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SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF EDUCATIONAL REALITY

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PREFACE

The reader is presented with the ninth edition of the *ACTA SOCIOPATHOLOGICA* proceedings, subtitled **"Social Determinants of Educational Reality."** This publication continues the tradition of connecting research findings from the fields of social pedagogy, social pathology, and related disciplines with current issues in education and upbringing.

The main theme of this edition is **social determinants of education** – a topic that has become increasingly urgent in recent years. Challenges such as family problems, social inequalities, the digital environment, and the impact of the COVID19 pandemic significantly shape today's educational reality.

The proceedings are divided into **three thematic sections**: **The first section** focuses on the analysis of social determinants of education in both Czech and international contexts, including issues of inclusion and equal opportunities. **The second section – "Risk Behaviour, Mental Health and Prevention"** – addresses current challenges related to the endangerment of children and youth, prevention strategies, and intervention possibilities. **The final section** broadens the perspective to topics related to inclusion, cultural diversity, and lifelong learning.

We believe that the studies presented will offer inspiration not only to experts in social pedagogy, social pathology, social work, and related fields, but also to teachers, students, and all those involved in creating an inclusive and equitable educational environment. The proceedings can serve as a source of theoretical insights as well as practical suggestions for further research.

We thank all authors for their contributions and the reviewers for their professional evaluation of the texts. We wish our readers stimulating and thought-provoking reading.

Mgr. et Mgr. **Stanislava Svoboda Hoferková**, Ph.D.

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SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF EDUCATION

THE SOCIAL CONDITIONING OF EDUCATION: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY ANALYSIS OF INEQUALITIES AND INCLUSIVE STRATEGIES

SOCIÁLNÍ PODMÍNĚNOST EDUKACE: INTERDISCIPLINÁRNÍ ANALÝZA NEROVNOSTÍ A INKLUZIVNÍCH STRATEGIÍ

Václav Bělík (Czech Republic)

Abstract

This paper analyses the influence of social determinants on educational inequality in the Czech and international contexts. It draws on theoretical frameworks (Bourdieu, Bronfenbrenner, Coleman) and empirical data (OECD, PISA, UNESCO). It focuses on the classification of determinants, mechanisms of action, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and possibilities for systemic solutions. Methodologically, it uses secondary analysis of research, case studies, and examples of good practice. The results show that the key tools for mitigating inequalities are inclusive education, family support, professional development of teachers, and interdisciplinary cooperation.

Key words: social determinants of education; educational inequalities; cultural and social capital; inclusive education; systemic intervention

Abstrakt

Příspěvek analyzuje vliv sociálních determinant na nerovnosti v edukaci v českém i mezinárodním kontextu. Vychází z teoretických rámců (Bourdieu, Bronfenbrenner, Coleman) a empirických dat (OECD, PISA, UNESCO). Zaměřuje se na klasifikaci determinant, mechanismy působení, dopady pandemie COVID-19 a možnosti systémového řešení. Metodicky využívá sekundární analýzu výzkumů, případové studie a příklady dobré praxe. Výsledky ukazují, že klíčovými nástroji pro zmírnění nerovností jsou inkluzivní vzdělávání, podpora rodin, profesní rozvoj pedagogů a mezioborová spolupráce.

Klíčová slova: sociální determinanty edukace; vzdělávací nerovnosti; kulturní a sociální kapitál; inkluzivní vzdělávání; systémová intervence

1 The concept of social determinants of education

The concept of social determinants of education provides a key framework for understanding how structural conditions influence educational opportunities, processes and outcomes for individuals. This approach is based on the theory of social determinants of health as formulated by Wilkinson and Marmot (2003) and subsequently adapted to the field of education. Education is not understood here as an isolated individual performance, but as a process deeply rooted in the social context.

Social determinants include a wide range of factors – from the socio-economic status of the family, through the level of education of parents, the quality of the school environment, the availability of educational resources, to geographical location and political conditions. These factors operate hierarchically, have a cumulative effect and often lead to the reproduction of inequalities across generations. As Braveman and Gottlieb (2014) point out, the structural nature of these determinants means that their influence is systematic and long-term, which is confirmed by DiPrete and Eirich (2006), who draw attention to their amplifying effect over the course of a lifetime.

2 Mechanisms of action and empirical findings

Empirical studies show that the influence of social determinants on educational outcomes is significant. The OECD (2018) identified that these factors explain up to 15% of the differences in PISA international test results. Chmielewski (2019) even argues that their influence has been growing in recent decades. In the Czech context, the education system is considered one of the most selective within the OECD. According to PISA (2018) data, the difference in results between pupils from the lowest and highest socioeconomic quartiles was as high as 98 points in mathematics, which corresponds to almost three years of schooling (OECD, 2019).

Historically, the concept of social determinants of education has developed from the fields of sociology of education and social epidemiology. As early as the 19th century, Rudolf Virchow drew attention to the influence of social and economic conditions on health, which later carried over into the educational discourse. The study by Coleman et al. (1966) played a significant role, emphasising the influence of the broader social context on school success.

Theoretical approaches to the social determinants of education include the concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu), which explains how cultural resources acquired in the family influence school success, social capital (Coleman), which points to the importance of social relationships and community ties, and intersectionality (Yuval-Davis), which draws attention to the intersection of different identities and experiences that shape educational trajectories.

Overall, social determinants of education provide a fundamental analytical framework for understanding inequalities in education. Their influence is profound and complex, requiring systemic solutions that go beyond the scope of education and extend into broader social policy.

The mechanisms of social determinants of education are complex and interconnected. They can be divided into three main categories: direct, indirect and mediated effects.

Direct influences represent the immediate impact of social conditions on a child‘s educational opportunities. For example, a family‘s financial resources directly affect its ability to pay for extracurricular activities, tutoring or quality learning materials. Families with lower socioeconomic status (SES) invest on average 30% less in their children‘s education than families with higher SES (OECD, 2017).

Indirect influences operate through mediating variables. The high workload of parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds can lead to less involvement in their children‘s school life, which has a negative impact on their academic success. A study has shown that a lack of parental involvement reduces the likelihood of completing secondary school by 15% (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Mediated effects relate to the broader environment that indirectly influences education. The quality of low-SES neighbourhoods can lead to lower-quality schools, a shortage of qualified teachers, and limited extracurricular opportunities. For example, schools in poorer areas often have 20% higher teacher turnover (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

These mechanisms reinforce each other and create systemic inequality. Children from low SES backgrounds face not only material limitations but also limited support from their families and communities. Added to this is the influence of the school environment, which is often unable to compensate for these disadvantages. The result is a cumulative effect that manifests itself in lower educational outcomes, a lower probability of completing higher education, and limited life chances.

Empirical evidence confirms the strength of these mechanisms. A meta-analysis of 50 studies found a strong correlation ($r = 0.45$) between family SES and children‘s academic performance. A difference in parental income of USD 10,000 per year is associated with a 3% increase in the likelihood of completing higher education (Sirin, 2005; Dynarski, 2003).

Empirical evidence clearly confirms that family socioeconomic status (SES) has a significant impact on children's educational outcomes. The 2018 PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) international survey showed that SES explains an average of 14% of the variance in student performance in reading literacy in OECD countries. In the Czech Republic, the difference between pupils from the richest and poorest SES quartiles was equivalent to more than two years of schooling.

The education of parents also has a significant influence. A Eurostat study (2020) showed that children whose parents have a university education are four times more likely to obtain a university degree themselves than children of parents with only a basic education. This phenomenon is closely linked to the transfer of cultural capital and academic aspirations within the family.

Cultural capital manifests itself not only in access to education, but also in the way parents support their children. Research by Lareau (2003) in the US described the difference between „concerted cultivation", typical of the middle class, and „accomplishment of natural growth", common among the working class. The first approach involves actively organising leisure activities, communicating with teachers and developing cultural skills, while the second gives children more freedom but less structured support. These differences lead to differences in test scores of up to 0.6 standard deviations in favour of middle-class children.

Regional differences also play a significant role. In addition, it appears that the Czech education system does not effectively support children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The differences between pupils from different social strata are more pronounced than in many other OECD countries, pointing to a lack of compensation for structural disadvantages on the part of the school system.

Social determinants of education represent a complex network of factors that influence educational opportunities, progress and outcomes for individuals. In order to better understand these influences, it is useful to classify them. One of the most influential approaches is Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of development, which distinguishes several layers of the environment affecting individuals: the microsystem (family, school, peers), the mesosystem (relationships between microsystems), the exosystem (institutions indirectly influencing the child's environment, e.g. parents' workplace), macrosystem (cultural, economic and political frameworks) and chronosystem (temporal changes in the environment) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

An alternative classification is offered by Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2000), who divide determinants into three thematic categories: economic (e.g. family income, housing stability), social (quality of relationships, parental involvement) and institutional (quality of schools, availability of services, education policy). These categories overlap and operate at different

levels – from the individual to the community – creating a comprehensive framework for analysing educational inequalities.

Understanding of the impact of these determinants is further deepened through various theoretical frameworks. Pierre Bourdieu introduced the concept of cultural capital, which includes knowledge, language skills, aesthetic preferences and cultural orientation that are passed on within the family and influence a child's success at school (Bourdieu, 1986). In the current context, the concept of digital capital is also developing, reflecting access to technology and the ability to use it effectively in education (Pitzalis & Porcu, 2024).

In their critical theory, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis point out that schools function as **a reproducer of economic inequalities**. According to them, the education system does not create equal opportunities, but rather reinforces existing social hierarchies through hidden curricula, discipline and selection. Their „correspondence principle" shows how the structure of schools reflects the structure of the labour market, thereby preparing students for subordinate roles in the capitalist economy (Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

James Coleman emphasised the importance of social capital – the quality of relationships, trust and norms in a community that support effective education. In his theory of effective schools, he shows that even schools in challenging conditions can achieve good results if they have strong leadership, clear goals and a supportive culture. According to him, social capital arises in closed social networks that enable the sharing of information, expectations and norms, thereby supporting educational success (Coleman, 1988).

Kimberlé Crenshaw developed the concept of intersectionality, which draws attention to the intersection of different forms of disadvantage – such as socio-economic status, ethnicity and gender – and their cumulative impact on educational opportunities. This framework is essential for analysing inequalities in inclusive education and for designing policies that reflect the complexity of individual experiences (Crenshaw, 1989).

3 Inclusion, pandemics and systemic solutions

Eliminating inequalities in education requires a systemic approach, a key element of which is inclusive education. Inclusion is not just a technical measure, but represents a value framework based on the principles of equal opportunities, participation of all actors and the removal of barriers that prevent the full participation of all children in the educational process (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006).

In the Czech context, however, inclusive education faces a number of challenges. Among the most frequently cited are the insufficient preparation of teachers to work with a heterogeneous

group of pupils, the negative attitudes of some of the teaching community towards inclusion, and the lack of systemic support from the state and professional institutions (Květoňová, 2021). The implementation of inclusive principles requires cooperation between schools and other actors: school counselling centres (ŠPP), educational and psychological counselling centres (PPP), special education centres (SPC), social and legal protection of children authorities (OSPOD), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and healthcare facilities. Each of these entities has a specific role in identifying the child's needs, designing support measures and implementing them.

In addition to the school environment, support from families and communities, which form the child's natural background, is also essential. Identifying at-risk families – for example, those struggling with poverty, low levels of education or social isolation – is key to targeted interventions. Community programmes aimed at strengthening parenting skills, supporting educational aspirations and developing social ties can significantly contribute to improving children's educational outcomes (Epstein, 2001).

The typology of families according to the degree of support for a child's education makes it possible to distinguish between protective factors (e.g. active interest in school, stable family environment) and risk factors (e.g. neglect, low motivation, conflictual relationships). Effective interventions should be based on a combination of quantitative (e.g. measuring school attendance, results, socio-economic indicators) and qualitative approaches (e.g. interviews with parents, observation, case studies) that allow for a comprehensive understanding of the situation of the child and their family.

Research shows that successful inclusive and community programmes have a positive impact not only on educational outcomes, but also on social cohesion, children's mental health and their long-term life chances (OECD, 2012; Slee, 2011). The key to their effectiveness is interdisciplinary cooperation, long-term planning and respect for the individual needs of each child.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly exacerbated existing inequalities in education. School closures and the transition to distance learning have revealed structural weaknesses in education systems, particularly in terms of access to technology, mental health support and the ability to respond to the needs of disadvantaged groups. Research shows that pupils from low-income families, marginalised communities and regions with limited digital infrastructure were the most affected (Gee, Asmundson & Vang, 2022).

One of the most significant impacts was the digital divide. Many children did not have access to a computer, stable internet or a suitable space for learning at home. This inequality was reflected not only in differences in educational outcomes, but also in pupils' mental well-being. Isolation, stress from online learning, and limited contact with peers led to increased

anxiety, depression, and feelings of loneliness, as confirmed by studies focusing on mental health during the pandemic (Cheshmehzangi, Zou & Su, 2022).

International comparisons show that the impacts of the pandemic were most severe in countries with long school closures and weak digital infrastructure. According to Patrinos (2024), there was an average decline in results of 14% of the standard deviation, which corresponds to a loss of approximately seven months of learning. In the US, the gap between rich and poor districts widened, with students from the poorest communities losing more than 1.5 years of schooling (Kane & Reardon, 2023).

UNESCO (2022) notes in its report that the pandemic has highlighted the need for resilience, equity and inclusivity in future education policy planning. Recommendations to mitigate the impact include expanding access to technology, targeted interventions such as tutoring and summer schools, investing in students' mental health, and equitable school funding. Gamoran and Murnane (2023) suggest that attention should be focused on long-term strategies that combine academic support with community services and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Cooperation between schools, families and communities is also key to creating a supportive environment for education. Only a comprehensive approach that links educational, social and health aspects can effectively respond to the consequences of the pandemic and contribute to restoring equality in education.

Eliminating social inequalities in education cannot be addressed in isolation – it requires a systemic, long-term and coordinated approach that links education, social services, health care, the non-profit sector and community actors. The key principle is an evidence-based approach, i.e. decision-making based on data, research and proven interventions (Slavin, 2002).

One of the pillars of an effective system is the professional development of teachers, which must include not only methodological skills, but also the ability to work with diversity, recognise risk factors and collaborate with other professionals. Multidisciplinary cooperation plays an important role here – between schools, school counselling facilities, social and legal child protection authorities, health services and non-profit organisations. This cooperation enables comprehensive support for the child in their natural environment.

In the Czech context, there are a number of examples of good practice that show that targeted interventions can significantly improve the educational outcomes of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. These include, for example:

- The „Start Together" programme, which emphasises individualised teaching, a partnership approach to children and cooperation with families.
- Local Action Plans for Education (MAP), which connect schools, municipalities,

NGOs and other actors in the region and enable the planning of educational development according to local needs.

- Tutoring and mentoring programmes implemented, for example, by organisations such as People in Need, the Eduzměna Foundation and Teach for Czechia, which target children at risk of school failure.
- The introduction of the position of social pedagogue in school counselling facilities within the framework of current legislation (Association of Social Pedagogues, 2025).

These initiatives show that targeted support, community cooperation, and trust in teachers can bring about positive change even in challenging conditions. It is crucial that these approaches become part of everyday practice rather than exceptional projects.

Social determinants of education operate at various levels and have a fundamental impact on children‘s life chances. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these inequalities, but at the same time has opened up space for innovation and systemic change. Inclusive education, support for families and communities, professional development for teachers, and interdisciplinary cooperation are key tools for building a more equitable education system.

The future of education depends on the ability to link undergraduate teacher training, research, practice and policy – and to create an environment where every child has the opportunity to develop their potential regardless of their social background.

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FAMILY INFLUENCE AND RELATED ISSUES WITHIN INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE VIEW WITH A FOCUS ON THE CZECH REPUBLIC

RODINA A SOUVISEJÍCÍ VLIVY V KONTEXTU MEZINÁRODNÍ KOMPARACE SE ZAMĚŘENÍM NA ČESKOU REPUBLIKU

Daniela Vrabcová, Olga Kesnerová Řádková (Czech Republic)

Abstract

The paper, using meta-analysis and comparison, focuses on the highest parents´ education attainment and socioeconomic status as indicators of intergenerational educational mobility. Upward/downward intergenerational mobility in selected countries is monitored as a context for focusing the Czech Republic and the education. The paper is thus an insight into the issue of how schools develop as a place for inclusive education. The main focused period includes period from 2014 onwards. Based on the analytical and comparative findings, some further theses are formulated in the context of the parametres of inclusive education.

Keywords*:* family influence; international comparison; OECD indicators; educational systems; Czech Republic; parents´ educational attainment; socio-economic status

Abstrakt: Článek s užitím metaanalýzy a komparace pohlíží na nejvyšší vzdělání rodičů a socioekonomický status jako na indikátory mezigenerační vzdělanostní mobility. Sledována je vzestupná/sestupná mezigenerační vzdělanostní mobilita ve vybraných zemích jako kontext pro zaměření na ČR a vzdělávání. Příspěvek je tak vhledem do otázky, jak se daří rozvíjet školu jako místo pro inkluzivní vzdělávání. Příspěvek se týká zejména období od roku 2014. Na základě analyticko-srovnávacích zjištění jsou v kontextu parametrů inkluzivního vzdělávání formulovány některé další teze.

Klíčová slova: vliv rodiny, mezinárodní komparace, OECD indikátory, vzdělávací systémy, Česká republika, vzdělanostní úroveň rodičů, socioekonomický status

Introduction

The contemporary Czech society faces a wide variety changes: social, economic, educational, in particular. This trend does not seem to be exceptional and its framework as well as effect, causes, and consequences are of multiple and global character, though numerous regional cultural conditions are highly recommended to be taken into consideration. This paper provides an insight into some of the most specific features of the theoretical and empirical investigation of family influence within the educational systems with a focus on the Czech Republic. Apart from the context of family-oriented discourse being presented, basic family functions are employed as the base for family influence. Attention is focused on the impact of social origin on education, measured by the relationship between the highest level of education attained by parents or primary household members and the educational attainment of their offspring.

It reveals an insight into how Czech educational system succeeds to develop inclusive dimension of the educational system.

Czech family-oriented educational discourse

The concept as well as phenomenon of family in the Czech Republic and society has been under change due to social historical development in the European society though with some restrictions apparent in regions with stronger religious belief. A very interesting view of the family and marriage partnership, in relation to religious issues, with a focus on the Christianity – Islam comparison is provided by Nešporová (2005), a Czech sociologist. It is possible to specify some attributes fundamental to the contemporary Czech family: 1. intense individualism (intense focus on concerns of individual beings, family members), 2. low expectations of permanency of relationship including marriage, 3. restricted face-to-face contact between parents and children, 4. shift of some of the responsibilities that used to belong to families to the state system, 5. postponing parenthood/delaying childbearing, 6. pre-marital sexual contacts, adulthood and maturity of partners, 7. low stability of families, 7. social tolerance to divorce issues, 8. focus on materialist values, 9. high employment and educational attainment of women (Šulová, 1998, In Haviger, et al, 2014).

The discourse on contemporary Czech family and family system seems to reflect on changes and shifts at the level of roles – expected roles/meanings of issues such as: love, life partner (man/woman), children and childbearing, family as such. Deficiency of a model that could be accepted as a model/ideal, and struggle for equality in relationships contrasting with need of more or less mutual relationship/bond to the partner appear to represent some of the main causes of deeper threat Haviger, et al, 2014). For more sociological, psychological, pedagogical, or interdisciplinary analytical, and reflective findings on family, and parenthood

in the contemporary society, in the field of Czech region see also writings of some of these authors: Dudová, Vohlídalová (2005), Matoušek (2003), Kraus (2014), Lašek and Loudová (2013), Možný (1999, 2006), Rabušic (2001). These represent some of the main pedagogical, psychological, and sociological views applied in the contemporary Czech educational environment.

Educational science/pedagogy in the Czech area uses family as a concept in multidimensional context; in numerous pedagogical works there are treated issues such as: functions of family, in-family education, upbringing, and socialization, school-family relation and cooperation, family as one of the organizational forms of education.

Tab 1 - Typologies of family and school functions in Czech environment

Family functions (Janiš, Loudová. 2011)	School functions (Koťa, Havlík, 2002)	School functions (Malach, 2003)
1. Reproductive 2. Socialization 3. Educational 4. Emotional 5. Economic	1. Rearing 2. Educational 3. Qualification 4. Integrative 5. Selective 6. Special – protective and resocialization	1. Contributes to complex personality development; 2. Represents a protective institution; 3. Moulds human being; 4. Instrument of social politics; 5. Part of living environment

(Vrabcová, 2015)

In the Czech environment it is also possible to find a set of six family functions (Haviger, 2014): 1. reproductive function, 2. normative, providing socialization and education, 3. protective, 4. maintenance and rearing, 5. emotional /affective, 6. economic, 7. recreational. All of the functions are interrelated. However, due to this paper orientation, on the grounds of the family functions there arises the concern for one question: What is the extent to which parents influence their children´s education at the level of international comparative statistics? In more general terms: What is the intergenerational educational mobility in the Czech educational environment from the international perspective of comparative pedagogy? How strong is the impact of socio-economic status and the family background upon the children´s performance and educational attainment?

This section focuses on the absolute intergenerational educational mobility. This concept is used to *´refer to the proportion of individuals whose level of education is different from that of their parents: higher in the case of upward mobility, and lower in the case of downward mobility across generations´ (OECD, 2014, p. 86).* In case of the situation where children attain the same level of education as their parents, there might be used two concepts: *´immobility in education´* or *´status quo in education*. The influence of the socioeconomic status of the family background is also visible in mathematics performances of 15 year old ones when comparing the results of those from the advantaged background (higher socioeconomic status, higher educational level attained by parents) with the disadvantaged background. (OECD, 2024).

Intergenerational educational mobility at the level of literacy skills

In a 2014 comparative view of the Czech Republic the highest proportion of young adults attaining highest literacy proficiency levels 4-5 was in case of those whose parents have attained tertiary education. For more details see Tab 2; compare particularly the difference between the proportion of young adults with the highest literacy levels whose parents have attained below upper secondary education (column A at the levels 4-5) and the proportion of young adults with the highest literacy levels whose parents have attained tertiary education (column C at the levels 4-5).

Tab 2 - Proportions of students with highest vs. lowest literacy proficiency levels 4-5 vs. 0-1: by parents´ education (in %)

	A/ Parents with below upper secondary education		B/ Parents with all levels of education			C/ Parents with tertiary education		Difference B – A (impact of A upon proficiency levels)		Difference C – A (impact of C upon proficiency levels)	
	Proportion at levels		Proportion at levels			Proportion at levels		Proportion at levels		Proportion at levels	
	0-1	4-5	0-1	4-5		0-1	4-5	0-1	4-5	0-1	4-5
Czech Republic	c	c	7	14		2	26	c	c	-5	12
Finland	9	26	5	35		4	49	-4	9	-1	14
Germany	c	c	14	15		7	23	c	c	-7	8
Canada	26	7	12	20		7	25	-14	13	-5	5
France	21	6	11	14		5	28	-10	8	-6	14
OECD average	23	8	11	17		5	27	-12	9	-6	10

(OECD, 2014, Vrabcová, 2015)

As to the Czech Republic Tab 2 shows that the highest proportion (26 %) of young adults with the highest literacy levels was observable among those whose parents have attained tertiary education which is 12 % more if compared to the group with parents educated without any specification (14 %). The impact of parents´ tertiary educational level upon literacy skills of the children of the young adult age is larger in the Czech Republic (in terms of proportion: 12 %) than in OECD countries (as to the OECD average, in terms of proportion: 10 %), but even larger if compared to Germany (proportion: 8 %) or Canada (proportion: 5%). Higher educational level attained by parents´ is a precondition for higher literacy skills of their children/young adults in the family.

Let us have a current comparative view (OECD, 2024). Despite the comparative studies use new category to differentiate the background into two categories (see ´bottom quartile disadvantaged´ vs. ´top quartile advantaged´), it is possible to make a similar comparison focusing the proportion of 15-year-olds achieving at least a minimum proficiency in mathematics by the end of lower secondary education by socio-economic background. Tab 3 compares the same countries as Tab 2 and some more.

Tab 3 - Proportion of 15-year-olds achieving at least a minimum proficiency in mathematics by the end of lower secondary education by socio-economic background (2022)

– selected countries

	Socioeconomic status		
	Bottom quartile (disadvantaged)	Top quartile (advantaged)	Difference
Australia	57	88	31
Austria	55	93	38
Belgium	54	94	40
Canada	66	89	22
Colombia	29	66	42
Czechia	52	91	39
Denmark	66	91	25
Finland	61	89	18
France	51	91	40
Japan	79	94	15
Slovak Republic	37	88	53
OECD average	53	86	33

OECD, 2024, **Indicator SDG 4.1.1**

Tab 3 illustrates that the influence of the socioeconomic status of the family background is still present. The Czech Republic (Czechia) unfortunately belongs to countries with very big difference (6 points higher compared to OECD average), similarly as for example Belgium, Colombia, France, Slovak Republic with the highest impact of the socioeconomic status upon the educational performance compared to countries, such as Japan where advantaged children´s performance is only 1 point better when compared to the disadvantaged as to the socio-economic status (similarly, Finland 18 points difference, Denmark 25 and Canada 25 points difference.

Conclusion

Upward intergenerational educational mobility represents one of the factors, attributes and aspects of such educational systems that are inclusive and that employ the principles of both equity and equality. Summarising some of the key findings, Czech Republic must be viewed as a country where families´ and parents´ socio-economic and educational status has quite a strong impact on educational level of attainment in case of people, young adult particularly,

but not exclusively. Due to the fact that motivational role of family appears to represent the core of most of family functions as they are usually described, family´s motivational role incorporates the economic parts of life-cycle. However, given the ongoing expansion of educational attainment, inequalities appear to persist.

The significance of the family, in terms of the family environment, is increasingly examined today also with respect to the living conditions in which children grow up. This is considered in connection with the risks of poverty or material and social deprivation, environments that foster inequality, lower motivation and aspirations for higher education, opportunities for attaining higher social or economic status, and prospects for upward educational mobility. The Czech Statistical Office's *Living Conditions Survey* (Korychová, 2024) also assesses the impact of three levels of education, categorized as below upper secondary education, upper secondary education, and tertiary education. (The classification is based on the education of the household's reference person—since 2023 defined as the individual with the highest household income. Furthermore, the survey confirms the relatively high educational homogeneity within households: partners typically share the same or a similar educational level, with 57% of couples having attained the same level of education, 38% differing by one level, and only 5% consisting of partners with the highest and lowest observed levels of education). The survey further demonstrates that the degree of material and social deprivation is substantially higher in households where the reference person has attained, at most, lower secondary education (deprivation in households with lower secondary education: 12%, compared to 3% with upper secondary education and 1% with tertiary education) (Korychová, 2024).

The ideal case is that, families focus on motivating their members, i.e. young people, young adults, to fulfill family functions by various means, one of which is fully-conscious struggle to provide them opportunity to attain: higher educational level in comparison to that of parents´ one/s, higher levels of literacy proficiency. Negative view of this struggle might be identified within the discourse as irrelevant pressure on school performance. Achieving this kind of targets depends on more factors; two main groups/types are related not only to the families and parents themselves, but also to the system of education, including inclusive strategies and supportive instruments, strategies at school environment, educational policy, including educational expansions, effort to widen the educational opportunities.

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COOPERATION BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND CHILD WELFARE AUTHORITIES IN ADDRESSING RISKY BEHAVIOUR AND CHILD ENDANGERMENT

SPOLUPRÁCE ORGÁNŮ SOCIÁLNĚ-PRÁVNÍ OCHRANY DĚTÍ A ZÁKLADNÍCH ŠKOL V ČESKÉ REPUBLICE PŘI ŘEŠENÍ RIZIKOVÉHO CHOVÁNÍ ŽÁKŮ

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Abstract

This paper deals with the system of social and legal protection of children (OSPOD) in the Czech Republic and its connection with the school environment. It describes the legislative framework, activities and working methods of OSPOD, including cooperation with schools in addressing various forms of risky behaviour and child endangerment. It also focuses on the role of the school counselling centre, its structure and the competences of individual experts. The text analyses specific situations such as truancy, bullying, cyberbullying, substance abuse, abuse and illegal behaviour by young people, and describes the procedures used by schools and OSPOD to address them. It emphasises the importance of early intervention, multidisciplinary cooperation and the need for clearly defined competences in crisis management. The aim is to promote effective cooperation between schools and OSPOD for the benefit of child protection.

Keywords: social and legal protection of children; school counselling centre; risky behaviour of pupils; cooperation between schools and OSPOD; intervention and preventive measures

Abstrakt

Článek se zabývá systémem sociální a právní ochrany dětí (OSPOD) v České republice a jeho propojením se školním prostředím. Popisuje legislativní rámec, činnosti a pracovní metody OSPOD, včetně spolupráce se školami při řešení různých forem rizikového chování a ohrožení dětí. Zaměřuje se také na roli školního poradenského centra, jeho strukturu a kompetence jednotlivých odborníků. Text analyzuje konkrétní situace, jako je záškoláctví, šikana, kyberšikana, zneužívání návykových látek, týrání a protiprávní jednání mladých lidí, a popisuje postupy, které školy a OSPOD používají k jejich řešení. Zdůrazňuje význam včasné intervence, multidisciplinární spolupráce a nutnost jasně definovaných kompetencí v oblasti krizového řízení. Cílem je podpořit účinnou spolupráci mezi školami a OSPOD ve prospěch ochrany dětí.

