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**Between School and family environment.
Tasks of a school social worker in the contemporary
educational system in Poland**

**Pomiędzy szkołą a środowiskiem rodzinnym.
Zadania szkolnego pracownika socjalnego we współczesnym
systemie oświaty w Polsce**

Abstract: The school is a fundamental educational environment that, along with the family home, has a significant impact on the formation of the attitudes of the children and young people who attend it. It becomes especially important in situations where the family does not properly carry out its functions. Then the school environment has a chance to carry out tasks compensating, at least in part, for the shortcomings of the home environment. In addition to counsellors and teachers, paramount tasks are performed by the school counsellor, providing broad support to the student and his or her parents experiencing difficult situations, which are reflected in the functioning of the student in the school setting. A valuable support for the school counsellor could be a school social worker, who, thanks to his or her special competence, could become a link between the school and the student's family, allowing for a look at his or her failures in school or social life from a broader perspective. For that reason, the article includes a proposal for schools to employ social workers. The assumptions of social work fit perfectly into the school's educational programme, which assumes that the school supports the students in their comprehensive development,

in the pursuit of self-development, to bring out their potential, discover their abilities and strengthen their self-esteem.

Keywords: school environment, school pedagogue, school social worker, family, development.

Introduction

The issue addressed in this article is the need to include social workers among the professionals supporting teachers in Polish schools – in addition to the school counsellor, special counsellor or psychologist. The text presents the difficult situation prevailing in Polish schools, which results from the excessive workload of the school counsellor with duties that belong to the social worker's scope of activity, as well as a number of pupils' problems whose origins go beyond the school environment. The need for the presence of a social worker at school will be justified by the basic assumptions of social education.

The core principles of social work, which include the subjectivity of the client and his or her right to self-determination, shaping responsibility for one's own fate, an individualised approach to a given person and his or her needs, perceiving the client from the perspective of his or her potential, which – although sometimes overshadowed by problems – is inherent in every person, mobilising him or her to activity and self-development, testify to the fact that it is, in its essence, an educational activity. The aforementioned principles constitute also the assumptions and goals which guide the educational work of the school. It is not only a matter of a school graduate possessing a certain amount of knowledge or skills at a given stage of education, but above all of becoming a person convinced of his or her dignity, full of respect for oneself and others, sensitive, open and willing to develop, capable of reflection. The impact of the school is to ensure a smooth transition from the period of upbringing and education to lifelong self-education, self-development and pursuit of passions and abilities. Alongside teachers, counsellors and psychologists, the social worker is the right person to support students in the development process by, among other things, approaching them in an appropriate manner and monitoring their family and environmental situation (Czarnecki, 2012, p. 392).

The role of the school counsellor in supporting students

The school counsellor is now the one who, in his or her field of responsibility, is burdened with tasks that could successfully be shared with a social worker. The position of a school counsellor was introduced in Poland in the 1970s. At that time, the tasks related to this role were focused on the assistance and care taken of the child at school and on raising the educational culture of the child's parents (Jundziłł, 1980, p. 230). Currently – according to the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of the 9 August 2017 on the principles of organising and providing psychological and educational assistance in public kindergartens, schools and institutions (*Journal of Laws*, 2023, item 1798) – the tasks of a school counsellor (but also of a psychologist, according to § 24 of the Regulation) include, above all, recognising the needs of students, diagnosing the causes of didactic and behavioural difficulties, discovering and developing students' potential, analysing the educational situation of the school, providing educational assistance, conducting mediation, intervention, prevention, especially with regard to addictions, organising various forms of school and extracurricular support for students with developmental and behavioural disorders, helping parents and teachers to develop students' resources. Thus, the school counsellor provides support to pupils facing difficulties in school, peer relations, as well as personal and family problems, which are closely intertwined (Sałasiński and Badziukiewicz, 2003, p. 80-146). The multiplicity and diversity of the listed tasks seem to be far beyond the capacity of a single employee, all the more so as, in situations of sudden staff shortages, the school counsellor is sometimes directed to act as a substitute teacher, organise excursions or other events on the school premises (Wasilewska-Ostrowska, 2017, p. 69). Overburdening the school counsellor with an excess of duties may become a reason for neglecting some of them. At the same time, a prerequisite for the proper fulfilment of the counsellor's duties, especially those related to the students' family environment, is to get to know the quality of its functioning, the difficulties the family is facing, which is not always possible only on the basis of meetings with the parent or guardian on the school premises and based on their declarations. The work of a social worker here would be an excellent complement to that of the school counsellor.

