słowa kluczowe:** psycholog szkolny; tryby pracy psychologa szkolnego; problemy

## INTRODUCTION

The profession of a school psychologist started to be relevant around 15 years ago in Slovakia. Of course, it had also existed before, but until that time internal psychologist had been employed as an independent expert mainly at schools of some specific specialisation, e.g. at special schools, former auxiliary schools, facilities for children with mental disorders, or at special vocational schools, and this position was only seldom occupied. The opportunity for psychologists to be officially employed as independent specialists at schools was enabled in 1993 when the Parliament passed the law allowing this option. The decision to employ a school psychologist and to set aside a financial amount for the psychologist's salary from the financial package for the salaries of teachers has been and still is the responsibility of the school director. This is why the process of institution of a school psychologist as a separate and relatively independent worker has been quite slow and the school management tended to go for alternative solutions, even though they realised the need for psychological services. Such alternative options concentrated particularly on providing for services of a psychologist that would not cut off too much from the package of the money intended for the wages for pedagogical workers. And so, a sort of hybrid models of school psychologists started to emerge along with employment of pure psychologists.

The aim of this article is to point out some of the issues experienced by psychologists working based on individual modes which lead to more "woes" at the expense of "pleasures" of this interesting, even though sometimes tiresome, work. This tendency continues until now and frequently causes difficulties at work both for psychologists and other psychological intervention participants.

## CONCEPT AND JOB DESCRIPTION OF A PSYCHOLOGIST IN THE SCHOOLS' SERVICE IN SLOVAKIA

More than losing ourselves in the history of school psychology and gradual development of the school psychologist's work, it would rather be more appropriate to state the gratifying fact that school psychology has been established in our tertiary

education as an independent study programme equivalent to other, older psychological specialisations. Another gratifying fact is the option and, at the same time, the interest shown by schools, and not only the special ones but also mainstream primary and secondary schools, including grammar schools, to hire and employ psychologists in the form of internal specialised workers to respond to the needs of students, teachers and parents.

The profession of a school psychologist in Slovakia is preceded by the requirement to complete five-year university education at the relevant department or institute of psychology and then, where possible, to continue in a postgraduate specialisation programme.

The scope of a school psychologist's work is more than just wide. This view is also supported by the interpretation of Hvozdič (1986) who sees the function of school psychologist "in the development of personality by means and methods which are professionally applied by a psychologist in cooperation with teachers, parents and other agents of education at schools". The scope of his or her work nowadays derives from the implementation of the National Programme of Rearing and Education of the Slovak Republic drafted by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport for the next 15 to 20 years (MŠVVŠ SR 2013). In addition to general provisions, this programme has also worked out the specific scope of work of a school psychologist in Slovakia at primary and secondary schools. It contains 16 main duties starting with the diagnostics of cognitive functions and personality from the perspective of ontogenetic development, integration of students with special education needs, gifted and creative students, tiredness and overloading of students up to the need to elaborate new methods, techniques and instruments to measure school performance. (However, it should be noted here that the performance of all required duties cannot be reasonably expected from the school psychologist without support from a strong team of other experts.) A more realistic, and particularly more pragmatic, description of this work has been presented by e.g. Valihorová (2009), Zapletalová (2001) and many others. The actual work of a school psychologist in the environment of school is dealt with below.

Based on an informal survey of job descriptions of school psychologists and, furthermore, based on our own long-lasting experience as a school psychologist (Búgelová) and counsellor at the Pedagogical and Psychological Counselling and Prevention Centre (Pavluvčíková), we would like to present the most frequent issues that the school psychologist faces at schools:

1. Issues listed by teachers:
  - inappropriate behaviour of students,
  - bad school results,
  - poor motivation to learn and to education in general,
  - poor concentration and focus,
  - suspicions of cognitive and emotional disorders,

- reduced adaptation to performance and work, laziness,
  - mental fatigue occurring very fast,
  - insufficient social inclusion,
  - other, unspecified issues.
2. Issues listed by parents:
- poor respect for parental authority,
  - issues concerning any motivation for anything whatsoever,
  - absenteeism, lies,
  - suspicions of addictions (computers, gambling),
  - unsuitable friends,
  - family problems (partner relationships, dysfunctional family, troubles to master parenting, economic problems, etc.).
3. Issues listed by children (especially during spontaneous, unsolicited visit of a psychologist):
- not coping with elementary social skills,
  - relationship problems (first loves),
  - family problems (long-lasting absence of mother or father),
  - problems with new partners of any of the parents,
  - divorce of parents,
  - feeling lonely, bored, aimless,
  - animosity to a teacher, unfair grading,
  - bullying or mobbing by peers,
  - helping to choose a school,
  - other, unspecified issues.

