Social Work in Educational System of the Balkans - Is Social Worker Needeed in Schools?

Jovana Skoric[*]
Faculty of Philosophy,
University of Novi Sad, Serbia

Jelena Kupresanin
Faculty of Political Science,
University of Belgrade, Serbia

Abstract: This work is primarily concerned with the need for social workers in schools in the Western Balkans whose engagement is only in development and (incontinably) represented. In some regions, the place of social workers in schools has recently been introduced, as well as the (same-named) subject at the university, which represents a significant shift and greatly guides for development of theory and practice of social work. On the other hand, in a large part of these regions, conflicts, instability of socio-economic nature and transition destabilized institutional arrangements and left significant deficits, and raised the question of the development and sustainability of these programs. In view of this, it could be said that the children here are increasingly becoming victims of various social forces that negatively affect their psycho social state, which often reflects on the failure of educational system. Although schools are set up primarily to educate children, it is necessary to pay attention to the psycho social aspects of students. In view of this, the aim of this paper is to point out the need to provide a comprehensive social work service for students, parents, and staff addressing barriers that limit students to utilizing their full potential. Namely, the incorporation of social work into school facilities could also contribute to improving school security policy, identifying different strategies, and early intervention in different spheres to ensure that each student gets the same chance of progress in academic and social context. In view of this, the paper used qualitative documents analysis to evaluate and analyze relevant and available documents in order to determine the situation and differences in school social workers in these countries. At the end of this work, there was left space for discussion about the needs for fundamental changes in the educational system and putting a greater emphasis on social workers.

Keywords: Social work, social workers, educational system, changes

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INTRODUCTION

School social workers are an integral link between school, home, and community in helping pupils achieve academic success. They work directly with school administrations as well as pupils and families, providing leadership in forming school discipline policies, mental health intervention, crisis management, and support services. As part of an interdisciplinary team to help pupils succeed, social workers also facilitate community involvement in the schools while advocating for student success (Niamhom, Srisuantang, & Tanpichai, 2018; Kamaruddin & Sulaiman, 2017; Pushkina, 2017).

[*]Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jovana Skoric, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad, Serbia. E-mail: jovana.skoric@ff.uns.ac.rs

Roots of School Social Work

Rapid social changes and a series of obstacles of a different nature, including both personal and family challenges, systemic failures in schools and other social problems require a new structure in educational institutions where social workers represent a very important figure. In many countries in the world, children with problems, or children exposed to different types of problems and difficulties, their parents and the schools themselves, have the necessary and consistent support of a school social worker. In view of this, school social work has become a recognized, well-known, affirmative and legally regulated field of social work in many countries (Europe and wider). On the other hand, there are countries in which educational institutions do not have continuous and adequate support of social workers, which greatly disturbs the functioning of the pupils themselves, but also affects the overall social development.

The General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, under Article 26. The Right to Education. After several decades, the Millennium Development Goals for primary education strengthened the right to education by introducing specific goals such as early childhood education, free and compulsory primary education, elimination of gender disparity, and so on (Huxtable, 2013; Mohamad, Sazali, & Salleh, 2018). Among other things, school social work is one of the instruments endeavoring to truly achieve the rights of children as defined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN) 1989. This convention was ratified by almost all countries of the world, marking it as the beginning of a new chapter in the position of a child, more humane and more justifiable than ever in the history (see also (Gavrilovic, Jugovic, & Lepir, 2013)).

The precondition for the development of the social worker profession was to introduce compulsory education for all children, at the moment when education was no longer reserved for the elite but became part of the preparation of all children for modern life (Pushkina, 2017). The history of school-based social work has its beginnings in the 19th century, in the United Kingdom. A connection has not been established between the school community and its pupils due to poverty, social injustice, inexperienced parents who have not been educated, and so on. Consequently, there was an initiative to change existing (social) policies so the National Association of Social Workers in Education (NASWE) was established in 1884 in the UK. Its primary role was to provide a link between the school and the family of marginalized pupils (Allen-Meares, Washington, & Welsh, 1996). The improvement of social work in education systems throughout the United States began somewhat later, during the 20th century (McDavitt, 2017). Regardless of the geographical area, it was obvious that building bridges between immediate family needs and long-term benefits for pupils was necessary. Consequently, this responsibility was part of social services within the education sector, and later this role was assumed by social workers (McDavitt, 2017; Nuchso, Tuntivivat, & Klayklueng, 2016).