Klíčová slova: sociální a právní ochrana dětí; školní poradenské centrum; rizikové chování žáků; spolupráce mezi školami a OSPOD; intervenční a preventivní opatření

Social and legal protection of children: characteristics, legislative framework and measures

Social and legal protection of children in the Czech Republic is a comprehensive system of measures aimed at ensuring the favourable development of children, the protection of their rights and interests, and, if necessary, a substitute family environment. This system has historical roots in the Czech environment, but its current form reflects current social needs (Krausová, Novotná, 2006).

The basic legal regulation governing the social and legal protection of children is Act No. 359/1999 Coll., on the social and legal protection of children. Section 1 defines protection as an activity aimed at ensuring the child's right to favourable development, proper upbringing, protection of legitimate interests, including property, restoration of disrupted functions, and provision of a substitute family environment. The activities of the social and legal protection of children authorities (hereinafter referred to as OSPOD) thus affect a wide range of children's rights – from the right to life, identity, freedom of thought, protection from violence, neglect and exploitation, to the right to education and employment.

The legislative framework consists not only of national laws, but also of international documents that are binding on the Czech Republic. These include the Constitution of the Czech Republic, the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international treaties. For example, Article 10 of the Constitution stipulates that international treaties take precedence over the law if they stipulate otherwise (Constitutional Act No. 1/1993 Coll.). The Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms guarantees equality, the right to life, protection of the family and special protection of children and young people (Resolution No. 2/1993 Coll.). OSPODs include municipal authorities, authorities of municipalities with extended powers, regional authorities, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and the Office for International Legal Protection of Children.

OSPOD focuses primarily on children identified as at risk, although the term „child at risk" is not clearly defined in Czech law. Children at risk can be considered to be those who are at risk of being removed from their families, children who are neglected, abused, exploited, children with behavioural disorders, children who use addictive substances, children who are bullied or who live in a conflictual family environment (e.g. Pemová, Ptáček, 2022; Novotná et al., 2022). Assessing the situation of a child at risk is a key step in the work of the OSPOD, which requires a comprehensive assessment of all areas of the child's life, identification of risks and involvement of the wider family. Parental responsibility plays an important role, which

includes not only material security, but also care for the child's mental and moral development (Kovářová et al., 2022; Polišenská et al., 2019).

OSPOD social workers provide counselling, prevention and intervention services. They cooperate with parents, schools, healthcare facilities and other professionals. They arrange professional assistance and submit proposals to the court or the Czech Police in cases of suspected abuse (Mertin et al., 2020). Their activities also include arranging adoptions, foster care, care for children requiring increased attention, and resolving situations involving children in an international context (Šíp & Hájková, 2019).

The preventive activities of OSPOD include searching for children at risk, monitoring environments unsuitable for their development (e.g. gaming rooms, casinos), providing counselling to parents and organising educational activities. Municipalities and regions create conditions for cultural, sports and leisure activities for children (Špeciánová, 2007; Polišenská et al., 2019).

OSPOD's working methods include assessing the child's situation, individual child protection plans, and case conferences. An individual child protection plan is a mandatory document that sets out measures based on identified risks and aims to strengthen family functions (Matoušek, Pazlarová, 2016). A case conference is a tool for multidisciplinary cooperation, where OSPOD coordinates the entities involved (Hovorka, 2021; Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2019).

Educational measures are another tool used by OSPOD. These include warnings, supervision, restrictions and the obligation to seek professional help. If these measures do not lead to improvement, the child may be temporarily placed in an educational care centre or other facility (Act No. 359/1999 Coll.). The aim of these measures is to prevent problems from worsening and to avoid interference with parental responsibilities (Hovorka, 2021).

School counselling centre: characteristics, activities and entities involved

The school counselling centre (hereinafter referred to as SCC) is a key element in supporting pupils in the areas of education, upbringing and the prevention of risky behaviour. Its importance lies in its comprehensive approach to solving problematic situations that arise in the school environment and in connecting teaching staff with specialist institutions. As Březinová (2022) states, school is an important milestone in a child's life, where their long-term development, emotional experiences and the impact of teaching can be observed. Early recognition of warning signs, especially by the class teacher, can be crucial for initiating support measures.

The SCC consists of internal school experts – educational counsellors, school psychologists, school prevention methodologists, special educators and social educators. The counselling system also includes school counselling facilities, which comprise educational-psychological counselling centres and special education centres. Educational care centres are an important part of the system. These two lines form the pillars of the counselling system, which provides professional support to pupils, parents and schools. Its aim is to help solve educational, behavioural, personal and social difficulties. (Svoboda Hoferková, 2022)

The educational-psychological counselling centre provides services to children, pupils, parents and schools. Its activities include, for example, diagnosing school readiness, identifying special educational needs, proposing support measures, direct psychological intervention, career counselling and the prevention of risky behaviour. The Special Education Centre focuses on children and young people aged 3–19 with disabilities. It provides professional assistance on an outpatient basis, at home or in schools. The team consists of a psychologist, special educator, social worker and other experts. (Decree No. 72/2005 Coll.)

Educational care centres are intended for children at risk of behavioural disorders who have not been ordered to undergo institutional or protective education. The centres provide diagnostic, preventive educational and counselling services, with the intensity of cooperation depending on the severity of the difficulties. The services are provided by outpatient, day care and boarding centres; the stay at the centre is usually 8 weeks.

The teaching staff involved in the SCC includes an educational counsellor, a school prevention methodologist, a special education teacher, a school psychologist and, more recently, a social pedagogue. The activities of these staff members are regulated by Act No. 561/2004 Coll. and Decree No. 72/2005 Coll.

An educational counsellor is an educational worker who focuses on career counselling and support for pupils with special educational needs. Their role includes cooperation with parents, colleagues, experts and institutions such as the social and legal protection of children authority (hereinafter OSPOD), the police, or school counselling facilities, including educational care centres. The educational counsellor is a mandatory part of the school counselling system, as is the school prevention methodologist. The school prevention methodologist coordinates the creation of the school‘s prevention programme, the implementation of activities focused on the prevention of risky behaviour among pupils and students, provides methodological guidance to teachers, coordinates education in the field of prevention and cooperates with specialist institutions. Educational counsellors and school prevention methodologists are usually teachers at the school in question, who are recommended to complete specialised training as part of continuing education for teaching staff.

The school psychologist is a professional whose work mainly includes diagnosing school readiness, identifying risky behaviour, consulting with pupils, parents and teachers, drawing up individual plans and providing methodological support. The school psychologist is an important element in the diagnosis and early intervention of risky behaviour and the wellbeing of pupils and the entire teaching staff. Special education teachers are mainly employed in primary schools, where they work individually or in groups with pupils with special educational needs (e.g. Mertin et al., 2020). They help support pupils with learning disabilities, ADHD, autism spectrum disorders, etc., and contribute to the inclusion of these pupils in mainstream classes. Although the working hours of school psychologists and special education teachers are often reduced, their presence is very valuable to the school.

A social pedagogue at school is a professional focused on connecting the educational environment with the social sphere. Their main activities include supporting pupils at risk of social disadvantage, preventing risky behaviour, cooperating with families, and mediating cooperation between the school and other institutions (both state and non-state). For a long time, their position was financed mainly from projects (e.g. European funds), but since 2025 it has been enshrined in the Education Act (Act No. 561/2004 Coll.) and in the Act on Pedagogical Workers (No. 563/2004 Coll.), which allows for its financing from the state budget and sets qualification requirements (university education in social pedagogy or social work).

The school counselling centre is therefore made up of a network of experts who work together to create a safe and supportive environment for pupils. Their cooperation is key to the early identification of problems, effective intervention and linking the school with external specialist services. Given the growing demands on the school environment, it is essential that schools have sufficient staff and expertise in the area of school counselling.

Cooperation between the social and legal protection of children authority and primary schools in addressing selected forms of risky behaviour or threats to children

Cooperation between the OSPOD and the school can be divided into two basic situations, which can be found in the Act on Social and Legal Protection of Children: Section 10 stipulates a reporting obligation for schools and educational institutions, as well as for state authorities, authorised persons and healthcare providers, or other institutions designated for children, that children defined by this Act are at risk. In Section 53, schools, educational institutions and other similar institutions are obliged to provide the necessary information for the provision of social and legal protection free of charge (Act No. 359/1999 Coll.). The term „child at risk“ is vaguely defined in Czech law. Teachers therefore often follow the methodological guidelines and recommendations of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (Ministry of Education,

Youth and Sports, 2013–2025) when deciding whether to report certain facts to the OSPOD.

Illegal behaviour of young people and cooperation between schools and OSPOD

Youth delinquency is an interdisciplinary topic, as adolescence is associated with a higher risk of undesirable behaviour. Although statistics show a downward trend in registered youth crime in the long term, experts point to the increasing brutality of violent acts and the shift of illegal behaviour to the online space, where children and young people become both victims and perpetrators (e.g. Hoferková et al., 2017).

As mentioned above, Act No. 359/1999 Coll. in § 6 defines the group of children on whom social and legal protection focuses – for example, children who have committed an otherwise criminal act, have been victims of a criminal act, repeatedly run away from home, use addictive substances, do not attend school or are at risk of violence in the family. Section 31 of the Education Act No. 561/2004 Coll. imposes an obligation on school principals to inform the OSPOD of particularly gross and repeated behaviour by pupils towards employees or classmates.

A teacher who has reasonable suspicion of a criminal offence is obliged to pass on the information – ideally through the school principal – to the Police of the Czech Republic or the public prosecutor. After receiving the report, the school has the right to be informed within one month about the measures taken (Puškinová et al., 2021).

If there is suspicion of unlawful conduct that does not meet the criteria for a criminal offence (e.g. petty theft, vandalism), the school informs the headteacher. Sanctions should be defined in the school rules. If the behaviour is repeated even after educational measures have been exhausted (e.g. warning, reprimand, educational committee), the school contacts the OSPOD. As mentioned above, in the event of greater damage or associated violence, it is necessary to report the matter to the Czech Police.

According to Puškinová et al. (2021), the school should only contact OSPOD after exhausting its own options, with the exception of serious, repeated behaviour that threatens the child‘s development. However, Korbel and Lejsková (2019) emphasise the importance of early detection of the problem and cooperation with other organisations. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports recommends that each school have a clearly defined crisis plan with a division of responsibilities. The class teacher, who has the most information about the pupils, plays a key role here.

OSPOD deals with minors who commit criminal offences or misdemeanours on the basis of investigations by the Czech Police or reports from schools. It assesses whether the child is at risk and cooperates with the family, including in court proceedings. OSPOD does not have the authority to sanction the child or investigate the crime – this is the responsibility of the Czech

Police. The school first discusses the situation with the parents, convenes an educational commission and, only after exhausting all other options, contacts OSPOD, which decides on the next steps (Regional Authority of the Central Bohemian Region, 2019, online).

The school counselling centre (educational counsellor, school prevention methodologist, or social pedagogue) may initiate a case meeting with OSPOD and the Czech Police. The school principal must be informed about every child at risk and approves the content of reports sent to OSPOD or the Czech Police (Sirius Foundation, 2023).

Truancy and the procedure of the school and OSPOD

Truancy can be defined as the deliberate absence of a pupil without a valid excuse, which may be an indicator of the risk of early school leaving or other educational problems. Although it most often occurs in lower secondary school (most commonly between the ages of 12 and 14), it can also occur in younger pupils with more serious problems, or in pupils whose parents do not consider school attendance a priority.

According to Section 50(1) of the Education Act (Act No. 561/2004 Coll.), the reasons for a pupil‘s absence must be documented within three calendar days. If a pupil exceeds the specified limit of unexcused hours (10 in the first stage of primary school, 12 in the second stage; note: the first stage of primary school, grades 1–5, corresponds to ISCED 1, the second stage of primary school, grades 6–9, corresponds to ISCED 2), the school initiates communication with the legal guardian. In the event of higher absenteeism, the headteacher convenes an educational committee. If these measures do not lead to improvement and absenteeism exceeds 25 hours per quarter, the school contacts the OSPOD (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2024).

After truancy is reported, the child may be assigned a child and youth curator (OSPOD employee) who regularly consults with the family about school attendance. In extreme cases, the child may even be removed from the family, as failure to attend school is considered a form of neglect (Mertin et al., 2020).

OSPOD may also intervene earlier, for example when developing an individual educational programme. This process involves the school, the pupil, their legal representative, the school prevention methodologist, the school counsellor and, where appropriate, the Probation and Mediation Service of the Czech Republic. The aim is to identify the causes of inappropriate behaviour and to seek corrective measures (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2024).

Abused, exploited and neglected children – recognition and procedure of the school and OSPOD

There are four forms of child maltreatment syndrome: physical abuse, psychological abuse, sexual abuse and neglect. Ciklová (2016) points out that inaction in the knowledge that a child is being harmed can be considered complicity. Březinová (2022) emphasises the importance of trust between teacher and pupil, which can lead to the child confiding in the teacher. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has made it more difficult to recognise changes in children‘s behaviour due to distance learning. Recognisable signs include bruises, fractures, delayed development, anxiety, eating disorders, frequent illness or seeking substitute emotional bonds (e.g. Kalibová & Kaliba, 2014).

If a school employee suspects that a child is at risk, they contact the class teacher. The teacher cooperates with the school counselling centre, which assesses the situation and decides on the next steps – reporting to the OSPOD or the Czech Police. If the family does not cooperate and the situation does not improve, the school is obliged to report it to the OSPOD. In the event of an acute threat to the health or development of a child, the school must inform the OSPOD and the Police of the Czech Republic immediately (Blažková et al., 2024).

Upon receiving the report, the OSPOD initiates steps to protect the child – family rehabilitation, mediation of professional help, monitoring of the situation. Unlike other services, the OSPOD can intervene even without the family‘s consent. The parents‘ reaction may be negative at first, but cooperation between the school and the OSPOD often leads to an improvement in the child‘s situation (Blažková et al., 2024).

Bullying and cyberbullying – characteristics and procedures of the school and OSPOD

Bullying is long-term and repeated behaviour aimed at intimidating the victim, gaining superiority over them and achieving benefits. Mertin et al. (2020) point out that educational counsellors are often under pressure to find a quick solution, which requires negotiation skills and cooperation with the family and experts.

Schools must be prepared to deal with bullying through a crisis plan, which is part of a prevention programme (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2020). The initial stage is handled by the school prevention methodologist with the class teacher and school management. In more serious cases, the educational-psychological counselling centre, educational care centre, non-profit organisations or psychologists are involved. The educational commission is always convened, and it is advisable to invite OSPOD staff as well. The school principal is obliged to report bullying to the criminal justice authorities if the aggressor‘s actions constitute a criminal offence (Blažková, 2011).

Cyberbullying, as stated by Ehlová (2016), takes place through technology and can affect the victim continuously. Its anonymity increases the intensity of fear. In order to be classified as a criminal offence, it must meet the criteria for a criminal offence, e.g. stalking, defamation, breach of confidentiality of messages or documents (Svoboda Hoferková & Bělík, 2022).

The school has a duty to ensure the victim‘s safety, gather evidence, inform parents and consult with the relevant institutions on how to proceed. In serious cases, it is necessary to contact the Czech Police and OSPOD (Kopecký & Szotkowski, 2017).

According to the methodological guidelines of the Central Bohemian Region (2019), OSPOD provides counselling if the school has taken sufficient measures. However, if there are risk factors, it initiates active work with the family and may also work with the victim. Just as the school can invite OSPOD to the educational committee, OSPOD can invite teachers to a case conference. Participants are bound by confidentiality (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2020).

Addictive substances – prevention and procedures of the school and OSPOD

The school has a duty to create a preventive environment – to clearly define the prohibition of the use and bringing of addictive substances in the school rules, to implement preventive programmes and to inform pupils and parents about the risks (Gabrhelík, Orlíková & Šejvl, 2019). In the event of the distribution or consumption of addictive substances, the school cooperates with the Czech Police and OSPOD. If the pupil‘s life is not in danger, the school contacts their legal guardian. If they cannot be reached, the school requests the cooperation of the Czech Police and OSPOD. In acute cases, it is necessary to call the emergency medical service.

OSPOD is obliged to investigate every report from the school and assess the degree of danger to the child. If a criminal offence is suspected (e.g. drug distribution), it cooperates with the Czech Police and may be present during interrogations (Regional Authority of the Central Bohemian Region, 2019).

The OSPOD cannot disclose information about procedures involving the family to the school or intervene urgently in cases of substance abuse – this is the responsibility of the school. If the school feels that a broader solution is needed, it can convene an educational committee with the participation of the OSPOD, which will thus gain a comprehensive view of the child‘s situation.

Conclusion

There are a number of situations where it is necessary for the school to take active measures in cooperation with the social and legal protection of children authority. The most common risk behaviours include truancy, child abuse, maltreatment and neglect, bullying and cyberbullying, substance abuse and illegal activities. In its methodological recommendations, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports sets out procedures for teachers in other areas of risky behaviour, such as alcohol use, self-harm, risky sexual behaviour, suicidal tendencies and gambling (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2013–2025). These recommendations imply that the school should first exhaust all available educational procedures and only then contact the OSPOD. Exceptions are cases involving children falling under the definition of Section 6 of Act No. 359/1999 Coll., i.e. children who are at risk of violence, criminal activity or serious neglect. In such cases, teachers are obliged to inform OSPOD without undue delay (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2013–2025). An effective tool for cooperation is to invite the OSPOD to the educational committee or to have teachers participate in a case conference. These forms of cooperation enable the school to better understand the child‘s family context and tailor individual support to it.

Cooperation between the school and the social and legal protection of children authority is key to effectively resolving situations that threaten the child. A joint approach can prevent problems from worsening and ensure comprehensive support that covers both the educational and social aspects of the child‘s life. Coordination between teachers and OSPOD staff makes it possible to respond quickly to risky behaviour, set up an individual support plan and involve other experts or institutions.

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SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK IN HUNGARY AND GREAT BRITAIN

ŠKOLNÍ SOCIÁLNÍ PRÁCE V MAĎARSKU A VELKÉ BRITÁNII

Janos Szecsko (Hungary)

Abstract

This study aims to present and compare school social work in Hungary and Great Britain. The goal of the research is to gain a more detailed and accurate understanding of the activities carried out in the two countries, highlighting the similarities and differences in practice. The research questions highlight the circumstances of Hungarian and British school social work, the cooperation of social workers with educational institutions and the activities carried out there. As a research method, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 social workers who have close ties to schools and who are specifically school social workers. The operation of mental health teams organised in educational institutions not only serves to protect children, but the creation and coordination of such a professional team can also increase the acceptance and influence of school social workers within the institution.

Keywords: social assistance in kindergartens and schools, child protection, school social worker services

Abstrakt

Cílem této studie je představit a porovnat školní sociální práci v Maďarsku a Velké Británii. Cílem výzkumu je získat podrobnější a přesnější přehled o činnostech prováděných v obou zemích a zdůraznit podobnosti a rozdíly v praxi. Výzkumné otázky se zaměřují na podmínky maďarské a britské školní sociální práce, spolupráci sociálních pracovníků se vzdělávacími institucemi a činnosti, které tam provádějí. Jako výzkumnou metodu jsme použili polostrukturované rozhovory s 14 sociálními pracovníky, kteří mají úzké vazby na školy a kteří jsou konkrétně školními sociálními pracovníky. Činnost týmů pro duševní zdraví organizovaných ve vzdělávacích institucích slouží nejen k ochraně dětí, ale vytvoření a koordinace takového profesionálního týmu může také zvýšit přijetí a vliv školních sociálních pracovníků v rámci instituce.

Klíčová slova: sociální pomoc v mateřských školách a školách, ochrana dětí, služby školních sociálních pracovníků

School social work in Hungary

From the 2018/2019 academic year, kindergarten and school social support activities were introduced in all public education institutions in Hungary. In order to support the upbringing of children in their families and to prevent them from becoming vulnerable, kindergarten and school social workers organise individual and group services and programmes, which are provided on a mandatory basis by the district Family and Child Welfare Centres as part of their special services. (Rákó, 2016; Herczeg, 2024)

The legal basis for the performance of these tasks is provided by Act XXXI of 1997 on the protection of children and guardianship administration, as well as Decree 15/1998. (IV.30.) NM on the professional tasks and operating conditions of child welfare and child protection institutions providing personal care and professional personnel.

Prevention and intervention activities take place on several levels, affecting families, schools and the wider community. The ecological perspective views educational institutions as a social system and considers it important how school social workers perceive the school climate and factors influencing the environment. (Soliman, 2017)

School social workers form a „bridge" between the family and the school, and between the community and the school, thereby strengthening the role of educational institutions in society and influencing people's opinions about schools and teachers. (Herczeg, 2023)

Decision-makers considered the introduction of the ecological model to be justified, as it helps to develop children's social skills and places great emphasis on the ability of public education institutions to respond adequately to children's needs. (Bunyevácz et al., 2018)

In addition to the ecological approach, the development and changes in models used in practice are also of great importance in school social work. The emergence of different models testifies to different approaches.

In terms of school social work practice, three main trends emerged in Hungary in the 2000s. These were „internal" school social work or the so-called traditional model, „external" school social work or the Ferencváros model, and the Pécs model. When comparing these models, similarities can be observed, but sharp differences can also be found. While in the traditional model the social worker is employed by the school, in the external model they belong to an institution independent of the school, the family and child welfare service. The Pécs model is even more independent, as the employer is a service provider that is independent of both the school and the child welfare services (churches, civil organisations, local government associations, public foundations). A significant difference is that in the internal and Pécs models, one social worker is assigned to one educational institution and spends most of their working time at that school, meaning that they are easily accessible to teachers, children

and their parents, whereas in the Ferencváros model, one social worker may be responsible for 4-5 institutions and spends only a small part of their time at the school, making them less accessible to teachers, students and parents. In both the external and Pécs models, professional support for social workers is provided, as they are guaranteed participation in case discussion groups, individual professional consultations or supervision sessions, but in the internal model, in a significant number of cases, the helper does not have this opportunity. (Máté, 2018, Gergál-Máté, 2018)

The new task assignment introduced is most similar to the „external" model among the previous models, as social workers are employed by child welfare centres. Therefore, they do not receive their tasks from the head of the public education institution, but from their immediate superior, the head of the family and child welfare centre. The high level of professionalism and the stability provided by operating within a network are definitely advantages of the model, but the limited number of hours spent in each institution by the social worker may also affect the quality of the service. (Máté, 2018)

With the introduction of the service, a new term has also come into use, as the extension to kindergartens has transformed the previously used term 'school social work' and the legislation now refers to it as 'kindergarten and school social support activities'. According to the law, one kindergarten and school social support worker may be employed for every 1,000 children registered in public education institutions, working 40 hours per week. (Herczeg and Héderné Berta, 2023) It is often the case that one support worker is responsible for as many as 5-8 institutions. The head of the family and child welfare centre determines the work schedule, but the assistant spends one working day a week at the centre, performing administrative tasks or participating in case discussions and supervision.

According to the definition in the Child Protection Act, „In order to prevent children from being at risk, the kindergarten and school social support service provides support to children attending public education institutions, their families and the teachers of public education institutions using the tools of social support work. Kindergarten and school social workers perform individual, group and community social work, as well as child and youth protection tasks." (2/2018. (I. 18.) EMMI decree. 25. § (1) – (2))

According to the decree, school social workers must have a higher education degree. However, this position is not exclusively reserved for professionals with a degree in social work; it can also be filled by teachers, nursery school teachers, special education teachers or theologians who have studied child and youth protection, for example. Within two years of starting employment, however, they must complete training as a nursery and school social worker, unless they already have an equivalent degree or further training. (Kopasz et al., 2025)

School social work in Great Britain

There is no uniform system for school social work in the United Kingdom, and very few local authorities employ social workers in this capacity. The prevalence of this type of service varies from region to region and even from county to county.

One reason for this may be that the officials employed did not have the appropriate qualifications for the job, which led to significant differences in the quality of services within the country. There were areas where they were able to provide a wide range of services to children and their families, meaning that ‚education welfare' was able to reach the level of genuine social work, as in Canada or the United States, but there were parts of the country where this remained completely undeveloped. (Huxtable, 1998).

At the beginning of the 2000s, significant changes took place in Great Britain's child protection policy with the amendment of the 1989 Child Protection Act and the launch of the Every Child Matters national child protection programme. This new child protection policy extended state responsibility to all children. It also required much closer cooperation between the various sectors involved in child welfare (health, education, child protection). Local authorities were required to set up multidisciplinary teams and introduce the case manager system, which was created to make it easier to determine responsibility and provide multilateral support. For school-age children, the centre of primary care became the educational institution, because this is where pupils spend most of their time, where their problems can be detected earliest and where it is easiest to influence them. For this reason, many have made it possible to employ professionals who support the physical and mental health and academic progress of children and provide primary treatment for social problems. (Varga et al., 2010) School social workers can also join this professional team performing these tasks upon their arrival at the institution and can even coordinate its operation.

Similar to the practice in Hungary, the tasks of school social workers can be diverse. An important task is to support children and their families who have difficulties attending school. Special attention is paid to supporting children in the social care system, those living with foster parents or in children's homes, and those requiring special education at school. They maintain regular contact with school teachers and professionals who support teaching work, assisting them on an individual or group basis and participating in community life. (Westlake et al., 2020)

Research methodology

During the research, we examined school social work in Hungary and the United Kingdom, so we chose interviews as a qualitative method to learn about it. The advantage of semi-

structured interviews is that they allow the researcher to engage in informal conversation, and by asking follow-up questions, there is a greater chance of getting to know the interviewees and thus gaining a comprehensive picture of how the activity works in the two countries. (Babbie, 2008)

I conducted the interviews with social workers working in Hungary and Great Britain (7-7 people) who have close ties to schools, and specifically with school social workers. I selected the interviewees using access-based sampling. Six of the British interviewees work in the East Midlands region and one in the North West region. Three of the Hungarian interviewees work in districts in eastern Hungary, three in Budapest and one in a town in the Transdanubia region.

The main questions of the interview can be divided into three main groups. In the first section, I examined the main objectives of social workers and the conditions of their work. In the second section, I presented their presence in schools and their cooperation with teachers, followed by a description of the specific activities of social workers and the methods they use in their work.

, I formulated the following assumptions in my research:

1. The basis for effective work by school social workers lies in establishing relationships.
2. The majority of teachers are not aware of the exact competences of school social workers in their practical work.
3. The activities performed by school social workers in educational institutions are almost identical in both countries.

In order to preserve anonymity, interviewees are identified by numbers. However, I consider it important to indicate the country in which the social worker who provided the quote works, so I have added the abbreviation GB before the numbers if the interviewee is British, and H if they are Hungarian.

Presentation of results

Based on the answers to the questions, I examined the working conditions of social workers, their presence in schools and their activities. The study can be considered novel due to its subject matter and international perspective, but it is important to note that due to the small sample size, it is not suitable for drawing conclusions about the entire institutional system in Hungary and the United Kingdom.

We asked social workers what they consider to be their most important objectives in their work. Five of the Hungarian respondents referred to themselves as acting as a kind

of „bridge“, functioning as a link between educational institutions, students, parents, social institutions and institutions and professionals involved with children. Here, it is not only important to ensure the transfer and uninterrupted flow of information, but also to create and maintain an environment in which the actors participating in the system are effective, trust-based, supportive and put the interests of the child first. As can be seen from the following response, the need to support teachers with social work tools was emphasised: *“Teachers are overworked these days. With all the new knowledge they have to impart, discipline and endless documentation, they don‘t really have time to deal with students‘ problems, and let‘s face it, they often don‘t have the tools to do so.“ (Interviewee H-7)*

In the UK, professionals have a similar view of the most important tasks of school social workers. Here, too, many emphasised the role of liaison and professional support for teachers. At the same time, the responses placed greater emphasis on helping children in basic or specialist care (i.e. if the court has ordered the child to be taken into care, or the local authority‘s child care department has cared for the child for more than 24 hours) to integrate into school, building their personalities and preventing them from dropping out. The responses show that promoting the importance of school attendance among both children and parents is considered to be of paramount importance: *„I feel it is important to promote school learning among children and to remind teachers that children are not deliberately bad, but because they are struggling with some kind of problem.“ (GB-1 interviewee)*

„I consider my main task to be supporting young students in school who have become disengaged from education for some reason.“ (GB-2 interviewee)

An important aspect of school social work is the availability of physical conditions for carrying out the work. In Hungary, this issue is regulated by a cooperation agreement between the educational institution and the family and child welfare centre. A key issue is the provision of a separate room for individual counselling sessions.

Unfortunately, the lack of such a room or the organisational difficulties involved in providing one were mentioned in five interviews in Hungary. Only two professionals reported having a permanent, always available room. The others mostly mentioned the medical room, the storeroom, a less frequented part of the library or the courtyard as places for individual conversations. Before using these facilities, it is necessary to consult with teachers, the head of the institution and the school doctor in order to successfully coordinate the individual support conversations with the daily running of the school. In many cases, this requires the parties to make various compromises. Based on the feedback, it can be concluded that the support person is not always able to carry out their individual activities under ideal conditions: *„In several of my institutions, it is a big problem that there is no ideal place for individual meetings. In some cases, we can sit down and talk in a secluded part of the library.“ (Interviewee H-3)*

"Our school is struggling with a shortage of rooms anyway. For individual consultations, we go wherever there is free space, be it a classroom, a storage room or even the medical room." (Interviewee H-6)

The problem of finding suitable accommodation was also raised by respondents in Great Britain, three of whom had already encountered similar problems. However, I find it interesting to mention the attitude of social workers towards this situation. While the Hungarian interviewees mostly experienced this as a problem that hinders their work, their colleagues in the UK were less concerned about it. The focus was more on finding a place for the conversation (even outside the school building) where the child feels comfortable and can talk about their problems calmly.