The above list shows that the scope of issues is truly varied and requires great erudition from the psychologist, as well as solid mental resilience, empathy and patience, particularly with the parents of clients. As Búgelová (2001, 2002) notes with regard to parents of children, the biggest problem generally lies with parents who would often deserve the punishment they give their children.

## CURRENT WORK MODES OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST IN SLOVAKIA

Psychologists who are core employees of the psychological counseling are allocated one or two schools where they primarily focus on problem children screening, usually making use of the information from class teachers, who are gradually invited to visit their offices.

Psychologists work part-time for two or three schools, this particularly depends on the funds the relevant school has at disposal. They visit schools for a restricted time in a week, usually for approx. 10–12 hours a week. An internal employee of the school is a teacher who graduated from a double major in pedagogy, i.e. psychology

combined with another major, e.g. psychology – biology, psychology – mathematics, etc. An independently working psychologist who is a core employee of a particular school is employed full-time to do the job in the full extent.

## BASIC FEATURES OF PSYCHOLOGIST'S WORK BY INDIVIDUAL MODES

### **1. Psychologist providing services to schools, but employed by a psychological and pedagogical counselling centre**

The fact that they are not dependent on school, not exposed to the pressures from teachers and school management are definitely advantages. The option to schedule time for a client, reduced time pressure, the option of professional consulting or help with a problem, relatively enough time for a client, related service – evaluation of tests, administrative activities, etc.

Issues at work – insufficient knowledge of school environment, context and relations associated with the problem at hand, time losses occurring with the need of repeated sessions, invitations of other individuals (teacher, parent, or another involved individual, etc.). A quite broad range of work caused by activities resulting from the obligation to also carry out activities associated with the work in the counselling centre.

### **2. A psychologist working part-time at several schools**

The option of *ad hoc* intervention in the event that an acute issue occurs, flexibility in obtaining the necessary information from teachers or school management, the option for a student to spontaneously visit psychologist at the defined time, quick feedback, maximum individual responsibility for resolution of a problem count among advantages.

Issues at work – a quite large increase in the requirements for a psychologist on the side of school, time pressure, strong pressure on the organisation of work and on minimisation of time losses, attempts to influence the psychologist's decisions, maximum individual responsibility for psychological intervention without the option of supervision or professional consulting.

### **3. Psychologist as an internal employee of school – a double major graduate**

The most advantageous maybe is the deep knowledge of the internal school environment including the informal social relations. Trustworthiness particularly on the side of clients is based especially on the power of personality and efforts to establish the minimum field of “independent” autonomy.

The main issue of this mode of work is the fact that you can't have your cake and eat it too, i.e. the primary role of this psychologist is that of a teacher and a member of the teaching staff with all powers and responsibilities resulting from it and, at the same time, he or she has the role of a psychologist who often acts as an advocate or protector of the student if such student faces problems associated with school which, in the end, leads to a conflict of interest. Another substantial issue includes the restrictions applicable to his or her professional powers, e.g. inability to use diagnostic tests, elaborate relevant psychological conclusions, carry out therapeutic interventions, etc., and the time planning difficulties resulting from two job descriptions which are not necessarily compatible. This also has a significant impact on his or her field of professional powers and work efficiency. The issues also include the issue (often personal) of inner disagreement between collegiality felt in relation to co-workers (teachers) and the objective approach to the client. In this role, the psychologist is subjected both to the school director and to the relevant representative of the teaching staff.

#### **4. Psychologist as an independent professional worker employed full-time**

Positive is the option to exercise the professional qualifications in full extent, which results both from his or her all-encompassing psychological education and, where appropriate, from the subsequent specialisation studies. Even though an employee of the relevant school, this psychologist reports only to the director and has no duties to the teaching staff. He or she enjoys sufficient work autonomy as to how to solve the case at hand, which diagnostic, counselling or therapeutic processes to use. He or she may (and should) cooperate, on an *ad hoc* and timely basis, with teachers, parents, or other involved individuals. If specific problems occur, he or she cooperates with other external experts including pedagogical and psychological counselling centres and the student's physician. This mode of work is usually very dynamic and entails quick feedback. The psychologist has immediate control over the case at hand, and particularly in the event of psychological intervention with regard to a student, and monitors, or modifies, the efficiency of his or her own processes. The trustworthiness and efficiency coming from the individuals around him or her are usually sufficient.