Namely, one of the aims of today's social work in schools is to adopt an organized approach to solving various social issues and problems, which largely depends on the normal course of teaching.

The profession of school social worker and activities which are included in this profession, from its very beginnings to the modern day, is developing and expanding the field of its work. Changes in the contemporary world also contribute to this, by changing both social workers and social work towards humanization and improvement, in order to make them more effective in addressing increasingly complicated and growing social problems but also in helping and supporting people trying to satisfy their essential needs. The International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association of Schools for Social Work contribute to the formation, development and affirmation of social work, advocating for an integrated approach to its realization, for social changes aimed at fostering well-being, starting from the theory of human behavior and social systems, and appreciating principles of human rights and social justice as the fundamental principles for this profession (Gavrilovic et al., 2013).

THE ANALYTICS OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK AND ITS BENEFITS FOR THE EDUCATION SYSTEM - THE REVIEW OF PREVIOUS RESEARCH

McDavitt (2017) believes that social work in schools is reflected in helping individual learners or groups of pupils who find themselves in a state of difficulty in educational, emotional and social development in general (McDavitt, 2017). AASW practice standards for school social workers provide a list of factors that affect pupils' ability to actively follow the classes. These are mainly family changes, drug and/or alcohol abuse within the home environment, poverty, violence, abuse and neglect, transition or instability of housing, etc. (School Social Work Association of America, 2008)). Accordingly, school social workers can apply strategies of early intervention and prevention in areas such as networking, counseling, case management and participation in the design and supervision of different educational policies (McDavitt, 2017). In this context, the Constable statement is very important: "School is a place where children

gain knowledge and socialize, know themselves and other people. It is important that school environment is healthy and friendly, thus children can succeed and develop (Constable, 2009).” In that sense, school social workers represent one of the country's responses to widespread child poverty and other social problems that hinder them or make it impossible to develop their potentials, or to achieve success in the educational process according to their abilities. Consequently, in addition to professional associates (such as pedagogues or psychologists) the engagement of social workers in schools is a multiple significance. The following picture (Figure 1) illustrates the authentic responsibilities of school social workers, i.e., pedagogues and psychologists, as well as their common functions within educational institutions.
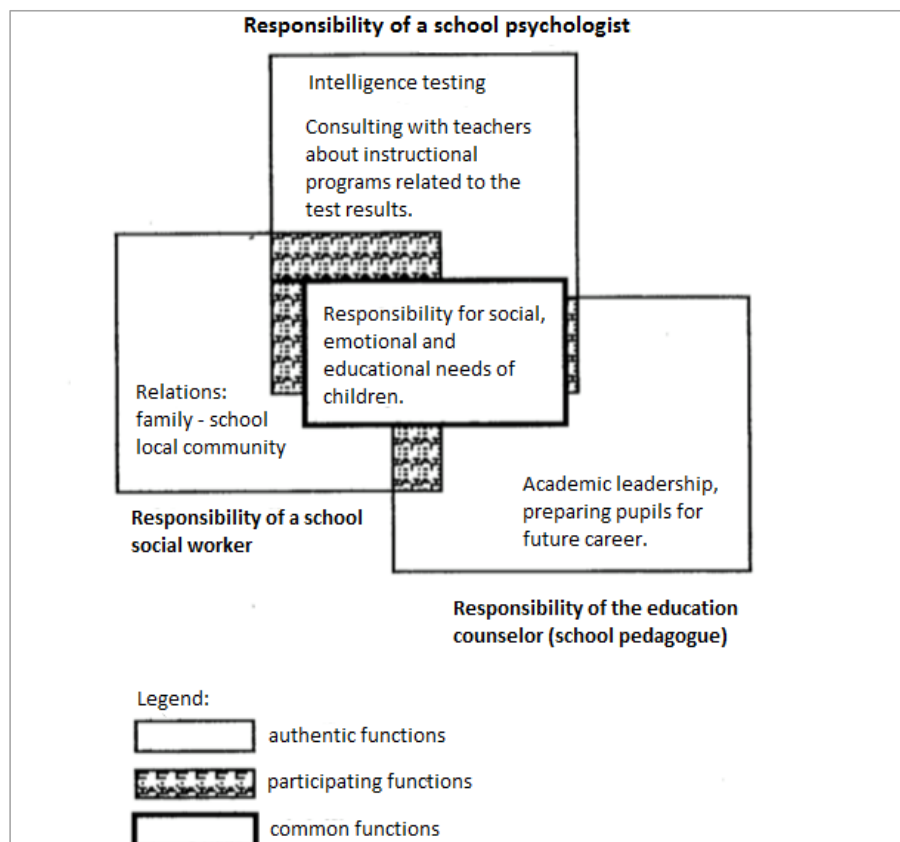