„We often go out for a walk in the city or sit down in the park. The main thing is to go to a place where the child feels safe. Last time, we were in the skate park with one of the children, where he was able to calm down and talk about his problems." (GB-4 interviewee)

"There is usually a place at school where we can retreat to; if nothing else, we go out to the courtyard and sit on a bench." (GB-7 interviewee)

A key issue in school social work is how much time the professional spends at each educational institution. With the exception of one professional, all of the Hungarian respondents work at several locations, which usually means three or four primary or secondary schools, but some reported working at seven or eight locations: *"I carry out my duties in twelve institutions in six municipalities. I can't get to every municipality every week, so we have divided the visits into A and B weeks so that I can get to pretty much everywhere." (H-2 interviewee)*

With one exception, the majority spend four days in educational institutions and one day a week at the district child welfare centre. They spend 1-2 days a week in more problematic institutions, but there were also respondents who spend no more than 2-3 hours a week in each institution. *"I have four municipalities with eight institutions, so that's two institutions per municipality per day. I think this is manageable, although there are schools where I could spend three times as much time. (Interviewee H-7)*

The British social workers interviewed also provide services in several institutions. They can also manage their working hours flexibly depending on the cases they are dealing with. In schools where there are more children in the social care system and more problems arise, the number of hours spent there also increases. *„The amount of time spent at school depends on how many institutions you have. I can spend at least one day at each school, and sometimes more. For example, I spend one day at primary schools and two days at secondary schools." (GB-4 interviewee)*

At the beginning of the collaboration, the duration of the stay at the school is clarified in advance between the heads of the educational and social institutions. The vast majority of professionals consider it extremely important that a support worker be able to spend as many days as possible at an institution each week: *"The more time we can spend with the children and teachers, the more effective our work at the institution will be." (GB-2 interviewee)*

In educational institutions where the support worker's time is more predictable and they can spend more time there, they are better able to integrate into school life because they are more visible and accessible to teachers and students. (Westlake et al., 2020)

W orking conditions are greatly influenced by the problems that social workers performing tasks in schools most frequently encounter in the institution, which are the difficulties that require intervention at an individual or community level. The answers to these questions were essentially the same among professionals in both countries.

In Hungary, they all highlighted the high number of students struggling with behavioural and learning problems. They also typically added that the number of cases stemming from such difficulties is constantly increasing in their area of care. As expressed in the following responses: *„I see that the problems are absolutely dependent on the locality, but it can be said that in most places there is a huge problem with children's behaviour" (H-3 interviewee)*.

"Children come to me with a variety of problems, but perhaps most often there are problems with their behaviour, both in and out of class. Unfortunately, this has not decreased over the years" (H-7 interviewee).

The answer can be found in dysfunctional families, poor social conditions, and physical and emotional neglect. It is typical for students that problems brought from home are even more evident at school, which unfortunately can often cause conflicts in teacher-student or student-student relationships. Based on what has been said, unfortunately, all the professionals interviewed were able to report incidents of school bullying.

Five of the British professionals mentioned the high number of unexcused absences from school as an important problem. It is an important task of the designated child protection officer to pay special attention to absences from school. Some schools employ a staff member specifically for this job, called a School Attendance Officer. If parents do not cooperate with the professional in this matter or are unable to change their child's school attendance habits, they may be fined or, after court proceedings, even sentenced to imprisonment. (Section 444 Education Act, 1996)

The support staff see it as their job to promote regular school attendance in order to reduce absenteeism, saying: *„We also have to help parents so that together we can make their children fit for school and get them to attend school regularly." (GB-3 interviewee)*

„Today's schoolchildren face many different problems, and we try to help them with these. In addition to bullying and social problems, we also have to deal with truancy." (GB-6 interviewee)

The relationship between school social workers and teachers

During the interviews, without exception, all respondents referred to the fact that one of the fundamental tools and weapons of a social worker in their work is their personality. This is in line with Budai's observation that „the personality of the social worker has a very strong influence on the relationship and cooperation between service users and social (and other) professionals." (Budai, Puli, 2015:37.) Effective work requires the development of a trusting and honest relationship between the parties involved in the service. In my research, I also examined the relationship between social professionals and educators.

All Hungarian respondents attribute the personal acceptance of social workers in the institution largely to their own adaptability, personality and, in particular, the attitude of the institution's manager, i.e. the director can play a key role in their integration: *„If you win over the director, you've won over most of the teaching staff and you're good to go." (Interviewee H-5)*

It is important for the headteacher to have a clear understanding of the social worker's potential tasks and areas of competence and to see where they can really help in day-to-day work, as well as to provide opportunities for the support worker to meet and communicate as much as possible with the teachers, who can then clarify their role and responsibilities. As one support worker put it: *„It was difficult to fit in until the headteacher understood what my exact role was here and saw my clear intention to help. Once that happened, the teaching staff also began to open up to me." (Interviewee H-6)*

All of the respondents have institutions where the teachers welcomed the new service, quickly took a liking to the support staff and are happy to turn to them for help. However, all of them pointed out that in many cases (despite previous discussions and information sessions) their actual limits of competence in the institutions are still not entirely clear, and they receive many requests from teachers that do not fall within their remit.

One respondent mentioned an institution where, after several years, he still encounters resistance from teachers, has not really been able to „integrate" into school life and continues to feel like an outsider.

Several support workers find it difficult to relate to teachers, as they put it*: „I feel that my presence disturbs the whole atmosphere. Even if they do mention a problematic case, they usually do so at the last minute, when the problem is already really serious.“ (Interviewee H-1)*

“I had a colleague who was put in the basement, in a windowless room. We managed to get her out of there, but the teachers didn’t seek her out or engage with her. We were promised that she would be able to work with groups of children, but nothing came of it. My colleague felt so bad there that she had to be removed from the institution.” (Interviewee H-2)

In order for the helper to achieve the set goals, they must be able to establish relationships based on trust, with the parties cooperating to achieve the overarching goal instead of playing zero-sum games. (Budai, 2015)

There were differences in the opinions of the British professionals interviewed, but they all agreed that the personality, attitude and perseverance of the helper are key to cooperation with the teaching staff. They highlighted two reasons for the difficulties in cooperation. One is the generally poor reputation of social workers in child protection in the country, and the other is the different approaches of teachers and social workers, as expressed by one interviewee: *„The school and the social worker think differently about how to help the child. In problematic situations at school, we are on the children‘s side... I think teachers would be happier if we didn‘t go there anymore.“ (GB-5 interviewee)*

British studies show that at the beginning of the millennium, social workers were viewed negatively by society, and their goals and activities were poorly understood. Although this image has changed for the better over the years, this kind of negative identification can still be observed. (Ausqith - Clark – Waterhouse, 2008)

However, five of the respondents reported having a positive relationship with teachers. In their opinion, the teaching staff are aware of why they are in the institutions and how they can help them in their work. They know that the approach they represent is useful when working with children, and many consider their presence to be a relief: *„I think teachers are very familiar with the intervention and support of social workers, but parents and students still see them as an uncomfortable threat“ (GB-2 interviewee).*

This may be due to the aforementioned „Every Child Matters“ programme, which has led to the introduction of professionals in schools to deal with social problems, and to the legislation entitled „Keeping children safe in education“. The regulations clearly define the school‘s child protection tasks, obligations and responsibilities. All educational institutions are required to appoint a Designated Safeguarding Lead and a deputy. These tasks may also be performed by teachers, but only after they have undergone appropriate professional training in child protection, and this knowledge must be refreshed every two years through further training. (I1)

Individual activity

All of the research participants, including the British respondents, carry out various individual activities. Based on the feedback, providing information, counselling and consultation are the most common tasks in both countries, and they also typically act as mediators, helping children or their families access various services. These individual activities are provided to children, parents and teachers.

The problem is usually reported to the school social worker by the head of the institution or the class teacher, who investigates the case and, if necessary, initiates an individual support conversation with them. Some respondents said that family support workers or case managers most often inform them about problems. They are the first to encounter the problem and ask for the help of the school social worker. Teachers only notify the support worker if the problem has escalated and they cannot find a solution themselves. The kindergarten and school social workers interviewed described this as follows: *„There are institutions where the class teachers, or rather the school as a whole, try to solve the problems themselves and do not involve us until the problem has become serious and they have to report it." (Interviewee H-3)*

„The school doesn't really come to me with problems. My family support colleagues come to me and ask me to keep an eye on the child because there is a problem with them at school. But at school, they very rarely tell me about it, I'm usually the last to know." (Interviewee H-1)

I mentioned earlier that the school needs to provide a room for individual activities where they can talk to the students in a calm and undisturbed manner. In Hungary, this is regulated by a cooperation agreement between educational and social institutions. We have already seen from the feedback that there are shortcomings in this area, and not all schools are able to provide this fully and smoothly. Respondents in both countries confirmed that teachers allow children to leave class for these occasions so that they can have conversations during school hours. Before selecting the lesson, they naturally take into account the child's academic performance in the subject in question. Experience shows that they are more likely to be excused from practical subjects: *„Teachers are generally open to talking to problem children individually. However, we try to avoid taking them out of maths or other more serious lessons, because it is more difficult for them to catch up on those subjects." (Interviewee H-5)*

A total of six respondents from both countries emphasised that school administrators prefer individual activities to take place during longer breaks or after school rather than during class time.

Consultations with teachers also typically take place during school hours, between lessons or after the teacher's last lesson in both countries. As one respondent put it: *„Teachers are open to individual consultations, which we can conduct at school. After lessons, there is time to*

discuss problematic cases and possible interventions. (GB-6 interviewee)

Here, they most often discuss the current behaviour and academic performance of individual students, identify any problems that may arise, and seek advice from the social worker regarding the students' education at school.

Group activity

Taking all the responses into account, regardless of the country, it can be concluded that there are several types of group work available to professionals. There is preventive group work with educational objectives, preventive activities aimed at improving physical and mental health, preventing the development of addictions, and preventing abuse, including bullying at school. In addition to these, the sessions also aimed to organise groups to support students' academic progress and further education.

All fourteen helpers emphasised that they consider it very important to integrate these programmes into the educational framework, as it is very helpful in bringing them closer to the students and, not to be overlooked, it is also a great help to teachers and children. „The group provides an opportunity for group members to use the group as a training ground in a protected environment for their learning and development processes and to receive quick, helpful, immediate feedback. The group provides greater publicity and control over the processes taking place within the group, including the influence of the leader." (Pataki, 2010, 25-26.)

Among the Hungarian interviewees, there is one case where group sessions are not held in educational institutions, but such efforts will be launched once the pandemic is over. For all of the other colleagues, these sessions are part of their service portfolio. These are usually 45-minute activities held for study groups or class communities, within the framework of lessons.

In terms of how students are grouped, these are universal, quasi-compulsory groups. „The programme is generally didactic, with a faster pace, and the tools and tasks used are more structured. The composition of the group is influenced by the given class, with the composition of the class having the greatest impact on heterogeneity in terms of both age and gender." (Máté, Gergál, 2020:165.)

The sessions aim to respond to problems that arise at school, and the topics are tailored to this. One respondent put it this way: *„I have the opportunity to organise a lot of group sessions in the institutions. This brings up issues in the class that don't come up at other times, but this way we can talk about them. Class teachers usually like these sessions and provide opportunities for them, for example during their class teacher lessons." (Interviewee H-3)*

Five respondents identified the scheduling of activities as a problem, as it often causes difficulties in terms of time and space. The institutions consider these activities to be very useful, but it is often difficult to find a suitable time for them. In many cases, they are held during form teacher e lessons or skill-based subjects. However, there are cases where 45 minutes is not enough for a lesson, but due to the school's tight schedule, it is not always easy to free up double lessons: *„Groups are popular with me. Organising them requires some effort to find a suitable time and place. Sometimes we manage to get a double lesson, but it's more difficult to arrange." (Interviewee H-2)*

Based on the responses from the UK, I did not get such a uniform picture of group activities. One respondent regularly conducts group sessions for students and finds this form of activity extremely useful: *„I think that organising group sessions gives us a very important tool. This makes it easier for us to 'reach' both the children and the teachers. Both target groups are open to these activities, which also contributes to my acceptance within the institution." (GB-4 interviewee)*

These workshops are usually organised around personality and community building. Similar to Hungarian practice, they are usually held in 45-minute intervals. Non-formal pedagogical tools are also frequently used. First-year students often participate in team-building activities and workshops that facilitate the formation of friendships (e.g. icebreaker or team-building games). The professional emphasised that they also organise group activities for the teaching community, with topics chosen according to the needs of the teaching staff. The response revealed that the choice of topics is diverse in support institutions: *„Social workers can provide workshops and group work that focus on many things, such as mental health issues. (GB-2 interviewee)*

Respondents in both countries emphasised that group sessions are selected by teachers or the head of the institution from among the options provided by social workers. At the same time, several responses mentioned the initiation of group sessions in the class community or in smaller groups of students as a response to problems that arose during individual activities. One of the professionals interviewed put it this way: *„There was a case where a child was sent to me because of his steadily declining academic performance. During our conversations, it turned out that after school, his classmates were bullying him through online chat rooms. I reported this to the class teacher, and shortly afterwards we managed to start a group organised around the theme of school bullying and ostracism. The intervention was successful and the problem was resolved." (Interviewee H-7)*

In terms of the topics covered in the group sessions, there are no significant differences between the two countries; similar problems are addressed with similar types of activities. Presumably due to differences in school organisational structure, British social workers work more closely with educational support professionals (Pastoral Care Officers, Educational

Welfare Officers, etc.) in group activities at school and involve non-governmental organisations independent of the school in their work.

Community activities

In both countries, the most frequently mentioned community activities include participation in school-organised events and assistance in organising leisure programmes and camps. At school events, they are most often asked to help with celebrations or various themed days. The responses reveal that support professionals are most often able to join programmes organised by educational institutions: *„There aren't really any community programmes that I specifically organise . But as a station, we regularly participate in school programmes. For example, we took part in health days, family days and sports days." (Interviewee H-2)*

"They usually invite us to school celebrations. I have helped with the organisation of carnival and Christmas celebrations." (Interviewee H-4)

Among the responses from Hungarian assistants, involvement in the summer Erzsébet camps or day camps was also popular. Here, they are usually asked to help with the organisation and coordination of programme elements, but there were some who highlighted child supervision as their main task. In two cases, I received responses that they organised their own summer camps, which were carried out in cooperation with other social workers from kindergartens and schools in the district or with the family and child welfare service. These were usually day camps organised for school-age children living in the city, mainly for children from disadvantaged families.

One of the respondents working in Hungary stated that they were not usually involved in school events and were not asked to help organise community programmes. All of the respondents working in the island country were able to name a community activity organised by the school in which they had been involved. Less than half of the Hungarian respondents reported participating in community programmes not organised by the school, while none of the British respondents reported similar experiences. Three of the respondents noted that they regularly participate with school social workers in their district in organising camps organised by the family and child welfare centre, which are also open to students from the educational institutions they serve.

In the early 2000s, changes to child protection legislation in the UK meant that new legal guidelines required professionals to form a team around children in order to implement child protection plans and meet the needs of the most vulnerable children. (Hood, Gillespie, Davies, 2016) Among the community activities, the responses of professionals working in the United Kingdom also highlight the frequency of working in interprofessional teams in

educational institutions. Everyone agreed that this is a very important part of the school social worker‘s role. They coordinate, assist and, in most cases, direct the work of this team, maintaining regular contact with each other and developing strategies for effective work. In addition to the school social worker, the team members most often include the Education Welfare Officer, the Pastoral Care Officer, the Special Education Needs Coordinator, the school nurse and the school doctor, if the school has staff in these positions.

Although professional recommendations for kindergarten and school social workers provide opportunities for teamwork, such as establishing a school mental health working group within the institution, none of the Hungarian interviewees mentioned this type of interprofessional collaboration. They maintain regular contact with professionals working in schools and strive to develop effective cooperation, but this cannot yet be considered a fully-fledged interprofessional activity. In appropriate cooperation, participants „jointly set goals and plan their joint work, decide on their further individual and joint activities. They decide how they will keep in touch with each other in the future, how they will meet regularly, how they will evaluate events again and again, analyse each other‘s experiences , make new decisions, and thus develop and operate a mutually supportive system.“ (Budai, 2019)

When it came to community activities, a common response from colleagues in both countries was that they had the opportunity to attend parent-teacher meetings, which they considered to be a very useful form of communication and information sharing. It makes their work much easier if they can meet everyone at such events: *“At the beginning of the year and at the end of the semester, I attend parent-teacher meetings whenever I can. I can’t get to every class, but I try to go to a few in every town. It’s a good opportunity to introduce myself or remind them that I’m at the institution.” (Interviewee H-6)*

Two of the Hungarian staff mentioned the opportunity to participate in teaching staff meetings and emphasised its usefulness. The British professionals did not report any such activities.

Summary

In light of the results obtained during the study, we can make the following statements regarding our previously stated research hypotheses.

The first hypothesis, that the basis for effective work by school social workers lies in relationship building, is valid, as school social workers in both countries identified the importance of relationship building as a key element. Social workers need to have good relationships with children, their parents, public education professionals and other professionals who support their work (school psychologists, school nurses, crime prevention counsellors,

developmental and special education teachers), as well as social work professionals (school social workers, family support workers, child protection professionals) is essential, and as a social professional, they have a special responsibility in this regard.

The second hypothesis, namely that the majority of teachers are not aware of the exact competences of school social workers, is only partially true in practice. This statement was confirmed by the Hungarian professionals, as everyone was able to name an educational institution among those they serve where teachers are still not fully aware of their actual competences in the institutions, and they receive many requests from teachers that do not fall within their remit. In contrast, according to the British interviewees, the teaching staff are aware of why they are in the institutions and how they can help them in their work. This may be due to the introduction of the „Every Child Matters" programme in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the arrival of professionals in schools to provide primary support for social problems, and the legislation entitled „Keeping children safe in education". This has brought educational institutions into closer contact with social workers.

When examining the relationship between social workers in the two countries and their target groups, interesting differences in practice can be observed. In Hungary, the majority still feel that their role in their institutions is not entirely clear to teachers and that they are not always aware of their limits of competence. In the UK, the practice of the has become more established and there is a greater awareness of the role of support professionals in the institution. I see the new child protection regulations introduced in recent decades, which have also had an impact on the functioning of schools, as a possible reason for this difference. In schools in the United Kingdom, a variety of roles have been created to promote the protection and undisturbed physical and mental development of children. Although these roles are often filled by people without a social work background, they are required to participate in necessary social/child protection-focused training and usually work with social work tools. This gave them time to become more familiar with this approach, enabling teachers to better place their social workers within their own system and become aware of the services provided by professionals, which also facilitates their easier integration into schools.

Our third statement, that the activities carried out by school social workers in educational institutions are almost identical in both countries, was confirmed by the research, as the respondents' answers about the activities carried out showed clear similarities. Based on the feedback, the most common individual activities in both countries were providing information, counselling and consultation, as well as acting as mediators to help children or their families access various services. There are no significant differences in the need to integrate group activities into educational institutions or in terms of topics; similar problems are addressed with similar types of activities.

There is a noticeable difference between British and Hungarian practices in terms of the community activities of school social workers. The research highlighted that the formation and operation of mental health teams, as recommended in professional guidelines and recommendations governing the work of social workers in nurseries and schools, is not yet in practice at the educational institutions concerned. Contact is maintained regularly with other professionals at the school, but there is no regulated, planned strategy or professional team with clear, coordinated, common goals. In contrast, in the UK, the involvement of social workers in such professional teams and their coordination is much more evident. There may be a great need for mental health teams in schools, which not only serve to protect children, but the creation and coordination of such a professional team can also increase the acceptance and influence of school social workers within the institution.

We examined practical operations in both countries on the basis of three dimensions. The research highlighted the circumstances of Hungarian and British school social work, the cooperation of social workers with educational institutions and the activities carried out there. Overall, it can be concluded that there are many similarities in practical operation between the countries studied, but there are also marked differences in certain areas.

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THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM IN POLAND

SYSTÉM NÁHRADNÍ PÉČE V POLSKU

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Abstract

This article is devoted to the Polish foster care system. In this publication, the author discusses the main principles and legal provisions underpinning foster care in Poland. She presents and characterises the forms of foster care and their organisation and operation based on applicable legal regulations and case law.

Keywords: foster family, foster care, foster care system in Poland, child.

Abstrakt

Článek se věnuje polskému systému pěstounské péče. Autorka v něm pojednává o hlavních principech a právních předpisech, na nichž je pěstounská péče v Polsku založena. Představuje a charakterizuje formy pěstounské péče, jejich organizaci a fungování na základě platných právních předpisů a judikatury.

Klíčová slova: pěstounská rodina, pěstounská péče, systém pěstounské péče v Polsku, dítě.

Introduction

Humans are social beings (Aronson, 2009, p. 9), so the primary environment for care and education is the family. Anthony Giddens believes that the family is a group of individuals related by blood, marriage or adoption, forming an economic unit whose adult members are responsible for raising children (Giddens, 2007, p. 732). The family is the basic social unit, the fundamental, constitutive element of every society, its main building block (Szlendak, 2011, p. 95).

It is therefore natural that the task of providing adequate care and upbringing for a child falls to the parents. If parents fail to fulfil this role or fulfil it incorrectly, a situation may arise where the child's continued presence in the family poses a threat to their well-being. If a child is separated from their family, the state is obliged to provide care for the child in place of the parents and to regulate the legal status of the child, the family and the persons and institutions providing this care (Walancik, 2015, p. 30). However, Polish law lacks a definition of the term „family". There are only definitions created „for the purpose" of interpreting this term in the light of specific laws (Walancik-Ryba, 2021, p. 15).

Polish law also lacks a definition of foster care. The Act on Family Support and the Foster Care System of 9 June 2011 (Journal of Laws of 2025, item 49, Article 2, section 1) defines the foster care system only as a set of persons, institutions and activities aimed at providing temporary care and upbringing to children in cases where their parents are unable to provide care and upbringing. This definition is therefore constructed in such a way that it defines the purpose of the foster care system, which is to provide temporary care and upbringing to children when their parents are unable to fulfil these obligations. The legislator states that the foster care system includes a set of persons, institutions and activities (Tryniszewska, 2015, p. 20, Królak, Rączka, 2017, p. 8).

However, the legislator does not specify the persons and activities that make up this system, nor does it define what foster care is or what the term temporary care and upbringing means. It lists the forms of such care and specifies the situation – the prerequisite – in which foster care is provided, i.e. when parents are unable to provide care and upbringing for their child. The regulations do not specify the reasons for this „inability", but case law suggests that this includes all reasons, both objective and subjective: dependent, independent of the parents, culpable or not. Foster care should therefore be provided in all such situations, regardless of whether the parents have full parental authority or whether this authority is limited, suspended or revoked. The organisation of foster care in Poland is the responsibility of the district (Collection of Laws of 2025, point 49, Article 32).

The tasks of foster care include: ensuring cooperation with the family in order to facilitate the child's return to the family or, if this is not possible, seeking adoption. If adoption is not possible, providing care and upbringing in a foster environment; preparing the child for a dignified, independent and responsible life; overcoming life's difficulties in accordance with ethical principles; establishing and maintaining close, personal and socially acceptable relationships with family and peers in order to mitigate the effects of loss and separation and to acquire social skills; and meeting the emotional needs of children, with particular emphasis on their living, health, educational, cultural and recreational needs. These needs are defined in the Family Support Act. (Collection of Laws of 2025, item 49, Article 33).

According to the Family and Guardianship Act (Collection of Laws of 2023, item 2809, Article

112), a child is placed in foster care until conditions exist that would allow for their return to their family or placement in an adoptive family. If the conditions for returning to the family do not exist, this care may continue until adulthood. As a rule, however, and in accordance with the purpose of foster care, unlike adoption, it focuses on the child‘s return to the family. Foster care may continue until the parents‘ parental authority over the child is restored, until the child reaches the age of majority, until the child reaches the age of 25 if he or she is still studying, or until the period specified for the given form of foster care expires.

The umbrella concept covering all forms of care for children who are not cared for by their parents is the concept of alternative care, as used in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Poland is a party. According to Article 20 of the above-mentioned Convention, a child temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment, or a child who, for reasons of his or her welfare, cannot be allowed to remain in that environment, has the right to special protection and assistance provided by the State (paragraph 1). States Parties to the Convention shall, in accordance with their national law, provide such a child with alternative care (paragraph 2). Such care may include, inter alia, placement in a foster family, Kafala in Islamic law (ECHR judgment, 2012), adoption or, if necessary, placement in a suitable institution designed for the care of children. When selecting appropriate solutions, due attention must be paid to maintaining continuity in the child‘s upbringing and their ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic identity (Journal of Laws 1991, No. 120, item 526, Article 20).

The concept of substitute care does not exist in the Polish legal system. According to Marek Andrzejewski, the term ‘alternative care’ was incorrectly translated from the original English as ‘foster care’, which led to the assumption that alternative care includes the above-mentioned foster families, institutional forms and adoption. Alternative care should be considered as ‘care of a different kind’ (than parental care), care alternative to parental care, not as substitute care (Andrzejewski, 2009, p. 371). Foster families provide foster care as defined in international documents – translated as foster care, not substitute care. These documents also consistently distinguish between the terms adoption and foster families.

Foster care – organisation and operation

Regulations concerning foster care in Poland are governed by the Family and Guardianship Code, while detailed regulations concerning foster families and care and educational facilities are found outside the Code, as specified in the Family and Guardianship Code, in regulations on family support and the foster care system (Journal of Laws of 2023, item 2809, Article 112) (primarily in the Family Support Act).

There are also regulations concerning foster care that are linked to other legal acts that make up the Polish legal system as a whole. The first of these, in accordance with the hierarchy of legal acts, is the Constitution of the Republic of Poland, which defines the primacy of parents in the upbringing of children (Dudek, 2003, Art. 48) and introduces constitutional protection of children's rights (Dudek, 2003, Art. 200). This is followed by international conventions ratified by Poland: the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, and the European Convention on the Exercise of Children's Rights, which contain general principles on alternative care arising from the rights of the child and the rights of the family. In addition to the above, the Civil Procedure Code (provisions on proceedings in matters of parental responsibility and care, concerning cases of removal of a person subject to parental responsibility or a person in custody) and the Act on Juvenile Justice should also be mentioned. Also worth mentioning are a number of implementing regulations issued by the Minister of Labour and Social Policy to the Family Support Act, which concern: the training of family assistants (Collection of Laws No. 272, item 1608), the model certificate of qualification (Journal of Laws of 2023, item 2052), the training of candidates for foster care (Journal of Laws of 2023, item 2452) and institutional foster care (Journal of Laws of 2025, item 395).

The basic distinction between foster care methods in the Polish legal system is the division into family and institutional forms (Journal of Laws of 2025, item 49, Article 34). Family foster care can be provided in two forms: as a foster family or as a family children's home (Collection of Laws of 2025, item 49, Article 39). The former can be provided within a foster family: kinship, non-professional, professional – including those serving as a family emergency care centre and specialised professional foster care. Institutional foster care, on the other hand, may be provided in care and education facilities, regional care and therapy facilities, and pre-adoption intervention centres (Collection of Laws of 2025, item 49, Article 93).

In accordance with the provisions of the Family and Guardianship Act, a child should be placed in foster care after all forms of assistance to the child's parents have been exhausted, as specified in the regulations on family support and the foster care system, unless the best interests of the child require immediate foster care (Journal of Laws of 2023, item 2809, Articles 112 and 112). The Family and Guardianship Code also contains provisions that give preference to family forms of foster care in accordance with Article 112 § 1 of the Family and Guardianship Code. The court will place the child in institutional foster care if it is not possible to place the child in family foster care or if this is not justified for other important reasons. Preference for family forms of foster care also stems from other provisions of international law – Article 20(1) and (3) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Collection of Laws 1991, No. 120, item 526) and are also in line with EU standards: Resolution No. (77) 33 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on the placement of children outside the family unit. These legal acts emphasise the importance of foster families. Furthermore, both

doctrine and literature hold the view that placing a child in institutional foster care should be an exceptional measure, applied in cases where placement in family care is not possible.

The organisation and functioning of foster care are regulated by the Family Support Act (Collection of Laws 2025, item 49, as amended, Section III). In the explanatory memorandum to the bill, the legislator pointed out that the current legal norms are characterised by generality, which leads to numerous interpretative doubts and inconsistent practices in foster care throughout the country. The lack of consistency in the interpretation of the regulations causes practical problems for many foster families in caring for children and, moreover, does not encourage families who could apply for foster family status to take on the responsibility of caring for children (Parliamentary Letter No. 628, Sejm of the Republic of Poland, 6th term).

