

THE INTERACTION BETWEEN SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS AND TEACHERS: THE DEVELOPMENT OF HUNGARIAN SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

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Abstract

In my presentation, I will explore the current state of school social work in Hungary, focusing on the interaction between social professionals and other actors within the public education system. Special attention will be given to the practical implementation of social work in schools, alongside the influence of professional and legal frameworks. From an international perspective, school social work has undergone significant transformations across Europe and globally in recent years. However, its development in Hungary has been notably slower, shaped by various historical and systemic factors. My presentation will address these challenges, sharing recent domestic experiences and highlighting practical dilemmas and useful insights. I will also examine the significant differences in how school social work is practiced internationally. While the original focus of the profession was on prevention, in Hungary, the emphasis has shifted toward direct assistance and intervention. I will analyze the reasons behind this divergence from global practices and classical social work methodologies, considering factors such as legislation, societal changes, and the structure of Hungary's social and educational systems. The emergence of school social work in Hungary has fostered a strong interaction with the teaching community, bringing to light systemic issues that warrant discussion. These issues extend beyond schools, indirectly impacting families and society as a whole. I will emphasize key ideas and developments that could shape the future of this emerging profession, for better or worse. Furthermore, I will highlight areas where meaningful progress has been achieved, particularly in child protection and prevention, through effective collaboration between social workers and educators. However, significant attitudinal changes are needed in both professions to ensure continued progress. My analysis is based on insights gathered from social workers and teachers in 75 Hungarian public education institutions, supplemented by a comparative examination of domestic and international regulations. This broader perspective aims to contribute to the ongoing development of school social work in Hungary and its alignment with international best practices.

Keywords: *School, social work, child care, competences, interactions.*

1. Introduction

School social work plays a vital role in supporting the holistic development of children in educational institutions. It aims to ensure children's successful academic progression, promote their physical and mental well-being, and maintain strong collaboration between social, educational, and health care sectors. In Hungary, this area of practice has undergone significant transformation over the past decades, with growing recognition of the importance of integrated, cross-sectoral support systems for children (Methodological Guide, 2022). This paper explores the evolution of school social work in Hungary in September 2018 as a new service within the family and child welfare centers. The data presented are primarily based on results achieved in the Northern Hungary region, specifically within the Eger District.

2. Functions and scope of school social work

A school social worker is a trained professional who provides direct support to children in schools and dormitories. Their core responsibilities include promoting students' social and emotional development, facilitating their integration into the educational environment, and preventing vulnerability or school dropout. These specialists help resolve conflicts involving students, parents, and teachers, and act as mediators between families and educational institutions (Máté, 2015).

The activity itself was incorporated through an amendment to Act XXXI of 1997 on the Protection of Children and Guardianship Administration (hereinafter referred to as the Child Protection Act, or CPA), which entered into force on September 1, 2018. The primary objective of this amendment was to ensure the presence of a social professional in every educational institution, who would be capable of coordinating the full range of services offered by the family and child welfare centers with the opportunities available within the institutions. It is important to highlight that these professionals are external to the educational institutions; that is, their employer is not the school's maintainer but the territorially competent family and child welfare center. Looking back on the history of the profession, various models have emerged, and experience has shown that it is most effective when the professional is not selected from within the institution itself, as this external status helps maintain genuine neutrality. In 2018 and 2019, the Educational Authority and the Department of Social and Child Welfare Services issued several documents that provided initial guidance for the introduction of school social work activities. In autumn 2022, a comprehensive methodological guide was published, offering a significantly more detailed and systematic framework. It defines the concept, objectives, and content of the activity, outlines work methods, specifies personal and material requirements, and identifies potential settings for the activities. Furthermore, it elaborates on the documentation requirements and process structures, providing practitioners with clear guidance for their daily work. The guide was developed by gathering and analyzing four years of practical experiences, aiming to deliver an even more detailed and practical manual for social workers. According to Section 40/A (2) ag) of the Child Protection Act, the provision of school social work is a core responsibility of the family and child welfare centers. It is classified as a specialized service aimed at promoting children's upbringing within their families and preventing endangerment. This service is mandatory for all educational institutions, which must ensure access for social worker professionals and cooperate with the respective family and child welfare centers to establish the necessary working conditions. This collaboration is formalized through a cooperation agreement that details the social worker's working hours, tasks, competencies, rights, and responsibilities, as well as the required physical and other conditions. Such an agreement is essential in practice because social workers must be predictably and consistently present in kindergartens, schools, and dormitories. Trust, reliability, and stability form the foundation of their work. For instance, if a social worker displays their office hours but is not available when a client seeks the service, the principle of reciprocity and reliability, central to the ethos of social work, is violated, and thus the service cannot operate as intended. Over time, this could have wider implications for the institution's environment: if the professional is perceived as accessible and trustworthy, they are likely to be sought out frequently; however, inconsistent availability could prevent the service from becoming firmly established (Methodological Guide, 2022).

Following the introduction of the service, a closer relationship gradually developed between social workers and their clients within the educational institutions. It is important to clarify who qualifies as a client in this context. Clients include not only the children and their parents or family members but also the teachers and other staff working in kindergartens, schools, and dormitories, including school health professionals, school security officers, and even administrative and maintenance personnel, as they all interact directly with the children and may thus become involved in the social worker's activities. Naturally, strict boundaries are maintained regarding the methods, forms of intervention, confidentiality, and data protection, depending on the specific client group being engaged (Methodological Guide, 2022). The key actors with whom school social workers may interact within educational institutions include:

- Children and pupils
- Parents
- Teachers
- Institution heads (principals)
- School healthcare professionals (school nurses, school doctors)
- School psychologists
- Special education teachers and developmental educators
- Child and youth protection officers
- School police officers / crime prevention advisors
- School security officers
- School secretaries, economic and technical staff

In summary, this is an intersectoral service designed to ensure that children in educational institutions receive support from a professional well-versed in the social and child protection systems.