Figure 1 *Model (James prema Martinovic (1994)*

The first question that arises when it comes to social work at school is what the school social work is exactly and what school-based social workers do?

The answers that can be found in the literature are as follows:

1) It is a specialized field of practice within social work (e.g., Constable (2009)),

2) contemporary social work at school is a scientifically applied discipline (Zganec, 1996),

3) social work rests upon the basis of one's own knowledge and knowledge from other scientific fields and with its specific approaches social work creates social change,

4) the field of school social work proved to be particularly necessary and useful in providing psychosocial assistance to marginalized children - economically, socially, politically or personally,

5) the practice of school social work requires a wide range of skills that includes interactive team work, especially with teachers, pupils and their families (Constable, 2009).

6) the goal of school social work is to improve the educational and psycho social environment among teachers, pupils and their parents,

7) social work at school is a specialized field focused on:

- helping pupils to achieve satisfactory school success,

- coordinating and directing the work of the school, family, local community in order to achieve the school success of a child,

- inclusion of all activities aimed at resolving conflicts and disagreements between pupils, parents and teachers at school or persons related to school,

- encouraging teachers and pupils to achieve success in the context of a common endeavor to achieve a better development of school life and

- cooperation with public and private institutions.

The basic goals of social work in schools are to increase the general level of functioning and school achievement of pupils. Professional social work at school should aim to achieve the following goals:

- to contribute to the realization of social rights and justice for children,

- to encourage the social development of pupils,

- to prevent social problems and risky behavior of pupils,

- to eliminate factors that impede the social development of pupils,

- to contribute to the mobilization of social support for student development and to influence their harmonious functioning,

- to mitigate the consequences of various forms of deprivation,

- to contribute to the prevention and elimination of deviant behavior,

- to carry out analytical, research, educational and public-informative activities,

- to carry out continuous evaluation and self-evaluation of achievements with the aim to introduce successful practice (Gavrilovic et al., 2013; Sherman, 2016).

In order to successfully fulfill its role, according to the National Association of Social Workers, the school social worker should:

- Receives and collects information about pupils with problems,

- Identifies changes in pupils by talking to the class head teacher, meets with the student and discovers problems while talking to them, talks with the parents of the pupils and makes an initial assessment,

- Develops an action plan by drawing up a draft and implementation plan to address the common problems of pupils, such as: depression or family problems, including divorce and homelessness. He or she sets out prevention programs and intervention plans in crisis to address problems and help pupils affected by crises (severe elemental disasters, deaths of dear ones, family breakdown, the occurrence of severe illness in the family, etc.). The school social worker also implements programs under the authority of the school administration, special programs and learning opportunities that include counseling and teaching after school,