Family foster care

According to the Family Support Act, family foster care includes: foster families or family children‘s homes (Collection of Laws of 2025, item 49, Article 39). The legislator has divided foster families into: related families; non-professional families; and professional families, including those serving as family emergency homes; and specialised professional families. Family foster care is supported by foster families. Support from these families is provided at the request of the foster family or family children‘s home. The provision of such support on request is not currently mandatory (Collection of Laws of 2025, item 49, as amended, Article 39, paragraph 2).The provision of support in the form of foster care falls within the competence of the district administration. Family foster care may be established by a married couple or an unmarried person to whom the child has been entrusted for foster care (Collection of Laws of 2025, point 49, Article 41, paragraph 1). The legislator has also defined the functions of these family foster care facilities, which include providing 24-hour care and upbringing for the child. Specifically, the following is required: treating the child in a manner that promotes his or her dignity and personal worth; ensuring access to appropriate health and educational services; addressing developmental and academic deficiencies; developing talents and interests; meeting the emotional, life, developmental, social and religious needs of the child; ensuring protection from arbitrary or unlawful interference with the child‘s private life; and facilitating contact with parents and other close relatives (Collection of Laws of 2025, point 49, Article 490).

Foster families and family foster homes are required to cooperate with the adoption centre, the family foster care coordinator and the family foster care organiser. Foster families and persons operating family foster homes are required to facilitate the organiser‘s assessment of the child‘s situation and to provide all relevant information, including information necessary to register the child with legal residence for adoption. (Collection of Laws of 2025, point 49, Article 76, paragraph 4). With regard to the foster care coordinator, cooperation includes

collaboration on the creation of a support plan for the child and, in specific cases, the provision of information that will enable the coordinator to register the child for adoption.

The Family Support Act strictly defines the conditions and requirements for persons wishing to establish a foster family or a family foster home (Collection of Laws of 2025, item 49, Article 41, paragraph 1). In addition to formal requirements, these persons must also meet high moral standards (Collection of Laws of 2025, item 49, as amended, Article 42, Section 1) and must complete relevant training and obtain a certificate of completion (Collection of Laws of 2025, item 49, as amended, Articles 43 and 44, Section 1).

A characteristic feature of family foster care is that, regardless of the method of placement, the obligation to care for and raise the child arises at the moment the child is actually placed in care (Collection of Laws of 2025, point 49 and Article 58). In this situation, however, if the care is not provided properly, the mayor informs the guardianship court, which is authorised to change the decision to place the child in foster care (Collection of Laws of 2025, point 49, as amended, Article 71, paragraphs 1-2).

Institutional foster care

Institutional foster care includes: care and education facilities, regional care and therapy facilities, or pre-adoption intervention centres. Collection of Laws of 2025, point 49, as amended, Article 93). Facilities may also specialise in performing socialisation, intervention, specialised therapeutic or family functions (Collection of Laws of 2025, point 49, as amended, Article 95). The type of facility is specified in the regulations (Collection of Laws of 2025, item 49, as amended, Article 101). It is possible to establish a multifunctional facility, even though this type is not specified in the law. Care and education facilities may only be operated by the district or an entity authorised by the district to perform this task (Collection of Laws of 2025, item 49, as amended, Article 93(2)).

While the operation of regional care and therapy facilities is the responsibility of the provincial government, the establishment of such facilities is voluntary. The provincial government has the option of outsourcing the operation of these facilities (Collection of Laws of 2025, point 49, as amended, Article 39, paragraph 2). According to the Family Support Act, these facilities should not accommodate more than fourteen children (, 2025, point 49, as amended, Article 190). They are intended only for children over the age of ten who require special care or therapeutic intervention and who have difficulty adapting to family life. In exceptional cases, younger children may be placed in care and educational institutions if the child‘s mother or father is placed there, and in other exceptional cases, in particular if the child‘s health condition requires otherwise or if the children are siblings. The director of the institution

shall immediately, within 24 hours at the latest, inform the court and the social services department of the child's placement. When ordering the placement of a child in a care and education facility, the guardianship court usually issues a decision on the placement and type of facility after conducting evidentiary proceedings to determine the appropriate type of facility for the child (Ciepła, Ignaczewski, Skibińska-Adamowicz, 2014, p. 292).

The duties of care and education facilities include: providing 24-hour care and education to the child and meeting their basic needs, in particular emotional, developmental, health, living, social and religious needs; implementing a child support plan developed in cooperation with a family assistant; facilitating contact between the child and their parents and other close relatives, unless the court decides otherwise; taking measures to return the child to their family; ensuring the child's access to education appropriate to their age and developmental abilities; providing therapeutic services to the child; and ensuring access to appropriate health services (Collection of Laws of 2025, item 49, as amended, Article 93, paragraph 4).

These obligations are therefore similar to those of family-based foster care. However, it should be noted that the obligations of institutional foster care also include the implementation of a child maintenance plan, which is drawn up in cooperation with a family assistant. In addition to the child maintenance plan, a family support plan is also most often implemented. However, the institution does not participate in its creation. The facility is also obliged to allow the child to have contact with their parents and other close relatives, even without the consent of the court, even if the parents have been deprived of parental responsibility. Of course, the legislator does not define the term 'close relative'. It can only be assumed that these are persons who have cared for the child or have an emotional bond with him or her. If such contact poses a threat to the child, the director of the facility should file a motion with the court to initiate ex officio proceedings to restrict or prohibit such contact (Collection of Laws of 2023, item 2809, Article 113).

It should be emphasised that all forms of foster care have introduced regular assessments of the reasons for the child's stay in foster care. In the case of institutional care, this assessment is carried out by a team for the regular assessment of the child's situation (Collection of Laws of 2025, item 49, as amended, Article 35) and should be carried out at least once every six months, and in the case of foster care for a child under three years of age, at least once every three months (Collection of Laws of 2025, point 49, as amended, Article 138). The assessment is carried out by the family foster care coordinator. With regard to the organisation of the facilities themselves, the Family Support Act provides for the suspension of the work of a child working in care in the event of criminal proceedings being brought against a person working with children for an intentional criminal offence prosecuted by the public prosecutor's office. The introduction of this solution, as justified by the legislator, is in line with the requirements for adequate protection of children staying in educational facilities.

As already mentioned, regional care and therapy facilities are operated by the provincial government. Regional care and therapy facilities can accommodate a maximum of thirty children at a time. These facilities accommodate children who require special care or have difficulties adapting to family life, who require specialised care and rehabilitation due to their health condition and who cannot be placed in foster care or in care and education facilities (Collection of Laws of 2025, item 49, as amended, Article 109).

The Family Support Act also regulates a number of other issues relating to care and education facilities, such as defining the qualifications of facility directors and other professional staff and establishing the principles of operation for facilities with specific specialisations. Directors of family care and education facilities and candidates for these positions have the opportunity to continuously improve their qualifications and receive support to provide more professional care for children and prevent burnout by participating in training courses in this area, the organisation of which is the responsibility of the district (Collection of Laws of 2025, item 49, as amended, Article 180).

The implementation of these solutions aims to improve the quality of care provided and to build a fully professional foster care system (Parliamentary Journal No. 628, Sejm of the Republic of Poland, 6th term). The district is responsible for organising and financing care and education facilities.

Summary

In a situation where a family is breaking down and the welfare of a child living in such a family is at risk, children feel lost (Bělík et al. (2022)), and there is no possibility of cooperation with this family without separating the child from the family, the child is placed in foster care. It seems obvious that for a child growing up outside the family, staying in one of the family forms of foster care is better than institutional care. However, it should not be forgotten that each case should be assessed individually. Family foster care, as the environment closest to the family, is generally suitable for the child, but only and exclusively if it is the best solution for the child‘s specific situation. It should be noted that in some situations, placing a child with siblings in a care and education facility is a better solution than separating siblings by placing children in different foster families. Both legislation and case law and doctrine naturally favour the placement of children in family foster care, and take the view that the placement of a child in institutional care should only be used in exceptional cases.

Public authorities should make every effort to secure family care for every child placed in a care and education facility and should seek alternative family care before deciding to place a child in institutional care. In any case, it is of course necessary to consider the best interests

of the child, which does not always mean placing the child in family foster care.

In accordance with current regulations, it is also important that placing a child in foster care is preceded by measures to support the family (Walancik, 2025, p. 31). The state‘s primary obligation is to support families who have difficulties fulfilling their caregiving and parenting roles, taking into account the child‘s right to be raised in a family, and only then, if necessary, to raise the child outside the family – in family or institutional forms of foster care.

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RISK BEHAVIOR, MENTAL HEALTH, AND PREVENTION

SUICIDES OF PERSONS UNDER 19 YEARS OF AGE IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

SAMOVRAŽDY OSÔB DO 19 ROKOV V SLOVENSKEJ REPUBLIKE

Ingrid Emmerová (Slovak Republic)

Abstract

This contribution deals with suicides of persons under 19 years of age in the Slovak republic. It analysis official statistical data on reported suicide attempts of children and youth. It also pays attention to the suicide attempts committed by persons up to 19 years of age. The acquired data prove the occurrence of suicides and suicide attempts in the population under 19 years of age and thus point to the necessity to undertake prevention and early intervention. Child and youth suicides have many motives and are often socially determined.

Key words: Suicide; suicide attempt; motives of suicides and suicide attempts of persons under 19 years of age; prevention of suicides.

Abstrakt

Príspevok sa zaoberá samovraždami osôb do 19 v Slovenskej republike. Analyzuje oficiálne štatistické údaje o hlásených samovraždách detí a mládeže. Pozornosť je tiež venovaná samovražedným pokusom osôb do 19 rokov. Získané údaje potvrdzujú výskyt samovrážd a samovražedných pokusov v populácií do 19 rokov, čo poukazuje na potrebu realizovania prevencie i včasnej intervencie. Samovraždy detí a mládeže majú veľa motívov, často sú sociálne determinované.

Kľúčové slová: Samovražda; samovražedný pokus; príčiny samovrážd a samovražedných pokusov u osôb do 19 rokov, prevencia samovrážd.

Introduction

Suicidal behaviour belongs among socio-pathological phenomena. Suicide is a self-conducted deliberate self-killing, it is a violent action with the intention to end one's life. Such behaviour occurs in all age categories, including persons under 19 years of age, children and youth. Several authors point to the occurrence of suicides in child age: Emmerová (2012, 2018), Hubočan (2025, Húsková (2024) or Lalwani et al. (2004), to suicides of adolescents: Russel et al. (2013) and Sidharta and Jena (2006), besides others.

There are several types of suicides, for children and youth the most typical being demonstrative, but also escaping suicides, and in cases of mental disease also autopunitive suicides. According to Kocourková and Koutek (2004), an important circumstance is choosing the means of suicide, there are soft and harder ways. Among the softer ones belong overdosing with medicaments, which is typical for adolescent girls. The harder ways include hanging, jumps from heights, use of firearms, etc.

Methods

We will more closely focus on suicides and suicidal attempts in the Slovak republic. We will analyse them on the basis of official statistical data from the National health information center. Data on the number of suicides and suicidal attempts are obtained through statistical survey of the Ministry of Health of the Slovak Republic. Suicides are reported by corresponding forensic medicine workplaces, suicidal attempts are reported by healthcare services providers. Naturally, it is necessary to consider certain latency of suicides (e.g. hidden suicides and suicidal attempts under the influence of an addictive substance, suicides registered as car accidents, etc.).

Results

Suicides are committed by persons from child age up to senior age. In terms of gender, there is a significant dominance of men. Table 1 shows the number of reported suicides and Table 2 shows the number of attempted suicides by age and gender. We present the numbers of all suicides and attempted suicides in the Slovak republic, age categories from 14 and from 15 to 19 years of age are shown separately.

Tab. 1 Suicides in the Slovak republic in 2015 – 2024 of persons under 19 years of age

Year / age		Overall in the Slovak republic, of which:	0 – 14 years old	15 – 19 years old
2015	overall	592	4	11
	men / boys	497	1	10
	women / girls	95	3	1
2016	overall	545	1	15
	men / boys	457	1	13
	women / girls	88	0	2
2017	overall	506	3	14
	men / boys	410	0	13
	women / girls	96	3	1
2018	overall	533	4	15
	men / boys	425	2	11
	women / girls	108	2	4
2019	overall	498	2	14
	men / boys	416	2	11
	women / girls	82	0	3
2020	overall	489	1	11
	men / boys	409	0	7
	women / girls	80	1	4
2021	overall	548	2	19
	men / boys	449	1	12
	women / girls	99	1	7
2022	overall	563	1	16
	men / boys	464	1	11
	women / girls	99	0	5
2023	overall	501	2	10
	men / boys	414	1	8
	women / girls	87	1	2
2024	overall	467	2	11
	men / boys	395	1	10
	women / girls	72	1	1

Source: Suicides and suicidal attempts in SR 2015 to 2024. **Available on:** *www.nczisk.sk* Own processing.

The data on the number of suicides of children and youth based on the official statistical data can be considered objective, because each death at this age is thoroughly investigated. For example, a suicide while driving cannot be reported as a car accident. In the years 2015 – 2024, children and youth committed attempts on suicide and completed suicides. In total, during the ten years, 22 children at the age up to 14 years committed suicide, most of

them in 2015 and 2018 (4 children). In terms of gender, boys dominated. In the age category of 15 to 19 year olds, the number of suicides is higher - over the reporting period, 136 persons at the age of 15 to 19 years committed suicide. The lowest number of them in 2023 (10 completed suicides) and highest number in 2021 (19 suicides). In terms of gender, again, male persons dominated, but also suicides of girls and young women occurred.

Tab. 2 Suicidal attempts in the Slovak republic in 2015 – 2024 of persons under 19 years of age

Year / age		Overall in the Slovak republic, of which:	0 – 14 years old	15 – 19 years old
2015	overall	859	18	81
	men / boys	441	2	26
	women / girls	418	16	55
2016	overall	951	26	95
	men / boys	489	3	35
	women / girls	462	23	60
2017	overall	841	35	94
	men / boys	462	4	29
	women / girls	379	31	65
2018	overall	773	38	95
	men / boys	437	2	40
	women / girls	336	36	55
2019	overall	743	41	89
	men / boys	374	7	30
	women / girls	369	34	59
2020	overall	656	30	90
	men / boys	334	5	32
	women / girls	322	25	58
2021	overall	660	63	115
	men / boys	314	6	28
	women / girls	346	57	87
2022	overall	724	79	148
	men / boys	293	5	33
	women / girls	431	74	115
2023	overall	678	69	118
	men / boys	293	6	29
	women / girls	385	63	89
2024	overall	808	37	121
	men / boys	376	3	29
	women / girls	432	34	92

Source: Suicides and suicidal attempts in SR 2015 to 2024. **Available on:** *www.nczisk.sk* Own processing.

The number of suicidal attempts is higher than the number of completed suicides. Even if a person survives the suicidal attempt, besides the health damage, there is a significant risk he/she will try again. In terms of gender, men slightly dominate in suicidal attempts in the Slovak republic, however, in the age category of 14 to 15 year olds, the dominance is significantly on the side of girls and women.

In terms of age, suicidal attempts occur regularly also in the age category of up to 14 year olds, most suicidal attempts took place in the years 2022 (79), 2023 (69), 2021 (63), and least number of them in the years 2015 (18), 2016 (26). In the age category of 15 to 19 year olds, most suicidal attempts were reported in 2022 (148), more than 100 cases were reported in the years 2021 (115), 2023 (118), 2024 (121) and the lowest number of suicidal attempts was recorded in the years 2015 (81) and 2019 (89). Again, girls dominate in these attempts, but less significantly than in the age category of under 14 year olds.

There are many motives of suicides, but most often it is a response to difficult and seemingly hopeless life situation. According to Koutek (2008), suicidal behaviour often represents a result of a multifactorial process which is determined by many influences. For children and youth, suicide is mostly a knee-jerk reaction. Risk situations and events that may invoke suicidal behaviour vary. Usually, they are situations that are perceived by young people as hurtful, then it could be an interpersonal conflict or a loss. Family plays an important role, especially quarrels within it. In the age of puberty and adolescence, it could be a break-up with a boy/girlfriend, pressure from peers or self-destructive models of friends. At school, it is usually bullying, dissatisfaction with school performance and results, high expectations during exam periods or of parents.

We analyse the motives of reported suicides and suicidal attempts of persons under 19 years of age in the years 2015 to 2024 (www.nczisk.sk). Motives of suicidal behaviour vary. Official statistical data of the National health information center of the Slovak republic list the following motives: conflicts and family problems, conflicts and school problems, conflicts and work problems, conflicts and existential problems, conflicts and erotic problems, conflicts and problems with public interests, connection with somatic disease, physical defects, without intelligible motive, including psychotic one, other internal personal conflicts and problems, other motives, unknown motive, not provided.

Statistical data show the motive of completed suicides is mostly unknown. The motives of suicidal attempts are mostly conflicts in families and at schools, without intelligible motive, in the age category 15 to 19 year olds conflicts and erotic problems occur.

From preventive point of view, it is important to know the motives of reported suicides and suicidal attempts. Majority of the children's suicidal attempts is a demonstration of fear and of an attempt to escape some kind of danger, e.g. a test. This corresponds with increased number

of suicidal attempts in the period of school reports. Risk factors at this age include problems at school and in families. Suicidal attempts of adolescents can be invoked by the feeling of disappointment and despair when facing serious problems or failures for the first time. Suicidal attempts at this age may often be described as emotionally tense crying for help.

Most frequent motives of suicidal attempts are problems and conflicts at school and in families, in the age category of 15 to 19 year olds conflicts and erotic problems occur more often.

Suicides are the subject of artistic works, especially of literature. Even though fiction, on the one hand, describes the situation in the society, on the other hand it also influences. Artistic rendering of a suicide, or of solving difficult situations by committing suicide, can be found in many pieces of art. Similarly, many artists committed suicide, and it may have influence especially on the younger generations.

Common motives of suicides and suicidal attempts of children and youth include family problems, especially neglecting, child abuse, deficiencies in upbringing, school problems (school failures, bullying), emotional and health problems, stressful situations and other motives. As Ondrejkovič (2009) states, suicide motives in child age are mostly concentrated around interpersonal relations. Most often it covers conflicts in families, divorces, break-ups, death of one or both parents, dramatic change of family background and social isolation of the child, failures at school, disappointments in love.

Suicidal attempts often occur as demonstrative suicides, what could be considered a gesture of a person in order to get attention. They might be seriously meant, but with subconscious and conscious hope for rescue. It might also be a form of emotional extortion. Fischer and Škoda (2009) warn that the most important criterion of the seriousness of the attempt is the presence or absence of a suicidal plan. If a person doesn't have a plan and keeps saying he/she would rather die, he/she is in the phase of consideration and there is no acute danger of a suicidal attempt. If a person has a suicidal plan, the seriousness of his/her intentions is decided according to:

- lethality of the method (planning a jump from a window is a more serious factor than planning an overdose with medicaments, etc.),
- availability of the means (e.g. firearm, or other),
- plan thought out in detail (e.g. persons who plan to poison themselves with drugs or poisons get some anti-vomiting agents in advance, to prevent the possibility to throw up the deathly dose of the drug or poison),
- preparation for death (writing a goodbye letter, settlement of property, e.g. writing down the last will, giving out valuables, etc.).

Discussion

Suicides and suicidal attempts are serious phenomena that also occur among children and youth, therefore it is important to pay attention to their **prevention**.

Tendency to suicidal activity usually develops for some time, it doesn't occur abruptly and unexpectedly. This process, according to Vágnerová (2000), tends to have several phases:

1. A person is under some kind of hardship, thinks about solutions and one of the options seems to be a suicide. Suicidal tendencies exist so far just on a symbolic level, on the level of thoughts and ideas. Many people even tend to speak about suicide in this phase.
2. Suicidal tendencies gain a more specific form, the person accepts suicide as a solution to his/her problems and he/she starts to think about the way to commit it.
3. The third phase is execution of the intention, real suicidal action.

This whole process may be abbreviated, the person may act impulsively and without previous consideration. It happens in specific ways, just as there are many specific motives of suicidal behaviour.

Ondrejkovič (2009), states in this regard, that suicidal behaviour of youth represents a complex and multifactorial phenomenon. No highly-specialised prevention and therapy of suicides exists, because hundreds of questions regarding the causes of suicides could only by truly answered by those who died and they, obviously, cannot be questioned. Thus only trough understanding the general causes, social and mental and individually spiritual, that may lead to a suicide we can intervene into these conditions and try to prevent a suicide. However, interventions must necessarily be of complementary nature, individually and macro-socially, in order to raise the probability of their effectiveness in saving the highest value in society, a human life.

Suicide prevention requires interdisciplinary approach, highly specialized prevention is ineffective. School plays an important role in this prevention. In the case of suicides of youth, several symptoms are suggested that may be registered early. Within suicide prevention, it is necessary for teachers to be aware of them. Such symptoms include indifferent and resigned response to performance requirements, depressive moods and symptoms that increase loss of zest for life, abandoning the group of friends, loss of interest in usual activities, overall worsening of school performance, decrease in attitude at school, inadequate behaviour at school, unexcused or repeated absence, taking legal or illegal drugs, incidents involving police.

Prevention of suicides of children and youth has three levels: primary, secondary and tertiary prevention.

Primary prevention – is aimed at children and youth at elementary and high schools. Executors of this prevention are mainly families, school, mass media, and others. Special attention at schools should be paid to pupils from dysfunctional families, from risk families, drug users, pupils with worse performance, ostracized pupils, socially isolated pupils. Increased attention to suicide issues should be paid in the time of school reports delivering. Irreplaceable role belongs to prevention coordinators at elementary and high schools, but also to class teachers and mass media. At schools, it is important to increase the self-respect of pupils, to support them in expressing their feelings, prevent bullying and violence in the school environment, support communication with mutual trust. Increasing the frustration tolerance and the ability to adequately deal with life problems are another key tasks of primary suicide prevention. Efficient and effective primary prevention entails continuous and complex programmes. In the context of suicide prevention, such programmes are most suitable which help pupils deal with social pressure, which are focused on improving communication, non-violent conflict management, increasing healthy confidence, dealing with anxiety and stress.

Secondary prevention – is aimed at those individuals who stand directly before the suicidal act. Secondary prevention requires professional help of psychiatrists, psychologists and other professionals.

Tertiary prevention – is aimed at those people, who have survived a suicidal attempt. It is important to teach such person to overcome life hardships, to find a new sense of life. Tertiary prevention is in the hands of psychiatrists immediately after the suicidal attempt, but other specialists are involved later.

It is appropriate to publish the phone numbers of helplines at schools or in paediatric ambulances, e.g. on notice-boards or in media. Many times they represent contact between a young person in problem situation and experts from helping professions who can provide help and prevent suicidal behaviour. Suicidal behaviour doesn't happen suddenly, it graduates from occasional considerations, through frequent and persisting thoughts of suicide, consideration of the ways of committing suicide, up to the execution itself. Therefore, if young person talks about suicide, it is important to take it seriously as a cry for help.

Intervention is defined by Bělík, Hoferková, Kraus et al. (2017) as an acute professional intervention. In the teaching about upbringing and education of socially disturbed youth, it represents pedagogical measures that intervene in the natural social life situations of individuals with disorders (problems) of emotions and behaviour. Brož and Vodáčková (2015) state that the essence and goal of crisis intervention in this case is:

- to establish good contact with young person and to widen his/her perception field through dialogue,
- to discover alternative solutions,
- to find support points and minimize "totality" in thinking,
- to replace the "all or nothing" principle with alternative options.

In the field of suicide prevention, it is suitable to limit the availability of means such as firearms or medicaments. Another important factor is preparedness of teachers, paediatricians and other professionals working with children and youth to identify the risk of a suicidal attempt and adequately respond in case of suicidal behaviour.

Conclusion

Suicides and suicidal attempts of children and youth represent a serious problem also in the Slovak republic. It is a multifatorially conditioned phenomenon. It is necessary to prevent suicides and suicidal attempts, even though specifically focused prevention is problematic and ineffective. It is important to support the protecting factors and to eliminate those that are risky. Among protecting factors belong harmonious family environment and support, adequate requirements at school; the risk factors include dysfunctional family (e.g. violence in the family, sexual abuse, addictions of family members), bullying at school, addiction of a child or adolescent, etc. Besides family and school, an important role belongs to paediatricians who attend children and youth up to 18 years of age. Young people can address them with their problems, even of non-medical nature, as on helping professionals. Paediatricians also know the risk diagnoses that can lead to suicidal behaviour (depression, schizophrenia, etc.). Paediatrician can recommend other professional help to the endangered young person and send him/her to a specialist.

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FUNCTIONS AND RISK FACTORS OF SELF-HARM IN ADOLESCENTS

FUNKCIE A RIZIKOVÉ FAKTORY SEBAPOŠKODZOVANIA U ADOLESCENTOV

Simona Dulovics Sámelová (Slovak Republic)

Abstract

In today's society, which faces constant technological and social changes, there is a growing number of threats to the physical and mental health of children, adolescents and adults. These challenges, including pressure to perform, the influence of social media and the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, contribute significantly to social isolation and an increase in mental health problems, particularly self-harm, especially among children and young people. The aim of this paper is to analyse the phenomenon of self-harm, its characteristics, causes, functions and manifestations. We understand self-harm as a maladaptive strategy for coping with intense emotional tension and emptiness, which differs from suicidal behaviour. Adolescence is considered a critical developmental period characterised by the search for identity and is most often cited as the initial period of self-harm. Other risk factors include the family environment and the influence of digital technologies, including the phenomenon of online self-harm. The article also lists typical signs that can be used to identify self-harm in adolescents from the perspective of parents or members of the school support team. Understanding the emotional triggers and functions of this behaviour is key to effective identification, support and assistance.

Keywords: Self-harm. Adolescent. School support team.

Abstrakt

V dnešnej spoločnosti, ktorá čelí neustálym technologickým a sociálnym zmenám, rastie počet hrozieb pre fyzické a duševné zdravie detí, adolescentov a dospelých. Tieto výzvy, vrátane tlaku na výkon, vplyvu sociálnych médií a dôsledkov pandémie COVID-19, významne prispievajú k sociálnej izolácii a nárastu problémov duševného zdravia, najmä sebapoškodzovania, a to hlavně u detí a mladých ľudí. Cieľom tohto príspevku je analyzovať fenomén sebapoškodzovania, jeho charakteristiky, príčiny, funkcie a prejavy. Sebapoškodzovanie

chápeme ako maladaptívnu stratégiu na zvládanie intenzívneho emocionálneho napätia a prázdnoty, ktorá sa líši od suicidálneho správania. Adolescencia je považovaná za kritické vývinové obdobie charakterizované hľadaním identity a je najčastejšie uvádzaná ako počiatočné obdobie sebapoškodzovania. Medzi ďalšie rizikové faktory patrí rodinné prostredie a vplyv digitálnych technológií, vrátane fenoménu sebapoškodzovania online. Článok tiež uvádza typické príznaky, ktoré môžu slúžiť na identifikáciu sebapoškodzovania u adolescentov z pohľadu rodičov alebo členov školského podporného tímu. Porozumenie emocionálnym spúšťačom a funkciám tohto správania je kľúčom k efektívnej identifikácii, podpore a pomoci.

Kľúčové slová: Sebapoškodzovanie. Adolescent. Školský podporný tím.

Introduction

In today‘s dynamic and changing society, facing constant challenges and threats, we encounter influences that significantly endanger the physical, mental and social health of children, adolescents and adults. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, social isolation, the shift to online learning and the cancellation of extracurricular activities, mental health has deteriorated. Stress and anxiety have significantly affected people‘s personalities, relationships and lives. One of the alarming consequences is an increase in mental illness and self-harm, especially among children and young people.

Despite constant efforts and emphasis on the importance of mental health care, we still encounter stigmatisation of mental disorders. Significant differences in coping strategies mean that what is manageable for one person may trigger self-harm in another as a reaction to unmanaged emotional tension or a difficult life situation. We note that the emotional climate in the family is key to the healthy development of the individual.

Children learn coping strategies from an early age in the family, which, even in a changing world, remains the primary environment for optimal development. Emphasis should be placed on healthy and quality emotional relationships that provide a sense of basic security and safety. However, we often observe a crisis in the parent-child relationship, especially during puberty and adolescence, which is one of the fundamental developmental crises of human beings (Langmeier, 2006, p. 142).

During adolescence, young people undergo not only biological maturation but also significant psychological changes, such as emotional instability and the onset of mature thinking. There is also a new social classification, accompanied by societal expectations, changing self-perception and a shift away from the authority of parents and teachers towards friends. The weakening influence of the family is gradually replaced by the influence of peers, which tests

the quality of emotional relationships with parents. If these relationships are of poor quality, problems with forming one's own identity may arise. It is during this period that peer groups become important.

From the perspective of Erikson's (1999) theory of development, this is a period characterised by the formation of the ego, i.e. identity. The family recedes into the background and peer groups, role models from the environment, gain in importance. The necessary psychosocial modality is to achieve the quality of being oneself, of sharing. Mastering this developmental period means acquiring reliability, loyalty and forming a cohesive identity. Failure to master this developmental task can manifest itself in fanaticism, non-recognition, the creation of a diffuse identity, i.e. one that is incoherent, confusing, full of contradictions, characterised by unclear roles, and ambiguities regarding self-image and the image in the eyes of others. Pretending, incoherence and ambiguity become typical.

Říčan (2004) states that adolescents are almost mature from a biological point of view, their cognitive functions are at their peak, but in terms of emotions, they are not yet fully mature; they are equipped for life rationally, but not emotionally.