Social worker at school

A social worker is a specialist prepared to undertake interdisciplinary community-based activities, cooperating with numerous professionals representing different areas of support for people in crisis: probation officers, health professionals or representatives of NGOs related to the broadly understood topic of support for children, adolescents and families. As a natural consequence – through cooperation with social workers and family assistants working in the local environment on behalf of social welfare centres [pol. ośrodki pomocy społecznej (ops)] and social service centres [pol. centra usług społecznych (cus)] – a school social worker has the opportunity to become the link between the school and peer environment, which are relevant in the student's life, with the one which is indispensable – the family environment. The home does not always provide a supportive setting for a child. Sometimes the conditions and atmosphere of upbringing at home become a source of much suffering for the child and also cause numerous problems at school. In the post-pandemic period which has also been marked by the ongoing war in Ukraine, there has been a significant increase in the number of pupils with mental health problems or behavioural disorders. As a result of wars and conflicts around the world, Poland has become the destination of numerous migrants, whose children are trying to find their way in the educational system and into the community of their Polish peers. These dynamically growing problems alone pose a challenge to the employees of today's schools. Therefore, the need to supplement the school staff with a social worker appears as indisputable.

The matter of a social worker's presence in the school structure in Poland is relatively rarely addressed in Polish educational discourse. The subject was raised, among others, by B. Smolińska-Theiss (Smolińska-Theiss, 2015, p. 136), A. Sander – presenting the German concept of social workers' activities on school premises (Sander, 2015, pp. 315-323), J. Młyński (Młyński, 2014, pp. 115-131) or K. Wasilewska-Ostrowska (2015, pp. 167-180; 2017, pp. 65-74). Wasilewska-Ostrowska presented a report of her research conducted in 2014 among teachers from schools, kindergartens and social workers in Kuyavian–Pomeranian Voivodeship on the legitimacy of creating the position of a school/kindergarten social worker (social educator). The results of this research showed that, in the opinion of the majority of the surveyed school teachers and social workers, the latter should be employed in schools and pre-schools.

The absence of a school social worker in the broader educational reflection in Poland is due to a number of reasons. One of them is probably

the crisis that the Polish education system has been experiencing for several years now. It is related to staff shortages, insufficient funding from the ministry, an outdated education model as well as frequent and hastily introduced reforms. Another reason for this state of affairs is the underestimation of the social workers' contribution and the entire social welfare system in regard to the process of providing comprehensive support to people in crisis, little awareness of the gravity of the tasks performed by this professional group in society and an outdated, underfunded, fragmentarily reformed social welfare system. Thus, the stagnation and inadequate effectiveness of actions that are often blamed on social welfare workers consists of a lack of systemic solutions within the ministry, but also an absence of coherent inter-ministerial actions, e.g. cooperation and coherence in the area of legal and organisational solutions with the area of health care or housing policy.

The essence of social work

Social work was introduced into social education in Poland through the scientific activity and practical involvement of Helena Radlińska. She herself repeatedly pointed out the key environmental determinants of the process of upbringing and education (Mazurkiewicz, 1983, p. 5). Irena Lepalczyk, one of the prominent contemporary representatives of this subdiscipline, wrote about the connection between the family and school environment and thus emphasised a crucial area of research in social pedagogy when analysing social reality:

I propose to return to two problems that have run throughout the history of social education: the family and the school. Both of these institutions constitute a traditional field of study and are not only the basic foundation of the life of the nation, but their functioning is a reflection of the economy and policy implemented in the state. In both of these institutions we also find a reflection of the pathological features of our contemporary world. Their proper diagnosis will allow us to find ways of helping the child, the parents, the teacher, family and school. It will provide an opportunity to join the mainstream of basic problems of the micro-environment, the main research area of our discipline (Lepalczyk, 1995, pp. 31-32).