- Provides help and services to the student, individually or in a team, determines interventions in accordance with the nature of the student's problems, with or without their parents, and in doing so, he achieves open and honest communication with the student,

- Communicates with the student, other professional associates, teachers, school administration, parents and, if necessary, with other community services. In the communication process, he or she not only talks to all above mentioned, but also goes to home visits, classroom visits, and visits the school yard or playground. If in any of these sites, a school social worker identifies additional problems, he or she intervenes or mediates immediately, and introduces additional elements into the action plan and interventions. A school social worker, for example, while staying in the classroom, can focus on attention or behavior. School social workers must be good listeners and sharp (perceptive) observers, well organized and able to quickly and creatively identify and solve problems, sometimes in a moment. In the communication process he should speak with a compassionate voice and empathy. It is also important to understand cultural differences,

- Follows pupils who are gaining help to ensure that social services are not only provided in a timely manner, but that the conditions have been improved. This is done by communicating with the student, his class head teacher, teachers, other professional associates, school management and other services with which the student and his family cooperates in solving the problem. Follow-up also takes place through family visits. If the conditions have not been improved, the school social worker, expert team and school administration assess whether it is necessary to initiate the involvement of other services that are authorized for other legal actions, or whether a student should be relocated from the family,

- Educates teachers, pupils, parents and themselves, using conferences and meetings, and following innovations of legal, statutory and other rules and procedures. Also, the school social worker also has responsibility for planning social actions and developing programs for the entire school, which encourage school or social success. Educating

others relates to the use and transfer of professional knowledge in order to overcome suffering, heal wounds, overcome pain and turn to the future,

- Advise pupils while communicating with them, discussing the problems they face (learning, dyslexia, attention deficit, social problems - including particularly poverty, abuse and violence, interruption of classroom activities, violent behavior towards teachers and/or peers, problems in a family, school, and/or community that affects pupils' school and social success and find ways to maximize their success. The school social worker helps pupils with learning disabilities and social relationships and helps them develop and strengthen the desirable behavior. A school social worker makes notes about his work with pupils so to document his/her meetings with pupils but he also meets with pupils several times in order to monitor their progress.

- Collaborates with appropriate community services (Social Work Centers, Health Center, Administration, Police, etc.) and develops action plans with them to jointly assist pupils who need help outside the classroom and school yard (National Association of Social Workers, 2018).

However, even if social workers around the world represent a major force within educational systems, in some countries of the Balkans, social workers remain marginalized or there is not a single social worker in educational institutions. The following subtitle will deal in more detail with the analysis of documents, facts and reasons why the social worker is not part of the education system in some Balkan countries.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research used data from various scientific disciplines as sociology, social work and politics, but also theoretical and empirical research from the field of social policy. The research is theoretical and descriptive, and also exploratory because it pretends to analyze and explain a position of school social worker in different countries of the Western Balkans.

The aim of this study is to provide a general wider context of the current situation regarding school social work in Western Balkans.

- Identification of school social work in the countries of the western Balkans,
- Comparison and analysis of positions of school social work in the countries of the Western Balkans

Method

This study used a qualitative documents analysis to evaluate and analyze relevant documents which expressing the courts, attitudes and positions of school social workers in Western Balkans countries. The documents which analyzed are: annual reports, public documents, scientific paper, different politics strategies and different documents about school policy.

RESULTS: IDENTIFICATION AND COMPARISON OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK IN THE WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES

The Western Balkans as a whole has a relatively well-developed social protection infrastructure and a number of different effective practices. However, in a large part of the region, conflict, instability, transition, and so on destabilize institutional structures and weaken different social work practices. This has further caused most regions to lag behind the West, and the accumulation of problems disturbed the capacity of access to social rights. Various studies (e.g., The World Bank (2017)) has identified that global economic and financial crises limit the possibility of eco-growth, which can have direct consequences for the educational achievements of various vulnerable groups of people. Similarly, the European Commission (2009) argues that the period of economic instability, wars, international isolation and other problems that have affected the countries of the Western Balkans over the last decades have directly led to the inconsistency of the support of social workers in educational institutions (European Commission, 2009).