In agreement with Lipanová (2023), we state that adolescence is a challenging period accompanied by a number of stressful situations that adolescents' current coping strategies are insufficient to handle because they lack experience. They have not had the opportunity to learn about other possible ways of coping. In this context, we encounter self-harm, which is often part of experimenting with coping with stress as one of the maladaptive mechanisms.

It is precisely this imbalance in the maturation process in adolescents, where rational thinking lags behind the emotional side, that may be one of the causes of self-harm. Many difficult life situations are more difficult for adolescents to cope with because their coping strategies are not sufficiently developed. They typically make decisions based on emotions and impulsive behaviour. Significant risk factors for self-harm in this age group include changes associated with adolescence: high emotionality, withdrawal in connection with negative feelings, increased importance of reference groups and the pressures they exert on individuals.

Self-harming individuals also often experienced childhoods in which their parents had problems satisfying their basic needs, providing basic security, emotional involvement and reassurance (Conterio et al., 1998).

The present era brings a great deal of frustration, but it is qualitatively and quantitatively disproportionate and different from the experience formed over several thousand years. It also brings about a deterioration in the quality of relationships – they are less personal, focused on performance, and isolate family members in their micro-spaces (Lipanová, 2023, p. 9).

Self-harm, characteristics, prevalence

Self-harm, also known as self-mutilation, is an act of physical violence that a person inflicts on themselves. It is an expression of psychological pain through physical pain (Nagyová, 2022).

It is an act of autoaggression, physical violence against oneself. It is deliberate and conscious behaviour that lacks the specific intention to die (Nagyová, 2022).

Favazza (1999) distinguishes between actual self-harm and certain culturally determined acts of self-harm, which include various trends such as body decoration in the form of piercings or tattoos. Another form of this culturally conditioned act is indigenous rituals, which in certain cultures celebrate the transition from childhood to adulthood. Self-harming behaviour must be characterised by the following features:

a) intentionality;
b) damage to tissue without the intention of dying;
c) social unacceptability; repetition of the act.

We agree with Kitty Širilová's (2014) view that self-harm can be characterised as behaviour in which a person hurts themselves. It usually occurs in situations that are challenging and characterised by insufficient coping mechanisms. The goal is usually the need to feel inner pain, to vent it, to get it out of oneself. From this perspective, physical pain can be understood as more easily comprehensible, concrete, visible or easy to imagine, while psychological pain is unmanageable in a given situation. At that moment, physical pain, which becomes an outlet, a release of psychological pain, can temporarily numb psychological pain, but soon feelings of guilt, and shame of failure, which subsequently increase the psychological pain and the individual finds themselves in a vicious circle in which the psychological pain intensifies. This cycle is very close and similar to substance addiction. (Kitty Širilová, 2014, p. 148)

Kast (2010) also states that this is a human effort to start feeling and perceiving one's body again after losing touch with it and with oneself. This destructive behaviour can be understood as an effort to regain contact with oneself.

In the context of this article, we perceive self-harm as behaviour directed towards oneself, but without suicidal intent. It is targeted, violent, deliberate behaviour, the essence of which is self-regulation of internal tension, gaining emotional control, an outlet, transforming psychological pain into physical pain.

The prevalence of self-harm among men and women is more balanced than that of suicidal behaviour (DSM 5, 2015).

Several professional studies (Favazza. 1989; Pattinson & Kahan, 1984, Kriegelová, 2008,

Whitlock 2009, Richardson 2006 Muehlenkamp 2004) point out that most adolescents began self-harming between the ages of 12 and 15, and that their behaviour tends to be repetitive.

The difference between the sexes can be found in the methods used. Boys are more likely to engage in self-biting, scratching, self-burning, self-biting and preventing wound healing, while girls are more likely to engage in self-cutting (Barrocas et al., 2015; Linderová et al. Hradečná et al., 2023, Glenn & Klonsky, 2013, Groschwitz et al., 2015; Poudel et al., 2022).

Most self-harmers use more than one method of self-harm (Groschwitz et al., 2015; Muehlenkamp et al., 2012, Carr-Gregg 2012).

Alderman (1997) lists cutting, burning, scratching, hair pulling, poking painful areas, banging the body against hard objects, drug overdose, and substance abuse among the most common methods of self-harm.

Kriegel (2008) also lists nail and finger biting, extremely risky behaviour (casual sex, careless driving, not wearing seat belts), participation in risky or high-contact sports, obsessive washing and cleaning (to the point of bleeding), remaining in a violent relationship, preventing wounds from healing (picking at scabs), deliberate starvation, smoking, and others.

Sutton (1999 in Kriegelová, 2008) states that when individuals do not have their usual tools at hand and find themselves in a so-called crisis, they are capable of using anything as a tool. The most commonly used tools for self-harm are razor blades for cutting and cigarettes or lighters for burning.

Triggers of self-harm

The triggers of self-harm cannot be strictly defined and identified. It is a multidimensional conditioned act, a subjective emotional experience. For some, it is strong emotions, emptiness, anger, fear, boredom, or indifference from those around them that trigger impulsive behaviour.

It can also be a certain pattern of reducing any tension, not only distress but also eustress. Even self-harm out of boredom and in an attempt to provoke attention should not go unnoticed. It has its own significance and could escalate into other auto-aggressive or even suicidal thoughts and later actions. In this case, not paying attention will not lead to the extinction of the child‘s undesirable behaviour pattern. (Lipanová, 2023, p. 11).

Platznerová (2009, p. 37) lists the characteristics of individuals who are prone to self-harm:

- *poorly managed stress*
- *sensitivity to rejection*
- *anger towards oneself*
- *suppressed anger and aggression*
- *impulsiveness, problems with self-control*
- *chronic anxiety*
- *tendency to be swayed by current mood*
- *feelings of weakness, helplessness*
- *depression, self-destruction*
- *suicidal thoughts*

Sutton (2005) lists long-term abuse in childhood, rape, gender identity issues, separation or alcoholism of a caregiver, parental divorce, and loss of a significant person as risk factors for self-harm.

Currently, there is growing evidence (Nock, 2004; Prinstein, 2005) that self-harm is associated with problematic emotional experiences and emotional regulation. Kamphuis, Ruyling, and Reijntjes (2007, in Slee et al., 2008) report that the most negative emotions are experienced immediately before self-harm, with a significant decrease occurring after the act and a recurrence of these emotions usually one day after.

Chapman and Dixon-Gordon (2007) cite anger (45.16%), anxiety (16.13%), boredom (12.90%), sadness (9.68%), and guilt (6.45%) as the most common triggers for self-harm. The subsequent emotions include relief (25.80%), calmness (16.13%), sadness (12.90%), indifference (9.68%), anxiety (6.45%), and anger (6.45%).

Warma, Murray and Fox (2003) found that 96.7% of self-harmers use self-harm to express psychological pain, 89.6% to express anger, 87.6% to maintain self-control, and approximately 4% to attract the attention of others (Nock, 2004; Prinstein, 2005).

The most common functions of self-harm include relief from negative feelings and release of emotional pressure (Albores & Gallo et al., 2014; Fischer et al., 2014; Kaess et al., 2012; Zetterqvist, 2014; Kaess et al., 2012; Klonsky, 2011; Sim, Adrian & Zeman, 2009; Nagyová,

2022; Gámez, Chmielewski, Kotov, Ruggero & Watson, 2011; Klonsky, 2011). Glenn and Klonsky (2013) refer to these functions collectively as influencing emotion regulation, which, according to the authors, is present in up to 98% of self-harmers.

According to the findings of Lindnerová and Hradečná (2023), emotion regulation was the most common function of self-harm (up to 84.7%), followed by self-punishment (67.1%) and dissociative function (48.1%).

Physical pain in self-harm is important in terms of the frequency of self-harm and also the number of suicide attempts, as pointed out by Ammerman et al. (2015), according to whom the less pain a person feels when self-harming, the more the frequency of self-harm and suicide attempts increases.

It follows from the above that physical pain is important in terms of the frequency and severity of self-harm; it acts as a kind of brake that should protect against more fatal injuries and life-threatening situations.

The course and comorbidity of self-harm

Self-harm has a typical course. A stressful event triggers unpleasant emotions and increased tension. Anxiety and irritability increase to an unbearable intensity, leading to a persistent need for regulation, relief, and release from tension. The strength of emotions is extraordinary and can escalate to a state similar to panic and dissociation. At the peak of this active phase, self-harm occurs and a short-term feeling of relief (short-term positive effect) is experienced. This is immediately followed by negative thoughts and emotions, with feelings of shame and disappointment, self-contempt, even disgust, and feelings of guilt, i.e. strong, negative and unpleasant emotions (Kukučová, 2022, p. 5).

Self-harm is rarely an isolated problem. Most often, we find links to eating disorders, substance abuse, mood disorders, and personality disorders – most commonly borderline and emotionally unstable personality disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, panic disorder, and anxiety disorder (Lipanová, 2023, p. 11).

Lipanová (2023) states that 75% of participants would like to stop self-harming and 25% would not. Hooley et al. (2020) express a similar view, stating that people who self-harm are not always convinced that they want to stop this behaviour. Gray et al. (2022) report that 20% of university students do not want to stop self-harming.

Places of self-harm

Young people initially cleverly hide evidence of self-harm on their bodies (under long-sleeved T-shirts, sweatshirts – even in summer, under long trousers). Parents or teachers should focus their attention on unexplained wounds on the forearms, shoulders and legs. The cuts often take the form of „linear lines", parallel to each other, resembling a „ladder". Some adolescents „carve" letters or words. A sign that this is deliberate self-harm may also be that it is on the hand with which the child does not write. Some wounds look more like scratches than cuts. After scars on the body are discovered, e.g. by parents, they find other places on their body that parents do not usually check, e.g. the inner thighs, stomach, breasts, etc. Not every cut can be considered intentional self-harm. When determining the severity of the problem of self-harm, the following should be assessed in particular (Nagyová, 2015, p. 84):

- the severity of physical damage;
- the mental state of the individual during the act;
- the level of acceptability of the behaviour.

The basic warning signs that indicate that a child or adolescent is deliberately harming themselves include (Ferková, 201, p. 87):

- unexplained wounds, cuts, bruises, burns, usually on the wrists, arms, thighs or breasts;
- bloodstains on clothing, towels, bed linen;
- sharp objects or cutting tools such as razors, knives, needles, glass shards or bottle caps;
- covering wounds and cuts by wearing long sleeves or long trousers, even in hot weather;
- injuries, e.g. fractures; hair loss;
- changes in behaviour, isolation and irritability.

Parents can be particularly helpful in intervening. School psychologists and teachers often do not have much chance of noticing cuts, especially if pupils wear long sleeves, which is often the case. Parents should focus their attention on unexplained wounds on the forearms, shoulders and legs (Ferková, 201, p. 87).

If parents notice a problem, they should focus primarily on open communication with their child. They should remain calm and not react hysterically or aggressively. Such an approach could cause fear and panic in the child, leading to concealment and downplaying of the situation. Children with such problems tend to lie, making excuses that the injury was caused by a pet, that they scratched themselves during training, etc.

Appropriate communication strategies when self-harm is discovered are as follows (Nagyová, 2022):

- communicate openly with the child, show empathy (which does not mean complete acceptance or approval of their actions)
- remain calm, do not react hysterically or aggressively
- try to assess the situation by asking direct questions
- try to find the causes of their actions.

Adults cannot punish the child for their actions. It is important to listen to them, provide support, and consider whether they themselves are contributing to the stressful situation in any way. Adolescents need to feel that we are not only concerned about their current injury, but that we are interested in them as a „whole"; it is important to take an interest in the various aspects of the child's experience. (Ferková, 2015)

Prevention in schools and the role of the school support team

In agreement with Emmerová (2018), we note that there are various programmes and projects aimed at preventing drug addiction, bullying and crime that are implemented in schools. However, little attention is paid to the prevention of self-harm. Narrowly specialised prevention of self-harm is problematic in schools. It is inappropriate to provide information about self-harm (e.g. its forms and methods); it is necessary to increase pupils' self-esteem, encourage the expression of emotions, prevent bullying and violence in the school environment, and communication based on mutual trust is also important. It is more effective to teach pupils to manage their emotions and stress in an appropriate manner and to teach them how to cope with stressful situations.

As Kriegelová (2008) points out, no official tool has yet been developed for diagnosing deliberate self-harm.

If a teacher or member of the school support team notices that a pupil is self-harming, it is necessary to respond with caution. It is crucial to realise that self-harming behaviour can be a cry for help or a way of drawing attention to oneself. When talking to the pupil, they should try to remain calm and avoid hysteria. The aim is to assess the situation by asking direct questions and trying to find the reasons for their behaviour.

Self-harming individuals fear the reaction of those around them and, above all, do not trust them. According to M. Kriegelová (2008), common reasons include fear of stigmatisation, embarrassment, shame, the belief that no one and nothing can help them, difficulty trusting

others, previous negative experiences, fear of breaking family rules, and a general lack of information about the issue. When contacting a professional, a large proportion of adolescents expect to be „labelled", talked down to, have the problem trivialised and receive a generally hostile attitude. They fear that they will be forced to talk about something they would rather forget and that this will deepen their mental instability (Ferková, 2015).

Teachers should not underestimate the situation; they should seek help from the school support team, who will refer them to a specialist, psychologist or psychiatrist. The psychologist should assess the problem adequately or refer it to a child psychiatrist, who will choose the appropriate treatment, most often psychotherapy, pharmacological treatment, or, depending on the severity, hospitalisation and subsequent treatment in hospital (Ferková, 2015).

We are aware that teachers in particular often do not know how to deal with a student in the event of self-harm. They are not sufficiently prepared and informed about such problems. Our education system almost completely lacks educational programmes aimed at the prevention and intervention of self-harm for teaching and professional staff.

Teachers should be able to distinguish between suicidal behaviour and self-harm, know its forms and the basic causes that lead to such behaviour. It is very important that all school staff are familiar with the risk factors and warning signs. With this approach, it is important to keep in mind that:

- pupils can self-harm at any age, including younger children;
- children from different family backgrounds self-harm;
- both girls and boys are prone to self-harm;
- future suicidal behaviour by self-harming children cannot be ruled out.

Responding appropriately in such a crisis situation is challenging even for experienced professionals.

Conclusion

This paper highlighted the urgency of addressing the phenomenon of deliberate self-harm in adolescents, emphasising its importance for both professionals and the general public. Given that forecasts do not indicate a decline in the incidence of this behaviour, it is imperative to focus on comprehensive, research-based approaches. , the solution must include not only raising awareness of the aetiology and functions of self-harming behaviour, but also improving diagnostic procedures and expanding the therapeutic arsenal.

A key pillar is the implementation of effective strategic prevention in the school environment. This requires systematic training of teaching and professional staff on the issue of self-harm. It is also necessary to develop and implement preventive programmes that focus on strengthening self-confidence and developing adaptive coping strategies for managing stress. Only such an integrated approach, combining theory with practice in schools, can bring long-term and sustainable results in promoting the mental health of adolescents.

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BULLYING AS AN OLD-NEW PHENOMENON IN SCHOOLS – A THEORETICAL REFLECTION

ŠIKANOVANIE AKO STARONOVÝ FENOMÉN V ŠKOLÁCH – TEORETICKÁ REFLEXIA

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Abstract

Bullying is a long-standing problem in schools which adversely affects pupils' psychological and social development. This article presents a review study in which the authors analyse the results of research on bullying over the last ten years. They focus on key findings regarding the forms, mechanisms, and consequences of bullying and formulate recommendations for pedagogical practice. The paper emphasises the importance of addressing this issue given its topicality and the serious consequences that bullying has on victims, aggressors, and the entire school community. The aim is to promote a systematic and evidence-based approach to prevention and intervention in the school environment.

Keywords: bullying, school, prevention, intervention, psychological development, social development, review study

Abstrakt

Šikanovanie je dlhodobo pretrvávajúcim problémom školského prostredia, ktorý negatívne ovplyvňuje psychický a sociálny vývoj žiakov. Príspevok predstavuje prehľadovú štúdiu, v ktorej autorky analyzujú výsledky výskumov zameraných na šikanovanie za posledných desať rokov. Zameriavajú sa na kľúčové poznatky týkajúce sa foriem, mechanizmov a dôsledkov šikanovania a zároveň formulujú odporúčania pre pedagogickú prax. Práca zdôrazňuje dôležitosť riešenia tejto problematiky vzhľadom na jej aktuálnosť a závažné následky, ktoré šikanovanie spôsobuje obetiam, agresorom a celej školskej komunite. Cieľom je podporiť systematický a dôkazmi podložený prístup k prevencii a intervencii v školskom prostredí.

Kľúčové slová: šikanovanie, škola, prevencia, intervencia, psychický vývoj, sociálny vývoj, prehľadová štúdia

Introduction

Aggression has been an extremely topical social and professional issue in recent years. Statistical data show an annual increase in the number of juvenile offenders at the global level, with a growing trend also observed in individual regions of the Slovak Republic (Mihályová, 2022). Research conducted in 2022 showed that up to 45% of Slovak adolescents had experienced bullying, with more than a quarter of them becoming direct victims of physical or verbal violence, including cyberbullying. With the growing importance of digital technologies and the intensive use of social networks, bullying is gradually shifting and intensifying to the online environment, making this phenomenon even more complex and challenging to prevent and intervene in (Božík, Kopányiová & Smiková, 2022).

The authors' research findings point to a significantly worrying level of aggressive behaviour among primary and secondary school pupils. A survey conducted between October 2022 and March 2023 on a sample of 384 teachers revealed that aggressive behaviour occurs with high regularity in the school environment—it was reported weekly by 23.7% of respondents, monthly by 26%, and once a year by as many as 38.3%. Only 12% of teachers reported that they had not encountered aggressive behaviour among students (Emmerová, 2024). These results also confirm that student aggression is a relatively common phenomenon that tends to escalate into more serious forms of risk, particularly bullying and cyberbullying. According to research, these forms of behaviour occur weekly in 5.5% of cases (bullying) and in 2.9% of cases (cyberbullying) (Research Institute of Child Psychology and Pathopsychology, 2023).

According to Svoboda (2014), three basic forms of aggression can be distinguished:

a) Individual aggression. This type manifests itself in individuals who tend to provoke, repeatedly cause conflicts, and engage in verbal or physical confrontations with other members of the group. It is a manifestation of negative attitudes and behaviour towards specific individuals. Other members of the group do not usually respond actively to this type of aggression, and its repeated occurrence leads to the emergence of a tolerated stereotype within the group.

b) Group aggression is characterised by the entire group directing its aggressive behaviour toward one or more individuals. The victim is usually chosen based on specific, traceable reasons. This type of aggression is limited in duration (approximately three months), after which another member of the group becomes the target of the attacks.

c) Bullying is a specific form of aggression that manifests itself in pathological behaviour by an individual or group toward one specific member of the group, often a student. The term comes from the French word chicane, which means malicious

harassment. A typical feature of bullying is its repetitive nature with elements of aggression, manipulation, and asymmetry of power between the bully and the victim. It is therefore a systematic, unbalanced power relationship in which the victim faces repeated attacks, insults, intimidation, blackmail, or physical and psychological pressure. Bullying can be verbal, physical, psychological, or emotional. When aggressors use electronic means of communication (e-mail, text messages, social networks) for this purpose, we refer to it as cyberbullying.

The issue of bullying has been systematically studied in Slovakia by several authors, such as Janková (2020, 2023), who analysed the attitudes of prevention coordinators and students towards bullying and cyberbullying, Pétiová (2021), who focused on the experiences of primary and secondary school students, and Holdoš, Izrael, Almašiová, and Kohútová (2022), who monitored children's experiences during the pandemic. Sejčová (2019) also pointed to the issue of violence in schools, while Pašková, Stehlíková, and Valihorová (2018) examined maladaptive behaviour among younger school-age students.

Research into bullying has a long tradition in foreign literature. Olweus (1993, 2010) is one of the pioneers of systematic research into this phenomenon and the creator of the well-known OBPP prevention programme. Espelage and Swearer (2010) emphasised the importance of the socio-ecological model, which interprets bullying as the result of the interaction of individual, peer, school, and social factors. Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, and Lattanner (2014) focused on cyberbullying and its psychological consequences, confirming a substantial overlap with traditional bullying. The longitudinal research by Ttofi and Farrington (2011) also made a significant contribution by demonstrating the effectiveness of school prevention programmes.

Methodology

The review study aimed to collect and analyse relevant studies and reports focusing on bullying of children and youth in the school environment of the Slovak Republic in the period 2015–2025. The review covered scientific and professional articles, university research, and national statistical or research projects (e.g. HBSC, PISA) published in Slovak or containing Slovak data. The studies were selected based on the keywords "bullying", "children", "youth", and "school".

The following criteria were defined for inclusion in the review: (1) time criterion – publications and research from 2015–2025; (2) thematic criterion – texts had to directly address bullying, its forms, occurrence, and prevention; (3) language criterion – published in Slovak or containing a Slovak sample; (4) type criterion – quantitative, qualitative and mixed studies, expert reports and national projects were included; (5) availability – studies had to be available in digital form with a clearly defined methodology, sample and research tools;

(6) relevance and quality – texts had to provide systematic data on the research sample, methods used, main results and recommendations for practice.

The selection of studies was carried out using the Google Scholar database and the official websites of relevant institutions. Based on a systematic search, approximately 50 potential sources were identified, of which 12 key studies and reports were included in the overview after applying the above criteria.

Each source included was analysed in terms of the nature of the research sample (age, gender, type of school, region), sample size, and methods used (quantitative questionnaires, statistical analyses, qualitative interviews, and case studies). The issue of bullying was then assessed, including its various forms, frequency of occurrence, differences according to age, gender or type of school, as well as ways of dealing with situations and preventive measures. The analysis also included recommendations for practice and intervention, which made it possible to identify gaps in research and areas requiring further attention.

Table 1 Overview of the studies analysed

Year	Study authors	Title of the study
2018	Lucia Pašková, Jana Stehlíková, Marta Valihorová	Risky behaviour of younger school-age children from the perspective of primary school teachers
2018	HBSC Slovakia (WHO & HBSC team SR)	Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study: Slovakia national report 2017/2018
2019	OECD PISA – Slovakia	PISA 2018 Results (Volume III) – What school life means for students' lives
2019	Ľuboslava Sejčová	Violence and bullying at school and its prevention
2019/2020	State School Inspectorate	Thematic report: Prevention and resolution of bullying in schools 2019/2020
2020	Mária Janková	Prevention and resolution of bullying and cyberbullying in primary and secondary schools from the perspective of prevention coordinators
2021	Marianna Pétiová	Opinions and experiences of primary and secondary school pupils with bullying and cyberbullying
2022	Juraj Holdoš, Pavel Izrael, Angela Almašiová, Katarína Kohútová	The experiences and behaviour of children and young people in Slovakia during the pandemic – Bullying and cyberbullying
2023	Mária Janková	Bullying and cyberbullying in primary and secondary schools
2023/2024	State School Inspectorate	Thematic report: Prevention and resolution of bullying in schools 2023/2024

Results

A detailed overview of selected studies, including authors, year of research, number of respondents, description of the research tool used, and study results, is provided in Table 2.

Table 2 Overview and focus of the studies

Year	Authors / Institution	Research sample	Research tools	Results	Recommendations
2018	Lucia Pašková, Jana Stehlíková, Marta Valihorová, UMB	N=316	Questionnaire	Teachers most often perceived maladaptive behaviour, with boys scoring higher than girls. Significant gender differences were found in most categories of risk behaviour.	Strengthen the presence of specialists in schools (psychologist, special educator, educational counselor, teaching assistant, therapeutic educator, social educator).
2018	HBSC Slovakia (WHO & HBSC team SR)	N≈10 000 pupils (aged 11, 13, and 15)	International standardised HBSC questionnaire	8–10% of pupils reported being bullied twice or more per month; a similar proportion admitted to bullying others themselves. Higher incidence among 11-year-olds, boys more physically, girls verbally and socially. The trend has declined slightly since 2013/14.	Strengthen age-appropriate prevention programmes, focusing on younger grades; combine prevention of physical and social bullying, involve peers.
2019	Ľuboslava Sejčová	Not specified	Interviews	The author presents the results of research on violence and bullying in schools.	Implement bullying prevention directly in the school environment.
2019	OECD PISA – Slovakia	15-year old pupils (N≈6 000)	Questionnaire PISA	20% of girls and 21% of boys are bullied several times a month; a decrease compared to 2018. The most common forms of bullying are gossip, ridicule, and name-calling.	As part of school policy, work specifically on the classroom climate, strengthen the role of teachers as facilitators, and strengthen peer programmes.

2019/ 2020	State School Inspectorate	Primary and secondary schools (N not specified, nationwide collection)	Questionnaire, school reports	14.5% of pupils reported that they had been victims of bullying in the last 3 months. Most often in the classroom, in the corridors, during breaks.	Intensify supervision in the corridors, support teachers in dealing with bullying, systematic prevention.
2020	Mária Janková, CVTI SR	N=553	Questionnaire	Most schools dealt with bullying (more often primary schools than secondary schools). Differences according to school type and place of residence.	Set a fixed time in the timetable for preventive programmes; strengthen schools by providing them with a social pedagogue.
2021	Marianna Pétiová, CVTI SR	N=2 194	Questionnaire	The victims of bullying are mainly girls, grammar school pupils, and pupils from large cities. The aggressors are more often boys. Primary school pupils sought help from their parents, secondary school pupils from their friends, or did not tell anyone.	Teachers and parents should provide information about possible solutions, reject violence, and promote prevention.
2022	Juraj Holdoš, Pavel Izrael, Angela Almašiová, Katarína Kohútová, KU	N=232 (aged 6-18, 50 % boys; 103 in the clinical group)	Questionnaire (bližšie nešpecifi-kované)	26% of children and young people (aged 9–17) have experienced bullying. Most often face to face. 29% of victims do not tell anyone about it.	Monitor the incidence, pay attention to silent victims, and strengthen face-to-face prevention.
2023	Mária Janková, CVTI SR	N=2 397	Questionnaire	45% of pupils have not experienced bullying. The most common manifestations are vulgar insults, irony, and ridicule. The incidence is related to classroom relationships and the teacher‘s approach.	Cooperate with the school psychologist, monitor the climate, ensure supervision during breaks.
2023/ 2024	State School Inspectorate	Primary and secondary schools (nationwide collection)	Questionnaire	17.2% of pupils reported that they had been victims of bullying. Some pupils do not tell anyone about it.	Systematic monitoring, strengthen prevention programmes, training for teachers.

Discussion

Research from Slovak schools confirms that bullying remains a significant problem, manifesting itself mainly in verbal attacks, irony, and ridicule. Janková (2020, 2023) found that most primary schools encountered this problem in the 2019/2020 school year. The classroom climate and teachers' attitudes play an important role in this, which corresponds to the international findings of the HBSC study also conducted on a sample of Slovak students (Inchley et al., 2020; WHO, 2022), which point to a stable incidence of traditional bullying among approximately 10-11% of pupils, while cyberbullying is on the rise. Similar findings are reported by the EU Kids Online project (Šmahel et al., 2020), which showed that approximately one in ten children has experienced cyberbullying, with prevalence varying between countries.

Slovak studies also show significant gender differences – boys are predominantly the aggressors and girls the victims, with adolescents in grammar schools and larger cities encountering bullying more frequently (Pétiová, 2021). Similarly, Pašková, Stehlíková, and Valihorová (2018) drew attention to the maladaptive behaviour of younger school-age children and emphasised the need for systematic support from professional staff in schools.

Special attention should be paid to the so-called "silent victims" who do not confide their experiences of violence to anyone. Holdoš, Izrael, Almašiová, and Kohútová (2022) found that up to 29% of bullying victims did not tell anyone about their experiences. A similar phenomenon is confirmed by foreign studies (Hinduja & Patchin, 2018), which show that the willingness to talk about bullying is closely linked to trust in adults and the existence of clear school procedures.

The differences between primary and secondary school students are apparent. Primary school students are more likely to seek support from their parents. In contrast, older secondary school students often try to deal with the situation themselves or do not confide in anyone (Pétiová, 2021). This trend is important to understand in the context of the socio-ecological model (Espelage & Swearer, 2010), which emphasises the interaction between the family, school, and the broader social environment. Slovak data show that the quality of relationships between classmates, the classroom climate, and teachers' attitudes significantly influence whether and how students deal with bullying.

Foreign meta-analyses also point to an overlap between traditional and cyberbullying, with involvement in one form increasing the likelihood of the other (Kowalski et al., 2014; Nixon, 2014). The consequences of both forms are associated with increased levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms and a decline in school performance, which Slovak schools confirm in their cases (Janková, 2020, 2023).

In terms of interventions, school-wide programmes that include rules, work on the classroom climate, and parental involvement are considered the most effective. The most frequently cited is the Olweus Bullying Prevention Programme (Olweus & Limber, 2010), which has repeatedly demonstrated its effectiveness in reducing traditional forms of bullying. Meta-analyses (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011) show that programmes based on multi-level intervention are more effective than isolated activities, which is in line with the recommendations of Slovak authors – for example, Janková (2020, 2023), who emphasises the need for regular time for prevention and strengthening the professional team in schools, or Pašková et al. (2018), who recommend the presence of a school psychologist, special educator, and teaching assistant.

Conclusion

An analysis of available Slovak empirical studies confirms that bullying and cyberbullying continue to be a current phenomenon in primary and secondary schools. Empirical findings point to a high prevalence of verbal forms of aggression (insults, irony, ridicule). However, specific risk groups have also been identified, including girls, older high school students, and respondents from urban environments. It is particularly worrying that a significant proportion of victims do not report their experiences, which reduces the possibility of early intervention and adequate support.