To gain an understanding of the specific characteristics of the Eger region, it is important to note that Eger is a city with county rights, surrounded by 22 settlements at the district level. Altogether, there are 75 educational institutions (kindergartens, schools, dormitories) operating in the area. Nearly 17,000 children attend these institutions. Considering the legally prescribed standard of one social worker per 1,000 children, the Family and Child Welfare Center of Eger employs 17 school social workers in the district. On

average, each worker is responsible for 2 to 11 institutions, depending on the size of the institutions. Out of the 17 social workers, one also performs coordinator duties, which means they support and supervise the work of other social workers and are therefore responsible for only one institution themselves.

3. Historical development in Hungary

The development of school social work in Hungary has seen several phases. Since the 1990s, multiple experimental models emerged. One early attempt involved assigning teachers with additional child protection responsibilities, but this approach lacked the depth and expertise of professional social work. A more sustainable model was the internal school social worker system, adopted by alternative schools that served disadvantaged or underperforming students. In this setup, schools directly employed social workers, creating a functional alignment between school philosophy and social support. The most notable and lasting innovation, however, was the external school social work model, such as the Ferencváros Fehér Holló Child Welfare Service established in 1992. This approach positioned social workers as external coordinators linking schools, families, and support institutions, rather than replacing internal school staff. Their work emphasized partnership and communication across professional boundaries, reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of school social work (Máté, 2015).

4. Challenges in the educational landscape

Hungarian schools face mounting challenges due to broader social changes. Economic pressures, evolving family structures, and increased performance expectations have placed new burdens on both students and parents. As a result, children exhibit a growing range of behavioral, emotional, and developmental difficulties, while teachers, often overburdened and under-resourced, are left without the tools to manage these complex issues effectively. Schools are now expected to cultivate creativity, resilience, and social competencies alongside academic knowledge (N.Tóth, 2017). A multidisciplinary response—featuring teachers, psychologists, nurses, and social workers—is increasingly recognized as necessary for addressing students' complex needs (Nagy és Szabóné, 2018). School social workers bring a systems-oriented perspective, working not only with students but also with their families, teachers, and the broader community. They help navigate challenges such as bullying, absenteeism, mental health issues, and socio-economic barriers, contributing to a more inclusive and supportive school environment (Methodological Guide, 2022).

Unfortunately, in practice, several challenges arise. Educational institutions often lack the necessary infrastructure, and even with the best intentions, they are sometimes unable to offer a separate room for the social worker. In such cases, social workers are forced to find vacant classrooms, or at times must conduct their work in hallways, courtyards, or other shared spaces. Clearly, this makes it much harder to provide high-quality professional services, although it must not prevent service delivery. Social workers regularly report these problems to their supervisors, and it is hoped that over time, these experiences will contribute to improving working conditions and advancing the profession. In the Eger District, these infrastructural difficulties are most commonly encountered in the most popular and overcrowded institutions. These schools and dormitories often lack enough space even for their own educational activities, let alone providing an additional office for social work. Moreover, the higher the educational level they offer, the fewer class hours are available for activities linked to social work. There is still a lack of widespread recognition that strengthening children's social skills and supporting their emotional well-being can also positively influence academic performance. At present, based on our experience, the priority in schools remains focused on meeting curriculum and examination requirements rather than developing social competences.

5. Conclusion

School social work in Hungary is undergoing meaningful institutionalization, driven by the growing complexity of children's needs and the limitations of traditional educational responses. Integrating social work into schools offers a promising way forward, providing children with comprehensive support and enabling teachers to focus on education. By adopting a systemic, preventive, and collaborative approach, school social workers contribute to the resilience and well-being of students, families, and educational communities. As international models demonstrate, school social work can be a cornerstone of inclusive education—if provided with the recognition, resources, and flexibility required for success (N. Tóth, 2017).

It is not easy for social workers to integrate into the atmosphere of educational institutions, even though both fields work with children. Education and instruction, viewed purely from a pedagogical

perspective, belong to a well-structured, thematically organized system based on old methods, where teachers have clearly defined tasks. In contrast, social workers, when the service was first introduced, entered these institutions independently, tasked with establishing a mindset that was not only unfamiliar but sometimes seemed unacceptable or even incompatible with the existing practices. For example, when a student begins to behave differently at school or does not conform to the expected classroom behavior, a teacher typically responds using disciplinary methods that consider the interests of the whole class and school community. These measures might include punishments (e.g., written warnings, poor grades, summoning parents, notifying the principal) or actions that, rather than helping the student, may worsen the underlying problem. This can happen when a student is publicly reprimanded or the issue is made visible to the peer group. When a social worker addresses the same situation, they start from a different perspective, considering the student's mental and social needs, and approach the problem with greater sensitivity and empathy—something teachers, due to their professional focus and heavy workload, often cannot afford to prioritize. They must keep up with the curriculum and manage the needs of the entire class. Over the years, it has been challenging for social workers to introduce and promote an alternative approach and working method that provides space and opportunity for a different way of addressing students and their problems. The traditional focus in schools has remained centered around fulfilling academic requirements. It takes a long time to recognize that the well-being of children—and thereby the entire community—depends not on success in individual math or history lessons but rather on maintaining mental health. And to support that, professionals like social workers are essential in schools. There is no doubt that this service is greatly needed. It fills significant gaps in the education system, creating important connections between professional fields that were previously divided. It is crucial to provide specialized training for future social workers specifically for this field because it covers a large part of social work practice and is necessary and beneficial not only in the short term but also in the long run, for individuals, communities, and society as a whole.

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