On the other hand, Helena Radlińska at the end of her scientific activity, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, provided the following characterisation of social education:

Social education is a practical science, developing at the intersection of human sciences, biological and social sciences with ethics and cultural studies (cultural theory and history) through its own point of view. It may be most briefly described as an interest in the reciprocal relationship between the individual and the environment, the influence of the conditions of existence and the circle of culture on the individual in the various phases of his or her life, the influence of people in ensuring the existence of values through their adoption and propagation, and the transformation of environments through human efforts in the name of an ideal (Sroczyński, 2022, p. 154).

From this definition, it is clear that the area of interest – and therefore of action – for social educators are the environments in which a person functions by performing various social roles. In the process of training a social worker in our country, the principles of social education play a fundamental role. He or she is prepared to support individuals, groups and communities experiencing difficulties, who function in different, intersecting environments. A social worker only recognises the complexity of the determinants of the difficulties experienced by the clients, tries to understand the genesis of these problems, often reaching deep into the past of their families, sees the family as a system in which difficulties experienced by one of its members affect the others, but also recognises the important fact that only multifaceted, complementary support provided in different areas of the client's and his or her relatives' life provides a chance to overcome a challenging situation. One of the duties of a social worker functioning in an environment of a family with children is to establish contact with the school attended by these children. According to the type of difficulties experienced by the family, this contact may be more or less intense, however sometimes the school provides a space where deficiencies in the functioning of the family can be compensated. Examples of such measures include paying for the children's lunches, school trips or excursions, or financing school materials. When working with a family in which domestic violence is present, an educational representative (most often a counsellor or school psychologist) – in accordance with Article 9a of the Act of 29 July 2005 on counteracting domestic violence – forms part of the interdisciplinary teams and work groups working with family members to improve the situation and ensure the safety of persons experiencing violence. Social workers and family assistants employed by city or municipal social welfare centres or the social service centres created to replace them from 2020 onwards establish cooperation with school counsellors and with the teachers of their clients' children. However, while the social worker and

the family assistant are obliged to visit the clients' homes on a regular basis, thereby getting to know the conditions and the way they function, the school counsellor or the teacher are not obligated to do so. Thus, the latter get to know the possible problems of the family by observing the student, talking to him or her and meeting the parents on the school premises. Furthermore, these are useful sources of knowledge for social workers about the problems experienced by the family. They constitute a significant piece of the puzzle that shows the supporting professional the extent of the difficulties experienced by the family. However, neither the teacher nor the school counsellor working with a large number of pupils is always adequately prepared and does not always find the time for a thorough analysis of the pupil's behaviour and statements that may signal problems at home, which remain beyond the range of observation of the school employees. This is particularly relevant in situations where it is a matter of suspicion that a child is experiencing violence at home, especially sexual violence, when it is necessary to act decisively and quickly, yet, at the same time, in a professional and thoughtful manner, as unwarranted intervention can hurt the family. In cases of family poverty, loss of livelihood, illness or disability of one of the family members or other complex situations, it is crucial to extend appropriate support to the children in the family. Such support must, however, be well thought-out, adequate to the needs and, above all, avoid stigmatising the assisted person. The reason is that many children effectively try to conceal their difficult family situation, as they are ashamed of it and want to protect their neglectful and abusive parents. Therefore, children avoid talking about problems, hide bruises, explain their parents' absence at parent-teacher conferences or lack of school supplies, and the teacher is not always able to see the real source of the pupil's problems. Also, cooperation between social welfare institutions and the school does not always run smoothly and properly. Of particular importance is the need to consider the conditions of family life and its impact on the children's functioning in the school and peer environment in the case of migrant and refugee families. These are not only Ukrainians, who are culturally close to Poles, but also families from Asian or African countries, functioning on a daily basis in an area of an entirely different culture, language, religion, symbols or traditions. Not every school will have a cultural assistant for all these young people. These pupils experience various obstacles in terms of adaptation, learning the Polish language and peer relationships. Their problems are compounded by the fact that often their parents also do not speak Polish at all or sufficiently, making it harder for them to communicate with teachers, difficult to navigate the

Polish education and support system, and leaving them unable to help their children with schoolwork. In such circumstances, particular attention must be paid to the family environment, as this is the context through which the child's problems can be addressed. On the one hand, the child has the right to preserve its identity and respect for its origin, and on the other hand, it must be helped to settle and spread its wings in the new environment. In these cases, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) continue to provide a great deal of support to migrants, as well as to the schools teaching their children. However, in order to be effective, their assistance should be compatible with the support provided by the school. According to a principle used in social work, only the support of an interdisciplinary nature, taking into account the interaction of various settings on the assisted person has a chance of success.