The determinants of bullying are multifactorial. The results emphasise the role of the classroom and school climate, the quality of peer relationships, and the pedagogical approach, with gender and developmental characteristics representing additional modifying variables. These findings are consistent with foreign literature, which interprets bullying within a socio-ecological model, and confirm the need to address the issue simultaneously at the level of the individual, peer group, school, and broader social environment.

In terms of application implications, it seems crucial to institutionalise preventive programmes directly into the educational process, ensure that schools are staffed with professionals (school psychologists, special and social educators), and systematically monitor social dynamics in school communities. Cooperation with families and counselling facilities also plays an important role, as does implementing digital prevention measures that reflect the specific characteristics of cyberspace.

A comprehensive, multi-level, and evidence-based approach to prevention and intervention is therefore a prerequisite for reducing the incidence of bullying and creating a safe school environment that supports the psychosocial development of students and minimises the risks associated with violent behaviour.

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MONITORING OF BULLYING VICTIMS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

MONITORING OBETÍ ŠIKANOVANIA V ZÁKLADNÝCH ŠKOLÁCH

Mário Dulovics (Slovak Republic)

Abstract

The aim of this paper is a theoretical-empirical analysis of the specifics of bullying, with an emphasis on pupils in the position of victims. In this paper, we present a partial analysis of the results from a nationwide research study focused on monitoring bullying in the school environment. The research was conducted through an electronic questionnaire between December 2024 and June 2025. The scale measuring student victimisation was self-constructed and was part of a broader questionnaire. The research sample consists of 390 pupils at the second level of primary school from the Bratislava and Trnava regions. Within the research sample, we identified 67 pupils (17.2%) as victims. Of this number, 50 pupils (74.6%) also experienced marginalisation in their class, and seven pupils (10.5%) reported daily fears of being physically or verbally harmed.

Keywords: bullying, school, victim, prevention.

Abstrakt

Cieľom príspevku je teoreticko-empirická analýza špecifík šikanovania s dôrazom na žiakov v pozícii obete. V príspevku predkladáme analýzu čiastkových výsledkov celoslovenského výskumu zameraného na monitoring šikanovania v školskom prostredí. Výskum prebiehal prostredníctvom elektronického dotazníka v období od decembra 2024 do júna 2025. Škála merajúca viktimizáciu žiakov je vlastnej konštrukcie a bola súčasťou širšie koncipovaného dotazníka. Výskumný súbor tvorí 390 žiakov druhého stupňa základných škôl z Bratislavského a Trnavského kraja. Vo výskumnom súbore žiakov sme identifikovali 67 (17,2%) žiakov v pozícii obete. Z uvedeného počtu 50 (74,6%) žiakov zároveň zažilo vo svojej triede marginalizáciu a 8 (11,9%) žiakov sa denne obáva, že im bude fyzicky, alebo verbálne ublížené.

Kľúčové slová: šikanovanie, škola, obeť, prevencia.

Introduction

Bullying is a persistent form of pathological behaviour in the school environment. Based on a comparison of research conducted by the Slovak Center for Scientific and Technical Information (CVTI) in 2005, 2009, 2014, 2020, and 2022, Janková (2023) reports that from 2005 to 2022, the number of students who were victims of bullying increased by 12% and, compared to the 2009 study, by as much as 20%.

The increasing brutality, violence, and aggression in schools is the reason why the issue of bullying is constantly the subject of interest among the general public, experts in educational practice, and decision-makers. The fact that bullying occurs in all age groups contributes to the seriousness of this phenomenon. Its consequences for the victim, but often also for the aggressor, can be dire. The multifactorial aetiology of bullying in the form of family pathology, disturbed peer relationships, frustration, personal problems, mental disorders of the aggressor, etc., ranks it among the most serious social and educational problems in educational practice faced by teachers and professional staff in schools, parents, and also the students themselves.

Bullying is also a multidimensional phenomenon which, given the specific characteristics of those involved, is often linked to other forms of threat and risky behaviour, such as delinquency, intolerance, xenophobia, truancy, self-harm, and suicidal behaviour. This interconnection multiplies its severity and points to the need for a comprehensive approach to its prevention and resolution. For this reason, all stakeholders are striving to find the most effective prevention options and effective ways to address bullying in educational practice.

1 Theoretical reflection on bullying in the school environment with an emphasis on victims

Bullying harms the physical and mental health of children and adolescents who are victims and seriously disrupts social relationships and the school classroom climate. Ballarin et al. (2023) state that victimisation through bullying is a process in which an individual is regularly exposed to intentional negative behaviour by peers over time. Emmerová (2024) describes bullying as an extreme form of aggressive behaviour in which the victim is defenceless for some reason. In an international context, authors define bullying based on the characteristics described by Olweus et al. (1993), who state that bullying is a form of aggression committed by a child/student that is characterised by three key features: the goal is to hurt another person; it is repeated; and it involves an imbalance of power or a disproportionate use of force. These characteristics of bullying are accepted worldwide.

Although certain specific characteristics distinguish typical victims of bullying in the school

environment in the professional literature, under certain circumstances, virtually anyone can become a victim (Hroncová et al., 2020; Hoferková et al., 2017; Říčan, 1995; and others). *Guideline No. 1/2025 on the prevention and resolution of bullying of children and pupils in schools and school facilities* states that: "the reason for bullying is mainly a specific characteristic of the victim, usually consisting of a health disadvantage, gender, religious denomination or belief, nationality or ethnic group, sexual orientation or gender identity, language, social, societal or financial status of their family, or other personal characteristics usually associated with wearing glasses, being overweight or having low physical literacy".

Hroncová et al. (2020) further state that: "The victim of bullying is usually a child who has not learned to be assertive enough to protect themselves. Victims are usually more anxious, insecure, cautious, and sensitive than normal children. They tend to have stronger bonds with their parents, which may be due to an overly protective parenting style". Sejčová (2021) shares a similar view, according to which the victim is a person (student) who shows their fear, withdrawal, and shyness the most and is usually the weakest in the group. The author adds that "... victims tend to be hard-working students, students with specific disabilities, such as glasses, overweight, braces, or learning disabilities such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, dysorthography, and others. New classmates who join the class are also often victims. Those who seek solitude, do not participate in class life, the so-called loners, also become victims.

From the perspective of the victims of bullying, it is an extremely hurtful and traumatic experience that can affect them for many years (Johansson et al., 2022). Students who are bullied often feel isolated, misunderstood, and abandoned, which can lead to a loss of self-confidence, poor school performance, anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, and even suicide attempts. Hanuliaková et al. (2016) report that, according to expert estimates, 20 to 25 per cent of children in Slovakia experience bullying by their classmates at school. Emmerová (2019) points out in this context that "... the increase in aggressive behaviour among students is currently becoming a severe problem. Such behaviour is becoming increasingly bold and, unfortunately, more brutal, and can escalate into bullying.

2 Research methods and characteristics of the research sample

A questionnaire focused on monitoring and analysing various aspects of bullying among students in the school environment was used to collect empirical data. For this paper, we analyse partial results of the research obtained using a scale of our own design focused on monitoring victims of bullying. It is a 5-point Likert scale. The points on the scale are formulated as follows: 1 – never; 2 – rarely; 3 – sometimes; 4 – often; 5 – very often.

The scale consists of 11 items that measure individual forms of bullying:

- direct physical forms of bullying (fighting, pushing);
- direct verbal forms of bullying (name-calling, insults, ridicule);
- indirect physical forms of bullying (the aggressor sends another student to hurt the victim);
- indirect verbal forms of bullying (gossiping, spreading lies, verbal insults);
- indirect social forms of bullying (social exclusion, ostracism).

We determined the reliability of the scale using Cronbach's alpha, which has a value of $\alpha = 0.764$. The scale was supplemented with closed questions focused on students' fears of being hurt by someone and their experiences with social exclusion.

The questionnaire was created using Google Drive and distributed to schools electronically between December 2024 and June 2025. We used descriptive statistics (relative frequency, absolute frequency, and arithmetic mean) and inferential data analysis methods (Mann-Whitney U test, Kruskal-Wallis test, and Pearson Chi-Square test) to evaluate the data. We chose non-parametric tests because the data in the research sample did not have a normal distribution. We determined the normality of the distribution of the research sample based on skewness and kurtosis values and also based on a visual assessment of the histogram.

The research sample consists of 390 primary school pupils from the Bratislava (n=276 / 70.8%) and Trnava (n=114 / 29.2%) regions. Of these, 200 (51.3%) were boys and 190 (48.7%) were girls. The average age of respondents is 12.5 years. Respondents were selected for the research sample at random. A more detailed description of the research sample is presented in Table T1.

T1 Characteristics of the research sample

Demographic characteristics of the research sample	N	%
Gender		
Boys	200	51.3
Girls	190	48.7
Average age	12.5	
School year		
5	115	29.5
6	110	28.2

7	97	24.9
8	44	11.3
9	24	6.1

3 Results and discussion

When identifying victims of bullying in the research sample, we used two indicators to filter the respondents. The first indicator was the average AM score of 1.7, which the students achieved on a scale designed to monitor victims of bullying (which determines repeated contact with bullying). This score was achieved by 126 (32.3%) students in the research sample. We then analysed the second indicator in this group of students, which concerned the negative psychological experiences of students related to school (tension, anger, sadness, fear, and the like). Based on these indicators, we identified 67 (17.2%) pupils in the research sample who were victims and met both criteria. The structure of victims by gender and grade is presented in Table T2.

T2 Structure of bullying victims based on gender and school year

School year	Boys		Girls		Total	
	n	%	n	%	N	%
5	7	23.3	10	27.0	17	25.4
6	6	20.0	8	21.6	14	20.9
7	12	40.0	12	32.4	24	35.8
8	2	6.7	6	16.2	8	11.9
9	3	10.0	1	2.7	4	6.0
Total	30	44.8	37	55.2	67	100

In the research sample, we identified more girls (n=37 / 55.2%) than boys (n=30 / 44.8%) as victims. The highest number of victims among girls (n=12 / 32.4%) and also among boys (n=12 / 40.0%) was in Year 7. Overall, the lowest number of victims (n=4 / 6.0%) was recorded in Year 9 grade. For comparison, we present the results of empirical research conducted at the end of 2022 (Dulovics et al., 2023). Although the research focused on cyberbullying, it should be noted that both phenomena are closely related and are known to often overlap in school practice. In the research sample of secondary school students (N = 2768), a slightly different structure of cyberbullying victims was identified in terms of the year they attended. The highest number of victims was recorded in Year 8 (108 / 33.5%), and the second highest number of victims was recorded among Year 7 students (93 / 28.9%). In both empirical studies, Year 7 appears to be at risk in terms of victimisation of students.

In terms of the number of victims by gender, in the 2022 study, we recorded a higher number of victims among boys (166/51.6%) than girls (156/48.5%) (Dulovics et al., 2023).

Volchegorskaya et al. (2019) identified 9.76% of pupils in a research sample of 376 primary school pupils aged 10 to 11 as victims, which means that one in ten pupils had experienced bullying. Compared to our research, this is a significantly lower prevalence. Based on our findings, every sixth pupil (17.2%) was a victim of bullying. The authors also found a difference in prevalence by gender. They identified a higher incidence of victims among boys (10.3%) than among girls (9.2%).

Subsequently, we focused our research on identifying significant differences in terms of gender and grade level among victims of bullying. The findings are presented in Tables T3 and T4.

T3 Inference analysis of differences in student victimisation in terms of gender

Gender	n	U	Z	p
Boys	30	533.500	-0.272	0.786
Girls	37			

Using the Mann-Whitney U test, we did not find a statistically significant difference between victims of bullying in terms of gender (p=0.786). Hanani and Piskin (2020) used a questionnaire method to investigate the prevalence of victims of bullying in secondary schools. They found that students scored significantly differently by gender on the scale used. It is necessary to emphasise specific differences in the evaluation of data with the compared research. The authors used a different procedure to identify significant differences, based on the raw scores achieved by respondents on the scale. They worked with the entire research sample, while in our case, we worked only with a part of the research sample, with students whom we identified as victims.

T4 Inferential analysis of differences in student victimisation in terms of school years attended

School year	N	H (K-W)	df	p
5	17	4.200	4	0.380
6	14			
7	24			
8	8			
9	4			

We used the Kruskal-Wallis test to identify significant differences between victims of bullying in terms of school year. In this case, we also did not find any significant differences between students (p=0.380).

We were also interested in how often students who found themselves in the role of victims experienced fears that someone might hurt them in class or at school. In this case, students had the opportunity to express their subjective opinion on a five-point scale (1-never to 5-every day). The findings are presented in T5.

T5 Victims' concerns about their safety at school in terms of gender and year attended

Gender	AM	Never	Very little	Sometimes	Often	Every day
		n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
Boys	3.2	3 (10.0)	7 (23.3)	6 (20.0)	9 (30.0)	5 (16.7)
Girls	2.7	9 (24.3)	7 (18.9)	10 (27.0)	8 (21.6)	3 (8.1)
School year						
5	3.2	2 (11.8)	3 (17.7)	2 (11.8)	9 (52.9)	1 (5.9)
6	3.1	2 (14.3)	3 (21.4)	2 (14.3)	5 (35.7)	2 (14.3)
7	2.8	4 (16.7)	6 (25.0)	8 (33.3)	3 (12.5)	3 (12.5)
8	2.8	3 (37.5)	0	3 (37.5)	0	2 (25.0)
9	2.0	1 (25.0)	2 (50.0)	1 (25.0)	0	0

We found that 11.9% of pupils in the victim position are afraid for their safety and fear on a daily basis that their classmates will physically or verbally harm them. Boys scored higher on this item of the questionnaire (AM=3.2) than girls (AM=2.7).

Although we found the highest number of victims among Year 7 pupils, it is surprising that this group of pupils did not express significant concerns about their safety in the school environment (AM=2.8). The highest level of concern about their safety and fear of physical or verbal attack was recorded among victims in Year 5 (AM=3.2) and Year 6 (AM=3.1).

The last area we will focus on in relation to victims of bullying is their experience of social exclusion, as the initial phase of bullying, in particular, but also its further course, is often associated with ostracism.

T6 Victims' experiences of social exclusion in class in terms of gender and school year attended

School year	Boys				Girls				Total			
	Yes		No		Yes		No		Yes		No	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	N	%	N	%
5	7	100.0	0	0	8	80.0	2	20.0	15	88.2	2	11.8
6	5	83.3	1	16.7	6	75.0	2	25.0	11	78.6	3	21.4
7	9	75.0	3	25.0	8	66.7	4	33.3	17	70.8	7	29.2
8	2	100.0	0	0	3	50.0	3	50.0	5	62.5	3	37.5
9	1	33.3	2	66.7	1	100.0	0	0	2	50.0	2	50.0
Total	24	80.0	6	20.0	26	70.3	11	29.7	50	74.6	17	25.4

Overall, almost 75% of victims experienced social exclusion by their classmates. Boys (24/80.0%) had more frequent experiences of social exclusion than girls (26/70.3%). The number of pupils who were marginalised in the class decreased in direct proportion to the school year, which may be related to the complex adaptation of some pupils when transferring to the second stage of primary school, when they may often experience a feeling of not being accepted into the group.

At the level of inferential analysis, we investigated the relationship between gender and social exclusion, as well as between the year attended and social exclusion. The findings are presented in Tables T7 and T8.

T7 Inference indicator of the mutual relationship between gender and victims' experience of social exclusion

Gender	n	χ^2	df	p
Boys	30	0.828	2	0.363
Girls	37			

T8 Inference indicator of the mutual relationship between the year attended and the victims' experience of social exclusion

School year and experience with social exclusion	N	χ^2	df	p
	67	3.863	4	0.425

Using the Chi-square test of independence, no significant relationship was found between the gender of victims and their experience of social exclusion in class/school (p=0.363). Similarly, we did not find a significant relationship between the year attended and the experience of pupils who are victims of social exclusion (p=0.425).

Conclusion

The results of the empirical research presented confirm the topicality and seriousness of the problem of bullying in schools in Slovakia. Although these are only partial results of a broader research study, they already indicate a relatively high prevalence of bullying victims among pupils. Scientific research into educational reality is of great importance in this context, not only because it provides insight into the current situation and expands scientific knowledge with new contexts, but also because it provides valuable information for school practice.

School practice and scientific research to date confirm that achieving absolute safety in schools is unfortunately unrealistic. However, this fact does not detract from the importance of prevention and appropriate intervention by teachers, school psychologists, social pedagogues, and other professionals. On the contrary, this fact confirms how imperative it is to work with children and young people and to pay attention to the prevention and elimination of risks that arise in the school environment and are a by-product of group dynamics.

The persistent presence of bullying in schools, which is often linked to other forms of risky behaviour, therefore requires systematic and effective preventive measures. The importance of early identification of victims and the provision of targeted support is key to mitigating the negative consequences of bullying and improving the overall school climate.

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ICT USE AMONG PRESCHOOLERS IN A DISADVANTAGED SMALL TOWN IN EASTERN HUNGARY

VYUŽITÍ INFORMAČNÍCH A KOMUNIKAČNÍCH TECHNOLOGIÍ MEZI PŘEDŠKOLNÍMI DĚTMI V ZNEVÝHODNĚNÉM MALÉM MĚSTĚ VE VÝCHODNÍM MAĎARSKU

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Abstract

The evolution of information and communication technologies, though relatively recent, has profoundly transformed numerous dimensions of contemporary life. The digital era's pervasive influence is particularly evident in the everyday experiences of children, who are exposed to and engage with ICT devices from an early age. This study seeks to investigate the digital device usage patterns of preschool-aged children and their developmental implications within a socioeconomically disadvantaged small settlement in Eastern Hungary. To achieve this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents (N2=15) and kindergarten educators (N1=6) responsible for the care and education of these children. The findings indicate that nearly all families in the examined community have access to ICT devices—most frequently smartphones, televisions, and tablets. Children predominantly utilize these devices for recreational purposes, such as viewing cartoons, videos, and listening to music, typically averaging around one hour of screen time on weekdays and longer durations on weekends. Both parents and educators reported perceiving behavioral and cognitive consequences associated with device use, including heightened aggression, impatience, and difficulties in maintaining attention.

Keywords: preschool children; information and communication technologies; digital devices; social disadvantage; child development

Abstrakt

Vývoj informačních a komunikačních technologií, ačkoliv poměrně nedávný, zásadně proměnil mnohé oblasti současného života. Vliv digitální éry je obzvláště patrný v každodenním životě dětí, které se s ICT zařízeními setkávají a aktivně je využívají již od raného věku. Tato studie si klade za cíl prozkoumat vzorce používání digitálních zařízení u dětí předškolního věku

a jejich vývojové dopady v sociálně znevýhodněné malé obci ve východním Maďarsku. Za tímto účelem byly provedeny polostrukturované rozhovory s rodiči (N2 = 15) a učitelkami mateřských škol (N1 = 6), které se podílejí na péči a vzdělávání těchto dětí. Výsledky ukazují, že téměř všechny rodiny v dané komunitě mají přístup k ICT zařízením – nejčastěji se jedná o chytré telefony, televizory a tablety. Děti tato zařízení využívají převážně k rekreačním účelům, jako je sledování pohádek, videí a poslech hudby, přičemž průměrná doba strávená u obrazovky činí přibližně jednu hodinu ve všední dny a delší čas o víkendech. Rodiče i učitelky shodně uvádějí, že používání těchto zařízení má dopad na chování a kognitivní schopnosti dětí – zejména se jedná o zvýšenou agresivitu, netrpělivost a problémy s udržením pozornosti.

Klíčová slova: předškolní děti; informační a komunikační technologie; digitální zařízení; sociální znevýhodnění; vývoj dítěte

Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, digital devices are spreading so rapidly that research cannot keep up with their impact or assess their harms and benefits (Zóka, 2019). As a result, the use of information and communication technologies is coming into focus, and special attention is being paid to examining the effects of digital devices in different areas (Hódi et al., 2019; B. Németh et al., 2021; Kóczán, 2021).

Digital transformation is not a matter of choice, but an unavoidable phenomenon for which everyone must be prepared, as the skills of the last century are not sufficient to meet the challenges of the 21st century (Digital Wellbeing Programme, 2016). However, developing healthy habits in the use of mass communication tools requires a great deal of attention from the environment. In the case of children, in addition to the usual parameters of ICT use (device, content, screen time), an important factor is the context of ICT use, i.e. the situations in which they interact with digital technology. The use of digital devices must therefore be taken into account in child-rearing (Hódi et al., 2019; 2022). The vulnerability of the 3-7 age group is increasing even within the family, due to the digital devices present in children‘s lives and the content of unknown origin available through them (Digital Wellbeing Programme, 2016).

The aim of our research is to explore the digital device usage habits of preschool children and the effects of this on their development in a disadvantaged small town in eastern Hungary. Kindergartens play a very important role in underdeveloped small settlements, where teachers serve as intellectual role models in the lives of disadvantaged families. Nowadays, internet penetration is almost complete in Hungary (I2), and information and communication technology devices (hereinafter: ICT devices) are also available in disadvantaged families (Galán, 2019; 2021). Our aim is to examine how these devices appear in the lives of preschool

children, whether they use them, what they use them for, how long they use them, and how their parents control this activity. In addition, we explore what changes and effects preschool teachers observe in children's behaviour that they attribute to ICT devices.

To this end, we conducted a qualitative study involving parents of preschool-aged children (N2= 15) and preschool teachers working with children (N1=6) at a local preschool in a disadvantaged community in the Fehérgyarmat district.

Children's content consumption

At the beginning of the 21st century, the virtual cultural shift brought about by the Internet changed our world (Castells, 2004; Gyarmathy, 2012), our family life, our habits, and the process and settings of socialisation. This world is now very different from the one in which previous generations lived (Prensky, 2001; McRindle & Wolfinger, 2014). The biggest difference is that the everyday use of ICT devices has now appeared at almost every level of society. There is hardly an adult who does not have at least one or two digital devices, so children are also part of the digital world from birth (Koscsóné & Kiss, 2020; Uzsalyné, 2020; Tóth, 2022).

The spread of information and communication technology is also evident in early childhood, with younger and younger children interacting with and using various digital devices (B. Németh et al., 2021). The spread of digital technology is proportional to the increase in screen time, as the more it becomes part of our everyday lives, the more it merges with our habits and actions (Molnár, 2023). Mass media play a prominent role in the lives of individuals and families.

Parents play a key gatekeeping role in their children's use of digital devices, as they are the first mediators and their children imitate their habits and preferences (Brito & Dias, 2021). Children's use of ICT devices is fundamentally shaped by how their parents use the online environment and various platforms. If parents are conscious of their presence in the digital world, they can use their knowledge to shape their children's online environment. Parental role modelling is just as valid as in any other area of life (NAIH, 2018; Szakács, 2022). The most influential factors in digital education are: parents' educational attainment, behavioural patterns, attitudes towards digital education, and their views on the early use of touchscreens (Tari, 2019).

According to Tóth (2022), it is beneficial for children to be introduced to the digital world by an adult, parent or other family member during their preschool years. It is recommended to do this as part of a weekly rather than a daily routine. If it is a daily routine, it should not exceed half an hour a day, but it is important that parents explore the digital world with their

children, accompanied by more and more conversations about what they are seeing. They need to be helped to process and interpret what they see, so the use of online content requires serious attention. In the near future, greater emphasis will need to be placed on teaching safe internet use in early childhood. The fact that children cannot yet read or write does not reduce the potential dangers, as they can easily click on dangerous links or pop-up windows and advertisements, which often contain inappropriate or disturbing content. It is essential for adults who come into contact with this age group to be aware of the opportunities and dangers that preschool children may encounter when using the internet (Janek, 2019).

The effects of using ICT devices

Parents who participated in a foreign study (Brito & Dias, 2021) do not view their children's use of digital devices as negative. Many believe that ICT devices play an important role in their children's professional future, as they are a source of learning. Negative views are generally found among experts, who highlight the risks to which young children are exposed. Parents of younger children often do not see any danger in the use of devices because their children are not yet active users of social media. Parents of preschoolers are mainly concerned about their children's health, as they become overly excited or tired as a result of prolonged use of smart devices (B. Németh et al., 2021). The more ICT devices children become familiar with, the more likely they are to become occasional or regular users of these devices (Fáyné et al., 2016), which also poses risks, as it can easily take time away from physical activity, in addition to the possibility of developing an addiction (Vekerdy, 2013; Bartha & Kovács, 2019; Uzsalyné, 2020), which plays a particularly important role in children's healthy physical and mental development.

In kindergarten, children are driven by a desire to learn about the world, and one of their most important activities is free play (Uzsalyné, 2020). This is when the neural connections that prepare and mature children's brains for learning are formed, and the best way to promote their school readiness is to let them play outdoors. This is why exercise is essential for children, as it supplies oxygen to the brain, which can then work at a higher speed (Miklya Luzsányi, 2019). Vekerdy (2013) believes that children need four to five hours of running, climbing trees and jumping every day for certain brain pathways to develop properly. Therefore, it is necessary to find a happy medium that allows time for exercise and play, but does not hinder the development of information and communication skills. He also emphasises that parents should limit the use of gadgets so that young children learn to be users of these devices rather than being dominated by them.

Bartha and Kovács (2019) point out that although machines make life easier, they also make people inactive, and instead of active physical and mental participation, the current generation

is characterised by passive experiences (Gyarmathy, 2012). According to guidelines issued by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2019), children under the age of five should spend less time in front of screens, be provided with better quality sleep, and spend more time playing actively if they are to grow up healthy.

Concerns of professionals involved in child-rearing

The positive role of digital devices in early childhood education is seen in their use in the early years of kindergarten education and their role in later learning, skill development and attitude formation (Fáyné et al., 2016). Another advantage is that the use of ICT tools allows children to perform a variety of interactive, creative and skill-building tasks that are more interesting, colourful and appealing to today‘s children.

The research results of Gados and Janek (2023) show that digital education and digital compensation may be necessary even in early childhood, when various digital tools and methods are used to improve the learning experience and compensate for the shortcomings of traditional forms of learning.

In order for the digital education of preschoolers to be effective, it is essential to provide ongoing training for teachers and to consciously integrate technological tools into the educational process. Digital tools give preschool teachers access to a wide range of information sources, interactive games, teaching materials and online learning platforms. Through gamification, or playful learning, these tools not only facilitate the acquisition of knowledge but also develop children‘s digital competences (Csépe & Török 2020).

However, a 2018 foreign study shows that preschoolers who used smart devices exhibited more behavioural difficulties (e.g., behavioural and emotional problems, hyperactivity, attention deficit) after one year than those who did not use them. The results of the study indicate that there is a correlation between preschoolers‘ use of electronic media and their behavioural difficulties. These devices overstimulate the developing brain with a huge amount of stimuli, distracting them from the social and physical activities necessary at this age and encouraging them to use more devices in a self-perpetuating cycle (Poulain et al., 2018).

According to another study on the behaviour of preschoolers (Nagy György, 2021), when children play with something new to them or engage in an activity that is more interesting to them, they are able to pay attention for longer periods of time. Since the display of a phone, tablet or television is constantly changing, they are able to pay attention to it for longer periods of time. The study also examined the mood of the children before, during and after using ICT devices. The majority of children experienced excitement, but there were also bored, fussy, calm and

restless preschoolers who flitted between games and were unable to really occupy themselves. Depending on the activity the children were engaged in (playing, listening to stories, listening to music), various mood changes and effects were observed, such as cheerfulness, exclusion of the outside world, impatience, concentration, agitation and nervousness. The results of the research confirm that there was a change in the mood of the observed children on every occasion. Most of the children who were in a less positive mood finished using the device in a positive mood. However, those children who did not have a successful experience while using the device became irritable and tense. A higher percentage of preschoolers who received the device in a positive mood ended up in a negative mood. In the case of negative mood changes in children, aggressive behaviour and fear were observed after viewing certain content. The strongest effect of media violence on children is imitative behaviour, and the second most important effect is terror and fear (Nagy György, 2021). In those cases, the children became sad when they were asked to stop using the digital devices.

According to Gyarmathy (2012), multimedia devices used on a daily basis also have an impact on the way information is processed. Today's children and young people, who are digital natives (Prensky, 2001), can handle large amounts of stimuli without difficulty, quickly learn how to use devices and are able to perform multiple activities at the same time. However, more and more people are expressing concern about the next generation (Lénárd, 2015; Tari, 2019; Zóka, 2019), as all information is easily accessible and there is almost no need to memorise it, which is why their memory and attention span are rapidly deteriorating. Today's children grow up with all information at their fingertips, so there is no need to burden their brains with knowledge (Gyarmathy, 2012).

The changes induced by the digital age are clearly observable in children's activities. Compared to previous generations, children are much more capable of divided attention, which reflects their ability to multitask, but this does not necessarily mean that this divided attention enables deep thinking. We must also take into account information impatience, the phenomenon whereby children who are accustomed to a rapid and lively flow of information feel a kind of impatience when information does not arrive at the speed and intensity they expect (Lénárd, 2015). Hungary's Digital Education Strategy also describes how the vulnerability of 3-7-year-olds within the family is increasing due to the digital devices appearing in children's lives and the content of unknown origin available through them (Digital Wellbeing Programme, 2016).