In the Western Balkans, education systems began to develop more intensively after the Second World War, however, the role of social work in schools remains rather invisible and marginalized. Various studies point to major educational infrastructure issues: a large number of segregated schools, a high percentage of national minorities in schools, high rates of poverty, divorces, juvenile delinquency, and so on are just some of the indicators that social workers are needed in schools. However, the general social, economic and political situation has caused a significant pressure on social work which is not in a position to meet all the needs of socially excluded and vulnerable groups.

Regarding the need for social workers in schools, the countries of the Western Balkans have thought of it in a

different way. In some countries, however, there was a need to target factors that could impede successful learning. Accordingly, the need for social work skills in this domain has been recognized. In the 1950s, in some countries of the Western Balkans, school social work was recognized as important in the fight against social problems, but in most Western Balkan countries this field remains unexplored and closed. The main issues raised here are as follows: Why the need for social workers in educational institutions has not been recognized in almost all countries of the Western Balkans? Or, if the need is recognized, what the potential barriers to introducing it into educational institutions are? Accordingly, the current state of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro and factors that (do not) contribute to the introduction of social workers into educational institutions will be presented.

Research so far has showed that social workers in the Republic of Serbia have not yet secured their place in schools, as opposed to the experience of other developed countries. In the Republic of Serbia, there are no legal (or normative) documents that define the functional duties of social workers in schools, nor is this profession recognized in systematization of jobs in educational institutions. Closeness of the school system and underdeveloped field of social work are the main "culprits" for this situation. Activities related to social services in schools are performed by other professional associates such as psychologists or pedagogues. In addition, there is a lack of research on arguments for the benefit of social work in schools, obstacles that hinder the institutionalization of social work in schools, target groups within them, and so on. What is also relevant to this problem is that there are isolated projects aimed at examining the introduction of social workers into schools, but they remain inconsistent and unsustainable. Accordingly, we can conclude that the profession of a social worker (for the time being) has not been recognized as a necessary solution for growing social problems within schools and wider.

The aforementioned transformations and transitions have contributed to the expansion of various social problems - new poverty, unemployment, rising crime, and so on in Montenegro, too. What can be seen from the analysis of various relevant documents (Radovic, 2013) is that the profession of school social work is not recognized in the Montenegrin legislation in schools. In other words, activities identified as the work of a social worker are carried out by other professions, primarily pedagogues and psychologists. The situation in Kosovo is quite similar, high poverty rates, unemployment, high crime rates are just some of the indicators that require the engagement of social workers in educational institutions. However, in the legal provisions regarding the education system, the social worker is not recognized in the job classification system.

Like other Western Balkan countries in transition, Macedonia is facing difficulties when it comes to engaging social workers in educational institutions. That is, there is a great need for changes in the entire welfare system. Existing data shows that there is a large number of marginalized children (Roma children, children living in extreme poverty, etc.) who attend school irregularly due to various barriers. Nevertheless, the need for social workers within schools is still not identified in Macedonia, and there is no legal regulation that defines them.

Currently, there are no social work positions in schools in Croatia, and a complex chain of prevention of student behavior disorders is not complete despite the strong need for it. This further shows us that the participation of social workers in interdisciplinary teams in schools remains marginalized (Martinovic, 1994). Despite various letters to the Ministry, initiating conferences on the topic of Social work in schools and other visible and indisputable facts, the introduction of social workers in schools is about to go down a long, pervasive and uncertain path.