Troublesome tends to be the organisational and time pressure often caused by spontaneous, unscheduled visits of students, teachers and parents. Considering the variety of the cases being solved among children and adult clients, strong pressure is exerted on the psychologist who must gain knowledge also from other psychological specialisations and even search for legal information. The responsibility for the work done lies exclusively on the psychologist.

Table 1. Basic features and efficiency of psychological work depending on individual modes of work of school psychologist

Work activities	Psychologist employed by psychological counseling	Part-time psychologist	Internal employee – both teacher and psychologist	Internal employee – specialist psychologist
Screening of problem students	Yes	Yes, to a limited extent	Limited	Yes, to full extent
Timely response to a problem	After a lapse of some time	Yes, considering the presence of a psychologist	Yes, considering the school duties	Yes, without restrictions
Continuity of work with a client	Lengthy, without necessary flexibility	Yes, considering the presence of a psychologist	Yes, considering the teacher's schedule	Yes, basically trouble-free
Option of a spontaneous visit by a student	No	Yes, at pre-set times	Yes, at pre-set times, normally not used	Yes, without restrictions
Utilisability of actual information about the issue	Yes, after a lapse of some time depending on the appointment date	Yes, if the psychologist is actually present	Yes	Yes
Use of psychodiagnostics	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Direct psychological intervention	Yes, after a lapse of some time	Yes, considering the actual presence of a psychologist	Yes	Yes
Validity of psychological intervention and conclusions	Yes, valid	Yes, valid	Limited validity	Yes, valid
Use of psychological services by school	Standard, rather lower – screening, acute issues, professional orientation	Standard, based on actual situation	Standard, noticeable gradual downward trend	Standard or more than standard, wide range, frequent spontaneous requests
Use of psychological services by parents and children	Sporadic, they choose psychologist irrespective of the allocated school psychologist	Standard, especially at the proposal of the class teacher	Sporadic, frequent confusion with a counsellor	Standard, positively taken, eventually also extended to include help with family issues
Economical efficiency of psychological services for school	Efficient – free of charge	Partially efficient	Efficient, plays also the role of a teacher	Efficient only if the psychologist's work is effective

Source: Búgelová's own elaboration.

## CONCLUSIONS

The school psychologist and his or her work at primary and secondary schools are gradually setting up among parents and teachers, as well as more general public. Interest in this service has been growing in parallel with the increase in the so-called problem children which is most noticeable in the area of inappropriate behaviour up to behavioural disorders, worsened discipline, reduced authority of teachers, problems inside the family, etc. The teacher is often imposed the role of a troubleshooter for the issues relating to psychological problems of their students which hinder his or her work and drag the teacher away from the primary teaching role. Even though the paper purposefully avoids the issue of children with behavioural disorders, disorders of cognitive functions, emotions, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and attention deficit disorder (ADD), these children are also included in the standard education system within integration efforts. However, their integration is not accompanied by the appropriate auxiliary services, such as assistants trained for such children, special teaching programmes, reduced number of children in classes, the option of a more intensive and individual approach, etc. Such a wide range of problems cannot be addressed by a psychologist only, whatever the mode of work described above, without the help of other specialists in the area of psychology, special pedagogy or medicine.

Sore and frequently discussed themes in Slovakia include the employment of the so-called double major psychologists as school psychologists. The limitation of their powers compared to single major psychologists doesn't give them the opportunity to fully embrace the job position, which leads to frustration from their own work and, furthermore, they do not have the feeling of satisfaction for the work done even though their personalities would be suitable for such occupation. They realise this "schizophrenic" position of theirs serving double role of a teacher and a psychologist, which leads to gradual resignation from the position of a school psychologist and this is the better option, or the worse one, to a psychological intervention that is not always professional and qualified enough.

The aim of the paper was not to persuade the reader which of the modes of a psychologist's work at schools is the best one. Besides professional erudition, the success and efficiency of psychological work depend to a substantial extent on the personality of psychologist, his or her willingness to use his or her potential in the service of children, clients without biases, motivate them and find something that is positive in each of them, something that deserves to be developed in the event that no one else doesn't see it or cannot find it. And then, as we hope, the woes will be surpassed by the pleasures from their and our work.

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