Excessive digital presence can negatively affect children's social skills and development. In early childhood, it is particularly important for children to experience real interactions, which have an impact on the maturation and development of the brain (Csépe & Török 2020; Gados & Janek 2023). Digital devices given too early flood the fundamental processes of the developing nervous system and emotional apparatus with a quantity of stimuli that it is not yet mature enough to handle (Tari, 2023).

A negative effect is the appearance of various physical symptoms after using ICT devices, such as headaches, back pain, fatigue, dry eyes, text neck[1] , obesity and neglect of physical activity, as well as problems that affect demonstrable changes in children's native language and social development (Tari, 2019; Hódi et al., 2019; Nagy György, 2021). Gyarmathy (2012) also emphasises that digital culture has an impact on children's mental development and skills. The educational system's toolkit, based on the distant past, is insufficient to meet the challenges of the modern age.

For kindergarten teachers, the digital and online presence of kindergarteners can pose many challenges and fears. It can be difficult to find a balance between digital education and traditional, play-oriented learning. Preschool teachers have varying levels of digital knowledge and experience. Some teachers are confident in using technology, while others may not feel comfortable using digital tools, which can limit creative learning opportunities.

Smart devices cannot replace the forms of learning that arise from interpersonal situations, but alongside traditional methods, it is possible to explore and exploit the possibilities and advantages of the increasingly ‚smart' devices offered by the digital world together with children (Horváth & Komáromíné 2019). However, this requires the training and further education of preschool teachers in this area so that they can make the most effective use of the opportunities offered by smart devices and the internet in their educational work (Rausch & Pásztor 2021).

Methods

The aim of the study is to show what kind of digital environment surrounds preschool-aged children, what devices they use, what kind of digital content they consume, and how much time they spend in front of screens. We also explore the regulatory methods and strategies used by parents in the family environment and the extent to which smart devices are used as rewards or punishments.

It is important to note that the scope of the research does not allow conclusions to be drawn about the entire preschool population; the results revealed during the study are only characteristic of the preschool that will be presented later.

The target group of the research is preschool-aged children from a disadvantaged village in the Fehérgyarmat district of Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county. The village has a population of less than 2,000, with a high unemployment rate and few job opportunities. The largest employer is the local government, and many people work in the public works programme. Most of the population supplements their income with income from agricultural activities,

1 Deformity of the cervical spine caused by poor posture.

and some cultivate their land on family farms or as agricultural entrepreneurs.

The kindergarten operates with three groups, with a maximum capacity of 90 children, of which 73 places were filled at the time of the research. Six kindergarten teachers (including one head teacher), three kindergarten nurses and one teaching assistant carried out the educational tasks.

All of the kindergarten teachers working at the institution (see Table 1) were interviewed. Based on age composition, the average age was 50, so with one exception (who was 35), middle-aged kindergarten teachers participated in the research. Four of the six subjects had a higher education degree, while two had completed vocational secondary school. Three kindergarten teachers have several decades of experience in their field, one of them is about to retire, and the least experienced interviewees have three and six years of work experience, respectively.

Table 1.

Demographic data of kindergarten teachers

No.	sex	age	educational qualification	time spent on the field (years)
kindergarten 1.	woman	46	higher education; special education teacher, social pedagogue, kindergarten teacher	28
kindergarten 2.	woman	35	higher education; kindergarten teacher	6
kindergarten 3.	woman	58	higher education; Hungarian folklorist, kindergarten teacher	27
kindergarten 4.	woman	55	vocational high school: kindergarten teacher	38
kindergarten 5.	woman	52	higher education; nemzetiségi óvodapedagógus	10
kindergarten 6.	woman	46	vocational high school: kindergarten teacher	3

With the help of kindergarten teachers, we contacted the parents involved in the research, who were selected using a simple random method. Their demographic indicators are shown in Table 2. The interviewees are raising a total of thirty children. Ten female and five male parents participated in the interviews. Their ages range from 20 to 44, thus the opinions and experiences of both very young and middle-aged parents are represented in the research. Of the 15 subjects, two have a primary school education, one has completed ten years of

schooling, two have a vocational qualification, four have a secondary school education, and six are university graduates.

Table 2

Demographic data of the 15 parents surveyed

No.	sex	age	educational qualification	number of children
parent 1.	woman	31	university	2
parent 2.	woman	37	high school	1
parent 3.	woman	44	college	3
parent 4.	woman	38	college	1
parent 5.	man	33	elementary school	4
parent 6.	man	23	vocational school	1
parent 7.	woman	36	college	3
parent 8.	man	22	high school	2
parent 9.	woman	23	high school	3
parent 10.	woman	26	college	1
parent 11.	man	41	10th grade	3
parent 12.	woman	30	vocational school	2
parent 13.	woman	28	university	1
parent 14.	man	20	elementary school	1
parent 15.	woman	34	high school	2

In the research, we assessed the use of digital devices by preschool children through semi-structured interviews with their preschool teachers (N1=6) and parents (N2=15).

Data collection took place between August and December 2023 at pre-arranged times. The interviews lasted an average of 30-40 minutes and were recorded with a dictaphone.

The interview outline consisted of four dimensions: technical equipment, purpose and duration of device use, ICT knowledge of kindergarten teachers, and experiences with children. With regard to technical equipment, we asked questions about both the technological environment in the kindergarten and at home, asking kindergarten teachers about the former

and parents about the latter. In relation to the purpose and duration of device use, we asked kindergarten teachers and parents about their experiences with children‘s device use. When examining kindergarten teachers‘ ICT knowledge, we looked at what digital competences they have and what their attitude is towards the use of ICT devices. In the last dimension, we examine whether there is any noticeable change in children‘s behaviour in relation to the use of various digital devices. In this context, we also look at the regulatory methods and strategies used by parents in the family environment and how common it is to reward or punish children with smart devices.

The scope of this study does not allow for the presentation of all dimensions of the investigation, so we will focus on the technical apparatus, the purpose and duration of device use, and experiences related to children. The interviews were recorded based on the audio material produced and then processed manually.

Research results

The results obtained from the responses of parents and preschool teachers are presented in subchapters along the dimensions outlined above. Due to the limited scope of the study, it is not possible to examine all four dimensions, so in the following we will focus on the technical apparatus, the purpose and duration of device use, and experiences with children from the perspective of preschool teachers and parents.

Children‘s devices at home

With regard to the households of the parents who participated in the research, it can be stated that all of them have a television and a smartphone. Preschool-aged children living in these households do not have their own devices. The interviews also revealed that there are several smartphones in the family, not only do the parents have mobile phones, but the older children do too. Similar to the findings of Koscsóné and Kiss (2020), the results of the present study also show that smartphones are the most common digital devices in homes, even in disadvantaged households (Galán, 2019; 2021).

Based on the responses received from parents, children are most often surrounded by touchscreen phones, televisions and tablets in their family environment. In the respondents‘ homes, these are followed by laptops and PlayStation game consoles.

It can be observed that families with higher levels of parental education and where laptops are also used as work tools are more likely to have computers . „*We have two at home, we*

bought another one during Covid, and I still use it a lot for work" (parent 7).

In the case of disadvantaged communities, the question arises as to how families in difficult financial situations can access various digital devices. It can be said that in most cases they borrow from each other and in many cases they buy used devices rather than new ones. Not everyone can afford to buy a new phone, but when they do, they opt for prepaid cards rather than subscriptions, using the devices until their credit runs out. People from the village regularly commute to the capital for work, typically in the construction industry. This group can afford to buy new devices, and when it is time to replace them, the older devices are given to relatives. In the village, it is possible to connect to a wireless network, Wi-Fi, at the local council building and near the library. It is also typical that internet access is provided in these public places. „*My brother works in Germany, and he usually brings home all kinds of things, like microwaves, furniture and stuff. , he brought the GTA*[2] too" (parent 5). *"Well, I couldn't do what xy did here in the village. He cheated everyone, brought phones from Gyarmat for free, saying you could get them for free and pay later, in two or three months, I don't know. But he didn't buy them in his own name, he always tricks everyone here, he uses the phones, and then when it's time to pay, he doesn't need them anymore, (...), he hasn't had any trouble with it yet* (parent 11).

In the following, we present the results obtained on the usage habits of preschool children with regard to ICT devices.

Purpose and duration of device use

As mentioned earlier, research shows that daily device use is not typical in this age group (Hódi et al., 2019), However, parents' responses indicated that the content consumed varies widely, including watching cartoons, listening to songs, playing games, taking photos, keeping in touch, but also calming and soothing the child. These are described below, supplemented by parents' responses.

Based on the parents' responses, most children watch cartoons, videos and films on television or mobile devices. „*She mostly watches Elsa, she's going through that phase right now, she's always singing the songs and jumping and dancing*" (parent 10). „*I try to make sure that she doesn't watch too much, which often depends on her little brother, but when she does watch videos, I make sure that the content is child-friendly, such as stories about animals or counting. We like Tompetit, things* like that" (parent 15).

They listen to songs and nursery rhymes in similar proportions, usually accessed through the YouTube video sharing portal. Half of the households with tablets (5) mentioned that

2 GTA – Grand Theft Auto video game. Players must complete various missions while playing the role of armed criminals.

they try to develop their children with game applications and online colouring and drawing tasks. „*He likes to play when he has to collect fruit and put it in the* basket“ (parent 8).

The results also show that taking and viewing pictures on mobile phones is a common activity in the lives of preschoolers. „*When she sees me taking photos, she poses, then immediately wants to see them and asks me to take more. Sometimes, days later, she remembers to ask me to show her the photo of her wearing the hat she got, but she likes looking at photos anyway“ (*parent 1). „*He‘s very clever, he notices everything. Even when the phone is locked, he figured out that if he swipes his finger from the corner, he can take a picture. When he does that, he‘s very proud of himself and smiles because he knows he can do it*“ (parent 4).

For some families, keeping in touch via digital devices is almost a daily activity. „*...it‘s good that we can talk to distant relatives for free. I think if we didn‘t have this option, we wouldn‘t keep in touch as much, at least not as often if* it cost money“ (parent 5). „*...we always video chat with mum, (...) we usually call each other on Viber and everyone is happy to see each other. I consider this an advantage*“ (parent 7).

Almost two-thirds of respondents (9 people) said they use the phone as a tool to calm their child down and keep them occupied. „*...he has a younger sibling who is still quite dependent on me, and there have been times when I‘ve given him the phone so that I can look after the little one*“ (parent 15). „*Sometimes I can see that he is bored, but for some reason I can‘t deal with him at that moment, so I offer him a cartoon to watch while I finish what I‘m doing“* (parent 13). This confirms the earlier statement that various digital devices are used as “babysitters” to keep children occupied (Tóth, 2022). *“I am raising my little girl on my own, and sometimes I have to sit down to work in the evening, and at times like that, I see the best solution as letting her watch a cartoon next to me while I work”* (parent 2).

One-third of the interviewees (5 people) believe that the use of digital devices is a good opportunity for learning and development. They see the reason for this in the fact that children can learn colours, numbers and letters while watching cartoons and learning nursery rhymes, and that a well-chosen programme can also help them learn foreign languages. The findings of B. Németh et al. (2021) also show that parents typically see the beneficial effects of ICT devices in terms of knowledge acquisition, development and learning opportunities.

Three-quarters of parents (12 people) reported that, compared to weekdays, digital devices are used more often to entertain children at weekends and that they can spend more time in the company of mass media devices. „*They get my phone for about two hours, but this time is made up of 15-20 minute intervals. (...) If they stay home because they are sick, this changes because they watch more TV then*“ (parent 13). „*When we go on longer car trips, they usually watch cartoons in the back, but xy can‘t because he always feels nauseous when he focuses on one point, and he can‘t even flip through a book because he feels sick*“ (parent 3). Two parents

feel that there is no difference, and only one noted that device use is lower on weekends due to shared family activities.

Only one of the parents surveyed said that they try to keep their child away from mass media devices as long as possible. *„I don‘t think it‘s right and I don‘t see the point in giving my phone to my child. It really annoys me when I see babies watching cartoons in their prams, or when we go out to eat and I see a mobile phone propped up on the table with the child sitting in front of it with their mouth open“ (*parent 10).

Several respondents (10 people) reported that they leave the television on as background noise, even though no one is watching it. *“He watches the cartoon, then suddenly changes his mind and runs out of the room because he just remembered a game he wants to play (...) I don’t usually turn it off because then the house is so* quiet” (parent 6). *“It’s not typical for us to have cartoons on day and night. We usually watch the news, but of course they can see things there that aren‘t good for them (...) we can‘t do anything about the adverts, if there are songs, they even sing* along“ (parent 12). The above examples confirm what has already been described in the aforementioned research, namely that content broadcast on television can also pose a threat, as children can easily encounter content that is inappropriate for their age and that may be harmful or frightening (NMHH, 2018).

It can be said that the proportion of children who spent less than an hour in front of the screen (7 children) and those who spent one to two hours a day (7 children) was the same. In one case, the parent said that they allowed their child to spend more than two hours a day in front of the screen.

It is important to note that the responses received suggest that the several hours of device use do not occur at once, but rather consist of 10-20 minute periods spent in front of the screen that add up. Furthermore, it is not common for these periods to occur every day, as children may not use the devices at all during the day due to other activities. *„A few minutes in the morning before leaving, then a little in the afternoon, to* play“ (parent 4). *„Most of the time he watches YouTube on the TV, (...) you could say every day, but sometimes we‘re not at home and then he doesn‘t watch anything at all*“ (parent 7). *„A little story time, a little play, but it‘s not typical for him to spend hours just* playing games“ (parent 2). According to research by the Alpha Generation Laboratory at the Department of Ethology at ELTE, children are becoming familiar with digital devices at an increasingly early age and, as they get older, they are spending more and more time in their company (Konok et al., 2020).

Overall, it can be said that in the lives of the families surveyed, not only adults but also preschool-aged children use ICT devices on a daily basis. In most cases, preschoolers do not use the devices to develop cognitive skills – taking into account the characteristics of their age group – but for entertainment and to pass the time.

Regulation of device use

From the responses received from parents, it can be concluded that in most cases (11) parents set time limits for their children's use of digital devices. „*I don't let them use the phone for more than 10-15 minutes, (...) sometimes I say that the battery is running low, they need to put it on charge and they have to stop now*" (parent 15). „*They get the tablet for about 20-30 minutes, (...) sometimes in the afternoon and evening as well"* (parent 13). This result coincides with the findings of a domestic survey (Farkas et al., 2021), according to which parents mostly try to regulate device use by setting time limits.

Based on the results presented earlier regarding the content consumption of preschool children, it can be said that they most often watch stories and videos, listen to songs and nursery rhymes, look at pictures, and some use educational games. Based on the interviews, more than half of the parents (9 people) do not have sufficient information about the various content filtering software programmes; in their opinion, it is enough for them to check what applications their children are using. Shared internet use increases the likelihood that children will use the internet for useful purposes, but additional software-based protection is also necessary to ward off negative effects and reduce potential dangers (Mihalik et al., 2014).

The majority of parents (12) feel that they constantly supervise their children when they are using smart devices. However, the interviews reveal that children are given devices in situations where circumstances do not allow for constant monitoring by parents. Three-quarters of respondents (11 people) give their children a phone or sit them in front of the television while they do household chores (cooking, cleaning). Overall, the combined use of programmes and parental presence provides the most benefits and the greatest protection (Mihalik et al., 2014).

An analysis of parents' statements shows that digital devices are used in children's lives for both reward and punishment. Most often, they are used as a means of punishment (10), but sometimes ICT devices are used for both punishment and reward (3). „*I told him that if he put his toys back in their place, he could play on the tablet, but all he heard was that he could play on the tablet. He started playing, and I told him to tidy up first, (...) but even after three warnings, he didn't do it, so I took it away from him and he didn't get it* back" (parent 13). "*He didn't want to take his medicine because it was bitter and tasted bad, (...) but he immediately became as good as gold when I told him he could watch a cartoon before bedtime if he took* it" (parent 1). *"I just take it away if they don't agree (...) when there is shouting and they hit each other, I don't like that"* (parent 11). In the case of punishment, it is typical that restriction or deprivation is the result of bad behaviour or a lack of tidiness.

It is important to note that there were no cases among the responses where parents only rewarded their children with the devices, and in some cases, use was subject to certain

conditions. *„...I usually say that he can play with it if he eats his lunch*“ (parent 2).

In the following, we analyse possible changes in children‘s behaviour that can be attributed to the use of ICT devices.

Changes in children‘s behaviour as a result of device use

The proliferation of digital devices means that new problems arise every day that need to be addressed. These include various educational issues and the relationship between parents and their children in relation to ICT devices (Molnár, 2023).

Based on parents‘ reports and the experiences of kindergarten teachers, it can be concluded that children‘s moods change, either positively or negatively, when using devices.

Numerous opinions were expressed in which the use of gadgets resulted in positive behaviour and mood changes. *„He said he was bored, let him watch a cartoon, (...) when I allowed him, he jumped for joy and* cheered“ (parent 2). *„He concentrates so hard (...) and calls out: Mum, look, I did it! He was very happy“* (parent 3). *„He was watching these funny videos, he really liked them, his mood improved a lot (...) what can I do, at least he wasn‘t thinking about being* sick“ (parent 14).

However, some parents (6) expressed concern about the undesirable, negative effects of digital devices that permeate everyday life. *„...I think it was better before, when I was little, we were outside all day, playing around, playing football, not tapping away on our phones“ (*parent 11). *„It really annoys me when I talk to him and he doesn‘t even look up*“ (parent 13). *„The others have already said that my child won‘t even talk to me soon, once he starts school (...) I can see what he does when I take it away from him, and I always promise myself that I won‘t give it back, because that‘s what he did, but he gets it anyway, because he begs for it“* (parent 5).

During interviews with parents, addiction was identified as the most dangerous factor. Impatience and inattention were mentioned several times (10 people) in relation to children‘s behaviour. *„...sometimes he shouts if I don‘t give him my phone“* (parent 1). “*There have been times when he was so engrossed in watching TV that even though I called him, he didn’t pay attention to me for a long* time” (parent 3). *“Well, the little one doesn’t really play, he watches what the others are doing, if they’re playing GTA, then he plays that, if they’re playing something else, then he* plays that” (parent 5). According to the research results of B. Németh and colleagues (2021), parents see the risks of using digital devices in undesirable behaviour, addiction, and aggressive, violent behaviour.

Most parents (9) set limits after observing the negative consequences of phone use. In many

cases (9), they mention that it is difficult to control their children's content consumption and minimise screen time, as restricting these things provokes resistance, anger and tantrums. *„I don't usually check whether what they are watching is suitable for the little one. There are three of them, and the older ones decide what to watch on TV when they are there (...) They don't usually watch it because they are busy playing on their phones, but it annoys them when there are cartoons on*" (parent 11). *"There have been times when he has shouted and thrown such a tantrum in front of others that I didn't know what to buy him, so I just gave him my phone to shut him up" (*parent 6). In this case, the findings of Koscsóné and Kiss (2020) are confirmed, according to which ICT technology is woven into the everyday lives of children, determines many aspects of their lives, and in their sadness, boredom or loneliness, the use of a smart device increasingly provides them with comfort. Meanwhile, parents hand over the devices without any real knowledge or preparation, sometimes even without their child asking for it. Children need their siblings, grandparents and real relationships. If these interpersonal relationships are missing from their lives, their desire for experience, exploration and reassurance will be linked to a device (Uzsalyné, 2020).

Analysing the parents' responses, it can be concluded that in most cases, children react negatively when they have to stop using their smart devices. *„He curls up or sits on the tablet so that I can't take it away*" (parent 3). However, it should be noted that in these cases, there are a number of factors that influence how children react when their gadget use is interrupted. For example, the circumstances under which the device was being used, how long the child had been using it, or the child's emotional state at the time. *"He hid the remote control under the blanket, but he didn't realise that there was a small power button at the bottom of the TV (...) There was a lot of shouting and kicking, but I knew he was very sleepy"* (parent 7).

According to the parents, they do not use digital devices to put their children to sleep, but the interviews reveal that many preschoolers are allowed to use smart devices before bedtime. In this regard, we would like to highlight the findings of B. Németh and colleagues (2020) on device use before bedtime. According to this, there may be a link between the light emitted by the device and the increasingly common sleep disorders among young children. The WHO, which publishes its guidelines based on the results of multiple studies and the opinions of experts from numerous countries, has made a recommendation that children should not be in front of a screen for an hour before bedtime, as this impairs the quality of sleep (I1).

Some parents (6) also mentioned that they feel guilty about trying to replace their personal presence in their child's life with gadgets. *„I often feel bad about it, I know I let them watch a lot of TV, they're constantly watching videos on YouTube, but they understand that mum has to cook*" (parent 12). *"We come home from work, from kindergarten, from school, wherever, and the first thing they do is flop down on the sofa and turn on the TV. I feel that they are tired from the daily noise and bustle, so let them have a little fun (...) I usually feel guilty when I look at the*

*clock and realise that it's already evening and I've been busy doing things while the children are still watching TV" (*parent 3). It is not typical among the respondents to watch cartoons with their children or to be with them while they use smart devices, as they are busy with other activities during that time. B. Németh and colleagues (2021) stated that parents often feel anxious and feel that the use of ICT devices serves their own interests rather than the needs of their children.

There is a correlation between the responses received from parents mentioned above and the experiences described by kindergarten teachers, as all of them mentioned impatience and aggression in relation to children during the interviews. „*Today's children are much more impatient, and some of them are also aggressive*" (kindergarten teacher 4). Several teachers ( ) noted that „*children's imagination is poor*" (kindergarten teacher 2), „*they have no* imagination" (kindergarten teacher 5), „*they cannot draw or colour and do not really want* to" (kindergarten teacher 3). As a result, they develop the proper pencil grip or cutlery grip, which is necessary for school readiness, later than they should. Fehérné and her colleagues (2018) also write about the effects of multimedia devices on development. In their study, they state that the use of digital devices distorts interactions between parents and children hinders cognitive and language development, and found that children who show delays in language development can be linked to the fact that they started watching television at an earlier age.

According to a kindergarten teacher with several decades of experience (kindergarten teacher 3), „*children start speaking later, talk less and have a poor vocabulary* „. The use of various digital devices is not conducive to interpersonal relationships, adversely affects children's socialisation, reduces personal communication and impoverishes their vocabulary (B. Németh et al., 2021).

They also mentioned that some children are inattentive when learning poems and rhymes and can only concentrate for a very short time. *„We are currently preparing for Santa Claus's arrival, and I line them up nicely so that we can recite the poem together, but less than five minutes have passed and someone is already asking when we will do something else, (...) xy is staring out of the window" (*kindergarten teacher 6). They have less need to play together and „cannot entertain themselves". One kindergarten teacher (kindergarten teacher 3) believes *that "parents need to be made aware that young children need more stimulation from the real world*". *"It is more difficult to keep them engaged during activities, (...) it is more difficult to arouse and maintain their interest with things that are not interactive, such as a light-up phone or a tablet"* (kindergarten teacher 2). Konok and his colleagues (2020) examined how mobile device use affects preschoolers' attention and social-cognitive skills. Research in this area shows that the use of ICT devices has a significant impact on the development of preschool-aged children.

Based on the responses of kindergarten teachers, it can be concluded that they mostly have negative experiences with the effects of the digital world on children. Several (3) reported that most of the kindergarteners are more tired, unfocused, and sometimes even violent. „*There are children who are so sleepy in the morning that it is impossible to do any meaningful work with them. We know for a fact that they are allowed to watch TV late into the evening, and when we ask the children, they tell us that they fell asleep in front of the TV*" (kindergarten teacher 1). *"You can see it in the child's movements, they are jerky, I can't even describe it, you can see that he is nervous, he imitates the games he plays, (...), he constantly plays fighting games"* (kindergarten teacher 3). "The *children pick up the language from . There is this Tomi cartoon, they use bad language in it, but the children love it"* (kindergarten teacher 6).

It has already been mentioned that parents sometimes try to distract children who are poor eaters during meals by using smart devices. Work experience gained in kindergartens also supports this observation. *"At lunch, they ask me to turn on the TV because that's how they eat at home, with cartoons playing"* (kindergarten teacher 1). „*Before eating, she put her toy phone on the table and pulled it with her little finger, imitating what she usually does at home*..." (kindergarten teacher 2). „*It's sad, but when children start nursery, they often have to unlearn old habits. It takes a few weeks for some children to get used to eating without their phones*" (kindergarten teacher 4).

Most kindergarten teachers (4) believe that smart devices have no place in kindergarten. *"I still think that developing gross motor skills or free play is much more important at this age. There is no place for digital devices in kindergarten (...) free play stimulates the imagination and fantasy, but often these are not available at home because children are sat in front of the television or given a phone to play with" (*kindergarten teacher 5). There is no established pattern of digital device use and content consumption among families with young children (Hódi et al., 2019; Konok et al., 2020; Farkas et al., 2021).

Two kindergarten teachers believe that digitalisation is an integral part of children's lives today and that it is important to develop safe use of devices within an appropriate framework at this early stage. „*...I consider it useful with well-chosen programmes and educational games (...) for older children, but not for younger ones (...) it can also be helpful in learning foreign languages*" (kindergarten teacher 6). Due to their own lack of competence, parents often do not use the internet to its full potential (Galán, 2019). The Digital Wellbeing Programme (2016) states that awareness is key when using ICT devices.

Summary

The rapid and continuous development of information and communication technologies knows no bounds. Digitalisation has permeated almost every area of life, and smart devices have become part of everyday life (Mihalik et al., 2014; Beták & Szabó-Váradi, 2023).

In everyday life, we encounter opinions and statements found in the research that children's use of digital devices at home is often considered an accepted, everyday activity, while the use of digital devices in kindergartens is viewed with controversy (Beták & Szabó-Váradi, 2023).

Digital devices are expected to play an increasingly important role in kindergarten education, as these devices will transform learning spaces and activities in the future (Rausch & Pásztor, 2021). Preschool teachers need to keep pace with technological innovations, which, when properly integrated into preschool classrooms, can open up new horizons for children.

The main objective of our research was to explore the digital device usage habits of preschool children, their effects, and any parental control that may be present. To this end, we conducted a qualitative study involving kindergarten teachers (N1=6) and parents of kindergarten children (N2=15) in a disadvantaged small town in eastern Hungary.

Based on the responses received, the majority of preschool children living in disadvantaged small towns grow up in households where all adults and older siblings have their own digital devices. The research showed that children are most often surrounded by touchscreen phones, televisions and tablets in their family environment.

The content consumption habits of the preschool children involved in the study show that they mostly watch stories and videos and listen to songs and nursery rhymes, i.e. they use various devices for entertainment and to pass the time. Parents most often try to keep their children occupied with smart devices while they carry out other activities. Compared to weekdays, children spend more time with mass media devices at the weekend. Parents most often limit the time preschoolers spend in front of a screen to less than an hour or one to two hours. The digital generation is strongly attached to ICT devices and content consumption, so based on the research, parents tend to use deprivation or restriction as a form of punishment.

When examining children's behaviour, respondents expressed concern about the undesirable, negative effects of digital devices that permeate everyday life, as both parents and kindergarten teachers have experienced these effects, including aggression, inattention and impatience.

It is clear that, in addition to traditional forms of learning about and understanding the world in early childhood, digital channels play a significant role in children's lives. Developing an appropriate digital culture for children is primarily the responsibility of parents. Kindergarten

teachers can only work with parents to make children's use of digital devices a conscious and meaningful activity. „*As parents and teachers, we must take this new phenomenon into account, because the use of technical devices is neither harmful nor useful in itself*" (Zóka, 2019, p. 159). It is important to set an example for children both at home and in an institutional setting.

The range of information and communication tools is constantly growing and evolving, which holds many opportunities and challenges for the future, including in kindergartens (Kovács, 2024; Molnár, 2024). The role of preschool teachers in developing and establishing digital skills is indispensable, which is why it is extremely important to continuously strengthen their preparedness, skills and digital competences in order to ensure effective education and development (Beták & Szabó-Váradi, 2023; Szőllősi, 2024). This is especially true in disadvantaged communities, where the work of teachers is not limited to educating children, but where they can also shape parents' digital awareness and play a role in raising awareness and providing support.

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PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION IN SCHOOLS – CURRENT POSSIBILITIES AND PERSPECTIVES

PREVENCIA A INTERVENCIA V ŠKOLÁCH – AKTUÁLNE MOŽNOSTI A PERSPEKTÍVY

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Abstract

The paper focuses on theoretical reflection on prevention and intervention in the school environment, taking into account current trends and approaches in this area. It analyses the importance of systematically addressing bullying and other social risks in schools, emphasising the need for coordinated measures at the school, family, and broader community levels. The study points to the need for preventive and intervention strategies in line with current legislation and changing social conditions. The study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of current options and highlight prospects for further development of practice.

Keywords: prevention, intervention, school, bullying, legislation, school programmes, social risks

Abstrakt

Príspevok sa zameriava na teoretickú reflexiu prevencie a intervencie v školskom prostredí so zreteľom na aktuálne trendy a prístupy v danej oblasti. Analyzuje význam systematického riešenia problematiky šikanovania a iných sociálnych rizík v školách, pričom zdôrazňuje nevyhnutnosť koordinovaných opatrení na úrovni školy, rodiny a širšej komunity. Štúdia poukazuje na potrebu preventívnych a intervenčných stratégií v súlade s platnou legislatívou a meniacimi sa spoločenskými podmienkami. Cieľom štúdie je poskytnúť komplexný prehľad súčasných možností a vyzdvihnúť perspektívy ďalšieho rozvoja praxe.