Unfortunately, in Croatian schools, social workers have not secured their place so far. The problems of insufficient development of social work discipline resulted in inadequate recognition of the role and function of social workers in society in general and in education. This has significantly slowed down the process of introducing social work into the field of education. But, of course, social work should not give up its extremely important field of action. The project of the new Croatian school should be an opportunity for both education and social work to recognize common interests and finally start a mutual useful cooperation (Zganec, 1996).

Unlike the Republic of Serbia, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia or Montenegro, in Bosnia and Herzegovina (in the Republic of Srpska), professional social work has been introduced to educational institutions - pre-school, primary and secondary schools - the Law on Pre-school Education, The Law on Primary Education and Upbringing and the Law on Secondary Education from 2008. However, in practice, the process of its introduction runs slowly, although the needs for it are visible, indisputable and growing.

The standardization of school social work, in the environments in which it is in the initial phase, is utterly significant. In addition to the key advantage that social work brings for professionals and all users of the social work, standardization

of social work contributes to its promotion, the formation of a positive attitude of the environment towards it, and explains directly to interested pupils, their parents, school and community, what a social worker knows and can do, what effects he can achieve and how he should help pupils to overcome obstacles in the process of their education. Bearing all this in mind, an attempt was made to put school social work on a firm professional basis and focus on the outcomes that it should and can achieve (Gavrilovic et al., 2013).

In Albania since 2013, based on the provision of the Ministry of Education and Sport, schools have established a psycho-social unit made up of psychologists and social workers. This service represents a significant achievement and pioneering initiative not only in Albania, but also in the entire region of the Western Balkans. Innovative aspect actually consists in adding a social work service to the existing school psychological service. In that sense, social workers are engaged in empowering pupils, their families and the entire community through various interventions in cooperation with a school psychologist and other professional associates. The psychologist is more focused on identifying, evaluating, and developing individual intervention plans for pupils in need, while the social worker is more focused on parents and school team in order to identify, prevent or address different types of risks. This project represents a good base for improving the protection of children in schools, but the overall implementation of the same requires special support and attention as well as the creation of a legal framework and concrete practice which are just some of the challenges ahead (Republic of Albania the Parlament, 2016).

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND DISCUSSION: THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES AND THE ISSUE OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF SOCIAL WORK IN SCHOOLS?

The profession of school social worker and activities which are included in this profession, from its very beginnings to the modern day, is developing and expanding the field of its work. Changes in the contemporary world also contribute to this, by changing both social workers and social work towards humanization and improvement, in order to make them more effective in addressing increasingly complicated and growing social problems but also in helping and supporting endangered people trying to satisfy their essential needs (Gavrilovic et al., 2013).

Family and school are central places for the development of children. In that sense, "education has long served as a great leveller of opportunity because it helps people realize their potential and contribute to their communities and the world (UNICEF, 2016)". Accordingly, schools should create specific conditions in order that their pupils achieve the full capacity. Haynes (2002) argues that, although the primary mission of the education system is academic development, the school should take more responsibility for social and "silent" issues (Haynes, 2002). By contrast, through the analysis of various documents and strategies, it is evident that there are gaps between aspirations and realities, i.e., between apparent needs and currently available social work programs in schools in the Western Balkan countries (Constable, 2009). Based on the relevant facts from the previous subheadings, it can be noted that despite some good practices and successful implementation of social workers in schools, a large number of countries in the Western Balkans continue to struggle with the institutionalization of the same. Poverty, long-term unemployment, social and spatial segregation, political and social marginalization, consequences of transition, etc. are just some of the challenges facing all the countries of the Western Balkans, which greatly affect the school achievements of pupils from different marginalized groups. In view of this, the institutionalization of social work in schools is a very popular, and at the same time controversial issue followed by various difficulties in the very implementation of it. The need for the building of cohesive schools, based on non-discrimination, equal opportunities and cultural diversity, is a challenge, above all, for school social work.

This paper, through the identification, analysis and comparison of needs for school social workers in the countries of the Western Balkans, opens up the possibility that some future research will deal more closely with the reasons and factors of the failure or success of the mentioned implementation.

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