Activities of a school social worker for the benefit of pupils

Social workers employed by the school and operating on its premises, who are also obliged to visit the homes of pupils and cooperate with social workers employed by social welfare institutions, seem to provide an excellent solution. This is primarily due to their professional background, assuming an interdisciplinary character and orientation towards the various forms of support that can be offered to the child and family in diverse and changing crisis situations, depending on the circumstances. Another relevant aspect of the training of social workers is to make them aware of the ethical aspects of providing assistance, the consequences of inadequate assistance and treating the client (at school – the pupil) with respect. The basic principles of social work mentioned at the beginning, i.e. the subjectivity of the assisted person, respecting his or her right to self-determination, to refuse to accept help or to change the form of help, listening to the clients and trying to understand the problem from their perspective, are educational tasks that play an essential role in relations with adults, but also with children and adolescents. The social worker also strives to motivate the client, to make the latter aware of the need to make positive changes in his or her personal life as well as in his or her environment, and tries to stimulate the client to become active and take responsibility for his or her own destiny. The way in which a social worker perceives the client is also significant: the assisted person is treated as a human being with a potential, with competences that need to be strengthened, developed and built upon in the process of change. Helena Radlińska's definition of social work was based on this belief, in which she pointed out its specific aims: 'Social work consists in bringing out and multiplying the

human efforts, in improving them and in organising joint action for the good of the people' (Radlińska, 1961, pp. 354-356). She also emphasised the need for the assisted person to be active and involved in the helping process as an essential condition for success: 'Help counts with conscious participation, with the cooperation of the helping party and the assisted fully responsible for themselves' (ibid., pp. 339-340).

Conclusion

The school is an excellent place to implement the aforementioned values relevant to social work in the lives of its pupils: whether in response to difficult situations experienced by them or in the form of preventive actions with the goal of equipping them with social competences to help them cope later in life. These values are part of the school's educational programme in the broad sense of the term, which is designed, among other things, to foster in pupils an attitude of responsibility for their own lives, their own development and further education, responsibility and social involvement, sensitivity and an open, yet critical attitude to the encountered reality. The help provided to pupils at school – most often by the school counsellor, with the support of a psychologist, special counsellor or the teacher – is for a number of reasons not always comprehensive and appropriate to the situation. In the case of complex domestic issues resulting from a pupil's difficult family situation, information about his or her problems being experienced at school is passed on to the relevant social welfare institution, and assistance is provided within the school itself to improve the pupil's functioning at school. It is not always the case, as mentioned above, that information between education and social welfare institutions is transferred efficiently and factually to minimise the young person's problems. However, it is a truism that the hardships experienced by a child at home are reflected in the way it functions at school, during lessons and with peers, and the other way round: the difficulties experienced at school are reflected in all aspects of the child's life and are recognised by attentive parents or guardians. If the latter are not attentive, the child is left alone with its problems. School employees, faced with a large number of responsibilities and numerous groups of pupils, are not always able to meet the obvious principle of complementarity of support: if the pupil's family home is unable to do so, the school must intensify its efforts to ensure support to the pupil, in particular to build up the pupil's sense of self-worth, agency and self-respect. The more the professionals focusing on different areas of action are involved, the better for the pupils. When we observe the present-day system of Polish schools, these seemingly core goals of

upbringing are lost somewhere in the pursuit of grades, achievements, points and the competition for a higher place in the rankings. Therefore, turning to the foundations of social work would perhaps allow us to rediscover the main goals of child rearing, which should come to the fore in the 21st century. Using the language of social work, this would be 'helping people to integrate into society so that they lead a life in it that corresponds to human dignity' (Szatur-Jaworska, 1995, p. 107).

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