Kľúčové slová: prevencia, intervencia, škola, šikanovanie, legislatíva, školské programy, sociálne riziká

Introduction

Prevention and intervention in the school environment are an integral part of the current education system, and their importance is conditioned not only by the protection of pupils' mental health, but also by the promotion of social cohesion and the inclusive nature of schools (Križo & Krnáčová, 2020; Soroková, 2023). Schools are no longer seen exclusively as places for the transfer of knowledge, but as complex institutions that provide multidimensional support for children and their family environment (Reschová & Polášková, 2019). This shift requires the implementation of targeted prevention, systematic monitoring of risk factors, and professionally guided intervention procedures in crisis situations.

According to Špatenková (2011), effective crisis intervention must be based on clearly defined principles, from immediate response, through risk reduction and stabilisation, to an individualised approach that respects the subjective experience of the crisis. Prevention is of strategic importance because it minimises the likelihood of crises occurring and reduces their negative impact (Durlak et al., 2011; NASP, 2020). Postvention models developed by the Ontario Centre for Mental Health (2024) emphasise the need for a proactive, integrated, and interdisciplinary approach.

The Slovak context is undergoing a gradual transformation, which is reflected in the introduction of systemic solutions in the form of school support teams (SST) – multidisciplinary groups of experts working directly in schools, whose task is to implement preventive programmes, risk detection, acute intervention, and follow-up (Anyalaiová & Lednická et al., 2023; Križo & Krnáčová, 2020). Despite this shift, ensuring equal access to and quality of these services across regions, as well as systematic training of team members in line with current international standards, remains a challenge.

The prospects for further development of prevention and intervention in schools lie in linking proven international practices with local specificities and the legislative framework. The effective implementation of these strategies requires not only interdisciplinary cooperation between professionals, teachers, and families, but also adequate material and human resources (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019/2020; Shultz et al., 2016).

According to Kunčáková (2021), prevention in the school environment is implemented through preventive and educational activities and programmes, which are an important tool for reducing risky behaviour and supporting the positive psychosocial development of pupils. Preventive activities include one-off or short-term educational interventions aimed at raising pupils' awareness of risky behaviours and providing practical strategies for preventing them. This category includes, for example, lectures, discussions, awareness campaigns, courses, workshops, and training groups. These activities are time-limited, usually not exceeding three meetings with a specific group, and are designed with a clearly defined goal and content, while being methodologically adapted to the specific characteristics of the target group.

In the area of providing assistance and support in crisis situations involving children and pupils in educational institutions, a key role is played by professional staff who are competent to carry out crisis intervention. The status and activities of professional staff in schools are regulated by Act No. 138/2019 Coll. on pedagogical staff and professional staff, as amended (effective from January 1, 2025). According to Section 6(2) of this Act, the work of a professional employee includes:

a) psychological, speech therapy, social-pedagogical, therapeutic-pedagogical or special-pedagogical activities, including the re-education of children and pupils,

b) providing career and social counselling and prevention in the field of education and training,

c) performing specialised or managerial activities in a school or school facility.

According to Act No. 318/2019 Coll., professional staff working in schools who are also members of the school support team include:

- school psychologist,
- special education teacher,
- social pedagogue,
- career counsellor,
- school speech therapist,
- therapeutic pedagogue.

Professional school staff play a key role in assisting children and pupils in crisis situations and are authorised to carry out crisis intervention. Their activities are defined by Act No. 138/2019 Coll., which specifies the performance of psychological, pedagogical, and counselling work, as well as specialised and managerial activities. According to Act No. 318/2019 Z. z., the members of the school support team include a school psychologist, a special and social pedagogue, a career counsellor, a school speech therapist, and a therapeutic pedagogue.

According to Križ and Krnáčová (2020), the school support team (SST) is a multidisciplinary group of experts who work directly in the school environment and actively participate in shaping the school culture. Its activities focus not only on direct work with pupils, but also on supporting teachers, parents, and school management. An important element of the SST's work is the establishment of systematic processes that support prevention, intervention,

and the inclusive orientation of the school.

Križo and Krnáčová (2020) define the main functions of the school support team as follows:

- Searching for and identifying resources and risk factors among pupils, classes, and teaching staff.
- Providing comprehensive feedback (so-called 360° feedback), using sociometric tools, and evaluating the climate of the teaching staff.
- Counselling, support, and training for teachers and parents, as well as assistance to school management in fulfilling its vision and strategic direction.
- Implementation of preventive and screening programmes, such as art therapy or morning communication circles.
- Conflict mediation through non-violent communication and regular reflection with pupils.
- Targeted intervention, including re-education of learning disabilities (individual and group), supportive therapy, mentoring and supervision of teaching assistants, as well as support for class teachers.
- Active cooperation with counselling and prevention centres (CPC), including regular team meetings, intervision, supervision, and case conferences.

The school support team has a comprehensive and ongoing role in the crisis intervention process that goes beyond the acute response itself. It creates basic preventive mechanisms, prepares the school to cope with crises, actively participates in the intervention, and subsequently ensures the long-term stabilisation and adaptation of the school environment.

According to Soroková (2023), crisis intervention is a sensitive and targeted response by the school to a serious, acute crisis situation experienced by individuals in the school environment that they are unable to cope with or influence on their own. These are various unforeseen events or the escalation of a problem into a significant and non-standard conflict.

In the school environment, crisis intervention is implemented through the support measure "crisis intervention". In accordance with the Catalogue of Support Measures, its aim, pursuant to Section 145(2)(u), is to provide children and pupils with professional care focused on a specific period of their lives immediately after a crisis event.

The effective implementation of crisis intervention requires compliance with a set of principles that determine its quality and effectiveness. *Špatenková* (2011) identifies the following specific characteristics of crisis intervention:

a) immediate intervention – urgent provision of assistance immediately after the crisis situation arises,

b) minimisation of threat – providing emotional support and a sense of security to the affected individual,

c) focus on the current situation – primary focus of the intervention on the present state and a comprehensive understanding of the ongoing crisis,

d) time limitation – regular implementation at least once a week with a recommended range of six to ten meetings,

e) intensity of contact – frequency of meetings appropriate to the severity of the situation, from daily contact to weekly intervals,

f) structured, active and, if necessary, directive approach of the intervener,

g) individualised approach – respect for the subjective nature of the crisis experience and the variability of individuals' responses to identical stimuli.

Anyalaiová and Lednická et al. (2023) distinguish four phases of crisis intervention, which correspond to foreign models (Bellis et al., 2019; Szymanska, 2022; Center for Mental Health Ontario, 2024):

1.Prevention – creating and maintaining a safe and respectful school environment, systematic prevention of social and pathological phenomena, promoting the mental health of pupils, teaching and professional staff, implementing the principles of non-violent communication, continuous training of staff in crisis intervention, development and practical application of a crisis plan, as well as early detection of reactions to severe stress. Recommendations from the National PTA (Parents-Teachers Association) include, for example: open dialogue with children about their attitudes and feelings, clear formulation of rules and boundaries, recognition of warning signs of psychological stress, active intervention by parents in the event of inappropriate behaviour in the school environment, systematic communication between parents and teachers, and participation in violence prevention programmes in schools. Empirical findings show that with the active participation of all stakeholders, the incidence of violent behaviour in school communities can be reduced by up to 30%.

2. Preparation – a phase involving the mobilisation of the school's internal resources in the event of an impending or emerging crisis, clear definition of competences, tasks and

a timetable for activities, coordination of procedures with security and support authorities, and assignment of a specific employee to manage and organise the crisis intervention, including leading the crisis intervention team.

3. Intervention – the intervention phase is usually carried out within 48 to 72 hours after the crisis event, when pupils and teaching staff return to the school environment. In school conditions, crisis intervention is not usually carried out directly at the scene of the event or immediately during its course, but only after the situation has been partially stabilised and its safety aspects have been assessed.

At this stage, professional staff assess the extent and nature of the impact of the event on the school, the school community, individual pupils, and their legal guardians, and then mobilise internal and external support resources. Key intervention steps include:

- providing relevant information and consultations to all components of the school system,
- counselling and support activities for teaching and professional staff, as well as for pupils,
- stabilising the emotional and psychosocial state of individuals and groups,
- accompanying and supporting parents,
- implementation of specialised intervention methods (e.g. Critical Incident Stress Management – CISM, Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing – EMDR),
- creation of a safe and quiet space ("quiet room") equipped with means to promote emotional relaxation (e.g. soft toys, handkerchiefs, art supplies),
- managing chaos through the concepts of "circles of vulnerability and support",
- ensuring long-term care not only for those directly affected, but also for professional staff,
- planning follow-up support strategies.

The Slovak Crisis Centre (2023) recommends systematically assessing the severity of a psychological crisis during crisis intervention through the following steps:

- Assessment of symptoms – identification of manifestations such as anxiety, depression, or other psychological difficulties,

- Assessment of the frequency, duration, and intensity of symptoms,
- Evaluation of coping skills – analysis of how effectively the person can deal with the situation,
- Confrontation with the possible consequences of an unresolved crisis – e.g. deterioration of mental or physical health, increased risk of suicidal behaviour, or disruption of interpersonal relationships.
- It should be emphasised that assessing the severity of a crisis is a subjective process that is influenced by individual characteristics and circumstances. If a serious psychological crisis is suspected, it is essential to seek professional psychiatric help.

4. Postvention – the post-crisis phase represents a continuum of care after the end of direct crisis intervention and is essential for the restoration of mental stability and adaptation of those affected. The school support team (SST) monitors the experiences and adaptation mechanisms of children, pupils, and adults in the school environment for at least six months after the event.

Post-crisis activities aim to restore a sense of security and create space for the natural processing of grief. Various approaches are used during this phase, such as symbolic rituals, commemorating the anniversary of the event, expressive forms of emotional expression, visiting the affected family in the case of bereavement intervention, maintaining the normal school routine, and providing bereavement counselling.

In the context of postvention, it is crucial to be aware that, for example, after the suicide of a member of the school community, there may be an increased risk of further suicidal behaviour for up to two years. This requires the implementation of targeted and well-thought-out postvention strategies that reflect the specific characteristics and needs of the school in question. Effective postvention requires close cooperation between the school, parents and caregivers, community mental health centres, and other professional and social institutions.

Discussion

Prevention and intervention in the school environment are an integral part of the school's response to risky behaviour among pupils, and their importance is particularly evident in the issue of bullying and its potentially fatal consequences, including suicide risk. The Slovak context is gradually approaching international standards through the introduction

of school support teams (SST), which bring together psychologists, special and social educators, speech therapists, and career counsellors. The multidisciplinary nature of SST enables not only systematic prevention but also targeted intervention and follow-up (Križo & Krnáčová, 2020; Anyalaiová & Lednická et al., 2023). Its activities go beyond direct work with pupils and also integrate support for teachers, parents, and school management, creating a systemic support system in line with the principles of inclusive education (*Štefániková* & Lojová, 2021).

The importance of the SST can be seen in a continuous context, as its functions correspond to all phases of crisis intervention – from prevention, through preparation and intervention, to postvention. From a prevention perspective, the early identification of risk factors and the strengthening of protective mechanisms in pupils are of fundamental importance (Reschová & Polášková, 2019). International research confirms that systematic prevention programmes based on the development of social and emotional competencies and targeted work with the classroom climate can reduce the incidence of bullying by 20 to 30 per cent (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011; Olweus, 2010; Durlak et al., 2011). In the Slovak environment, methodologically refined programmes such as morning circles and artephiletics, which promote trust and open communication, have proven effective (Miková, 2018).

In the event of an acute crisis, intervention is carried out according to clearly defined principles, which include speed, structure, and an individualised approach (*Špatenková*, 2011). In the Slovak context, these principles are also reflected in the recommendations of the Slovak Help Centre (2023), which emphasise a combination of professional intervention techniques (CISM, EMDR) and the provision of psychological support in a safe school environment.

Postvention, which is often marginalised, is essential for the long-term stabilisation of the school environment. Empirical studies confirm that the absence of follow-up care can lead to a recurrence of risky behaviour or an increased risk of suicidality (Kalafat & Elias, 1994; Center for Mental Health Ontario, 2024). Therefore, Anyalaiová & Lednická et al. (2023) recommend systematic monitoring of the adaptation processes of affected pupils and teaching staff for at least six months after a crisis event.

Special attention should be paid to the link between bullying and suicidal behaviour. Several international studies (Holt et al., 2015; Arseneault, 2018) confirm that long-term victimisation significantly increases the risk of developing depressive symptoms and suicidal thoughts. School prevention and intervention programmes must therefore explicitly include a suicide risk management strategy, including screening mechanisms, procedures, and close cooperation with health and community services (Anyalaiová & Lednická et al., 2023).

The legislative framework in Slovakia provides professional staff with clearly defined competences through Act No. 138/2019 Z. z. and Act No. 318/2019 Z. z., which form the

basis for the systematic work of the SST. However, the implementation of these measures faces challenges related to staff availability, material resources, and the need for continuous supervision and further training of professional staff.

From the perspective of prevention and intervention in risky behaviour in schools, including bullying and its most serious consequences, the application of evidence-based, long-term, interdisciplinary approaches that are part of everyday school practice and linked to the community and healthcare systems is necessary. The above is the only way to ensure not only a reduction in the incidence of bullying, but also the protection of pupils' mental health and the prevention of suicide.

Conclusion

An analysis of prevention and intervention in schools showed that they play a key role in promoting mental health, developing social skills, and protecting pupils from risky behaviour and crisis situations. The results of the study confirm that effective prevention and intervention require a systematic, coordinated, and interdisciplinary approach that combines the professional competencies of the school support team, teachers, parents, and external professional institutions.

Slovak practice is gradually approaching international standards, in particular through the establishment of school support teams and the implementation of methodological procedures for crisis intervention. At the same time, however, challenges remain in relation to the uneven availability of these services, the need for continuous professional development of specialist staff, and the provision of adequate human and material resources.

The future direction of prevention and intervention in schools should be based on a combination of proven foreign models and domestic legislative and institutional specificities. Emphasis should be placed on:

- systematic collection and evaluation of data on the effectiveness of preventive and intervention measures,
- introducing innovative approaches that reflect the changing needs of children and young people,
- strengthening cooperation between schools, families and community resources,
- promoting mental health as a key component of the educational process.

A comprehensive approach to prevention and intervention in schools has the potential not only to mitigate the impact of crisis situations but also to contribute to building resilient and supportive school communities in the long term. Only systematic, professionally informed and sustainable action can ensure that schools can respond to the challenges of today while creating an environment in which every child can develop safely and harmoniously.

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BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE

DŘÍV, NEŽ BUDE POZDĚ

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Abstract

The article addresses the relevance and necessity of systematic sex education in primary education as a preventive measure against undesirable phenomena – from sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancies to sexual violence and discrimination. Drawing on historical development, current societal needs, and international standards, it analyses the position of sex education in the Czech Framework Educational Programme for Basic Education 2025. The authors compare different approaches (conservative, progressive, and the middle pedagogical-psychological path), present research findings on teachers' attitudes, and highlight the role of educators, schools, and parents. The importance of teacher training, interdisciplinary cooperation, and continuous evaluation of teaching quality is emphasized.

Keywords: Sex education, prevention, Framework Educational Programme (FEP), pedagogical approaches

Abstrakt

Tento článek analyzuje význam a současné postavení sexuální výchovy v českém základním vzdělávání v kontextu historického vývoje, aktuálních společenských výzev a mezinárodních standardů. Na základě výzkumu názorů pedagogů a analýzy Rámcového vzdělávacího programu pro základní vzdělávání (RVP ZV 2025) je diskutována role škol, učitelů a rodičů při zajišťování kvalitní a efektivní sexuální výchovy. Zvláštní důraz je kladen na metodické a didaktické přístupy, odbornou přípravu pedagogů a spolupráci s externími odborníky. Studie potvrzuje potřebu systematické a věkově přiměřené sexuální výchovy, která by měla být integrální součástí výchovně-vzdělávacího procesu.

Klíčová slova: sexuální výchova, prevence, RVP, pedagogické přístupy

Introduction

Sexuality education is an essential component of comprehensive education worldwide, supporting young people in developing healthy attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary for informed and responsible decision-making related to their sexual and reproductive health and rights. The Czech educational context incorporates sexuality education within multiple curricular areas but faces challenges related to curriculum flexibility, teacher preparedness, and societal attitudes that influence consistent and effective implementation.

This study aims to investigate primary school teachers' attitudes toward the introduction and implementation of sexuality education at different stages of primary education and to identify factors influencing its quality within the Framework Educational Programme (RVP ZV 2025).

Theoretical Basis

The field of sexuality education is grounded in extensive international research highlighting its multidimensional nature and critical importance for young people's holistic development. Contemporary frameworks advocate for a comprehensive approach combining biological, psychological, social, and legal perspectives, reflecting the complex reality of human sexuality (Ketting, Friele, & Michielsen, 2015). This interdisciplinarity ensures that education goes beyond mere biological facts to encompass relational, ethical, and rights-based dimensions necessary for informed decision-making and well-being (Pound et al., 2017).

Empirical evidence underscores the effectiveness of age-appropriate, participatory pedagogies that engage learners actively, foster open communication, and create safe, inclusive environments for discussion (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021; UNESCO, 2018). Inclusive comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) also emphasizes the integration of gender equality and respect for diversity, which are vital for preventing sexual violence and promoting respectful relationships (WHO Regional Office for Europe & BZgA, 2010).

Moreover, international guidance from organizations such as UNESCO and WHO consistently stresses the importance of involving families and communities to support learners' development outside school environments. Teacher capacity building through systematic and ongoing professional development is a cornerstone of successful CSE implementation worldwide (UNESCO, 2018; Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021).

Recent global research also sheds light on challenges common across diverse settings, such as tensions between cultural sensitivities and educational imperatives, the variability of curricula implementation due to teachers' preparedness and resource availability, and the critical role of policy support to unify and sustain quality delivery (Le Mat, Kosar-Altinyelken, & Bos, 2022). Teacher preparation, supportive policy environments, and parental engagement

are consistently cited as core determinants of implementation quality (Hawkins & Smith, 2024). In the Czech context, persistent barriers include insufficient training, curriculum fragmentation, and cultural taboos (Chavula, Zulu, & Hurtig, 2022; Le Mat, Kosar-Altinyelken, & Bos, 2022). These insights not only inform best practices but also contextualize the Czech Republic's flexible Framework Educational Programme (RVP ZV 2025) within international trends and paradigms, underscoring the necessity for comprehensive support mechanisms to realize the full potential of sexuality education.

Research Description

The study utilized a mixed-methods design, conducting an anonymous online survey from January to March 2025 with 118 primary school teachers representing diverse Czech schools. The survey assessed teacher attitudes on timing for introducing sexuality education, support for external experts' involvement, content suitability, and communication with parents and communities. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data allowed for a nuanced understanding of implementation challenges and perspectives.

Methodology

Quantitative survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics capturing frequencies and percentages of attitudes toward sexuality education initiation. Qualitative responses underwent thematic analysis independently coded by two researchers to enhance reliability and depth in interpreting teachers' views and concerns regarding sexuality education in schools.

Research Results

This section presents the key quantitative findings from the survey of primary school teachers regarding their attitudes to sexuality education introduction and implementation at different educational stages. The data illustrate varying levels of agreement and concern about the appropriate timing and delivery of sexuality education, reflecting the complexity of the topic within the school context.

Table 1: Attitudes Toward Introducing Sex Education in the First Level of Primary School

Response category	Count	%
Strongly agree	45	38.2
Agree	39	33.1
Slightly agree	16	13.4
Neutral	11	9.4
Slightly disagree	4	3.3
Disagree	1	0.8
Strongly disagree	2	1.8
Total	118	100.0

Table 1 summarizes teacher responses on whether sex education should be introduced early at the first level of primary school. Most teachers (84.7 %) responded positively (strongly agree, agree, slightly agree), indicating broad support. A smaller proportion expressed neutrality or disagreement, highlighting some hesitation.

Table 2: Opinion on Introducing Sex Education at the First Level of Primary School

Response category	Count	%
Strongly agree	23	19.6
Agree	15	12.7
Slightly agree	6	5.0
Neutral	32	27.1
Slightly disagree	8	6.7
Disagree	11	9.3
Strongly disagree	23	19.6
Total	118	100.0

Table 2 detects a more divided opinion on the appropriateness of introducing sex education at the first level. The presence of neutral responses and disagreement indicates varied attitudes, signalling the need for careful curriculum planning and stakeholder communication.

Table 3: Opinion on Introducing Sex Education During Puberty (Second Stage of Primary School)

Response category	Count	%
Strongly agree	78	66.1
Agree	18	15.3
Slightly agree	8	6.8
Neutral	6	5.1
Slightly disagree	1	0.8
Disagree	3	2.5
Strongly disagree	4	3.4
Total	118	100.0

Table 3 illustrates very strong support (about 87 %) for delivering sex education during puberty, consistent with developmental expectations and international practice, see also Fig. 1.

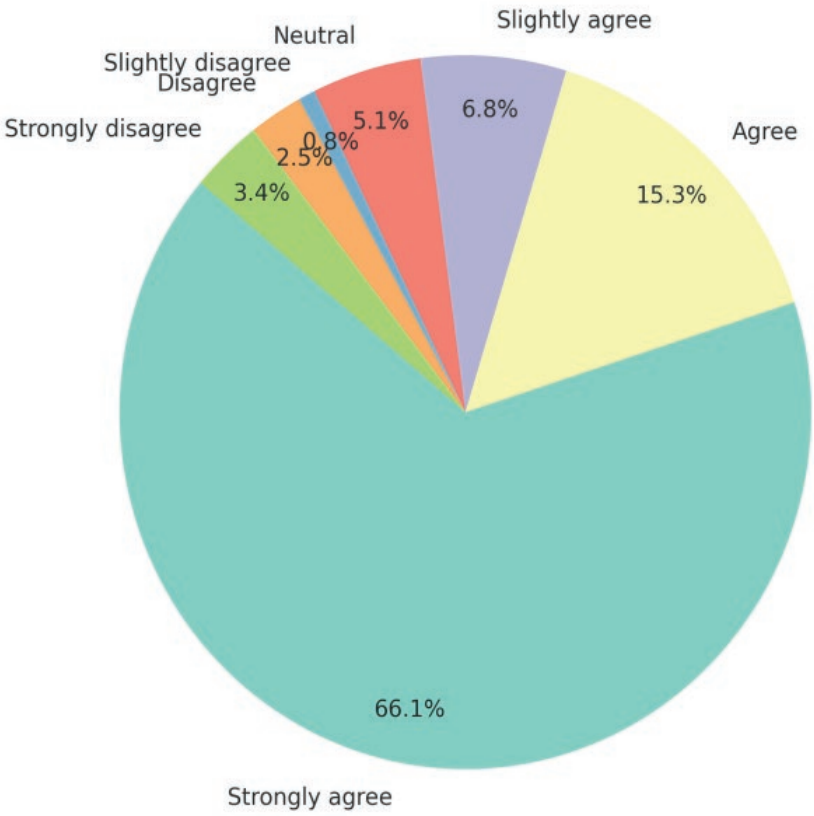

Figure 1 Distribution of responses regarding sex education during puberty

Overall Summary of the Research Findings

The research shows most teachers agree sex education should remain in schools and support involving external experts. It is most widely accepted during puberty (second stage). However, opinions differ on starting it in the first stage, requiring careful content planning and communication with parents. Implementation success depends on proper timing, clear goals, and professional teacher support.

Linking Research Findings to the Framework Educational Programme (RVP ZV 2025)

The findings reflect the multidimensional and flexible nature of the Framework Educational Programme for Basic Education (RVP ZV 2025), which integrates sex education content across several educational areas, as summarized in Table 4.

Table 4: Topics of Sex Education in the Framework Educational Programme for Basic Education (RVP ZV 2025)

Educational area	Main topics
Man, and His World	Human body and health; personal hygiene; basic information on reproduction
Man, and Health	Sexual maturation; reproductive health; prevention of sexually transmitted diseases; consent
Man, and Society	Relationships; gender equality; prevention of sexual violence
Personal and Social Education	Self-respect; respect for others; communication in relationships; decision-making skills
Citizenship Education	Rights and responsibilities; legal aspects of sexual behaviour

Table 4 shows how sex education themes are spread across multiple fields, enabling an integrated approach. The lack of precise scheduling for grades requires teacher autonomy and methodological preparation.

The varied opinions on when to introduce sex education, particularly early initiation, underscore the need for clearer guidance and professional development. Curriculum flexibility should balance with standardized support and training to ensure comprehensive implementation (Ketting et al., 2015; Pound et al., 2017). Embedding sex education within citizenship education highlights its connection to rights and responsibilities (UNESCO, 2018).

Effective delivery depends heavily on teacher preparedness, with variability in competence potentially leading to uneven outcomes. Continued investment in teacher training and support materials is therefore critical.

Didactic Principles of Sex Education

Effective sex education requires key didactic principles: age-appropriate content matching pupils' development (Lottes & Kontula, 2000); interactive, active learning (Pound et al., 2017); multidisciplinary integration of biological, psychological, social, and legal aspects (Ketting et al., 2015); a safe, respectful environment for open discussion (UNESCO, 2018); promoting positive values and attitudes; and involving family and community (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021). Successful implementation in Czech schools needs systematic teacher training, quality materials, and leadership support, with international evidence stressing regular instruction, skill-building, and collaboration with external experts (UNESCO, 2018; WHO Regional Office for Europe & BZgA, 2010).

Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into Czech primary school teachers' attitudes toward sexuality education, several limitations should be noted. The data were collected via an anonymous online survey, which may introduce self-selection bias and limit representativeness of the whole teacher population. The relatively modest sample size (N=118) limits generalizability across all Czech schools, especially in rural or underrepresented regions.

Furthermore, the cross-sectional design captures attitudes at a single point in time and cannot assess changes over time or causal relationships. Qualitative responses, while enriching, were limited in depth due to the survey format and could benefit from follow-up interviews for deeper exploration. Finally, social desirability bias may have influenced teachers' responses on sensitive topics like sexuality education, potentially overestimating support levels.

Future research incorporating longitudinal designs, larger and more diverse samples, and mixed-method qualitative approaches would strengthen understanding and guide more tailored policy and practice interventions.

Discussion

The didactic principles outlined earlier—including age-appropriate content, interactive and multidisciplinary teaching, and involvement of families and communities—closely match areas identified by teachers as crucial for successful implementation (Pound et al., 2017; WHO Regional Office for Europe & BZgA, 2010). Surveyed educators emphasized the need for regular training, professional support, and open communication with parents, underscoring the relational aspect of sex education delivery. Teachers also recognized the value of external

experts but stressed that ownership and competence should remain primarily within the school framework.

Implications

The study's findings have significant implications for educational policy and practice in the Czech Republic. The clear support for sex education during puberty reinforces the need to prioritize comprehensive, developmentally appropriate curricula at the second stage of primary education. However, the divided opinions about early-stage sex education reveal potential barriers that require addressing through clearer curricular guidance, evidence-based resources, and professional development (Ketting et al., 2015; UNESCO, 2018). Moreover, the prominent demand for involving external experts and strengthening parent communication highlights the role of holistic community engagement to foster a supportive environment for sexuality education (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021). The flexible nature of the RVP ZV 2025, while offering autonomy, necessitates robust teacher training and methodological support to reduce disparities in implementation quality and ensure equitable learning opportunities (Pound et al., 2017).

Recommendations for Practice

Building on the research insights, several practice-oriented recommendations emerge:

- Enhancing Cooperation with Parents and the Community: Transparent and ongoing dialogue with parents, alongside involving community experts, can build trust, address concerns, and integrate practical insights to enhance program acceptance and effectiveness (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021).
- Strengthening Teachers' Professional Preparation: Provide systematic training in subject knowledge, methods, and communication, inspired by programs from the Netherlands and Canada (Ketting et al., 2015).
- Development of Unified Methodological Materials: The Ministry should supply schools with evidence-based, age-appropriate guides to ensure consistent quality nationwide.
- Integrating the Topic into Multiple Subjects: Embed sex education across subjects like biology, civics, media literacy, and ethics to promote a healthy lifestyle.
- Regular Evaluation and Innovation of the Programme: Conduct ongoing assessments using pupil and parent feedback and expert evaluations to continuously improve the programme (UNESCO, 2018).

Conclusion

This study underscores the vital role of comprehensive sexuality education within Czech primary schools, affirming widespread teacher support for its continuation and development, particularly during puberty. The variability of opinions on early introduction points to the necessity of well-planned curricula, clear guidelines, and professional support to enhance teacher confidence and program consistency. Aligning RVP ZV 2025's flexible framework with international didactic principles and integrating community cooperation creates a foundation for effective, inclusive sex education. Ultimately, sustained commitment from policymakers, educators, parents, and experts is essential to equip young people with knowledge, skills, and values that promote their health, well-being, and rights.

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EDUCATION IN CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY CONTEXTS

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS OF THE ELDERLY IN THE CONTEXT OF DIGITAL INCLUSION AS A SOCIAL DETERMINANT

ROLA VEREJNÝCH KNIŽNÍC V EDUKAČNOM PROCESE SENIOROV V KONTEXTE DIGITÁLNEJ INKLÚZIE AKO SOCIÁLNEHO DETERMINANTU

Iveta Babjaková (Slovak Republic)

Abstract

This topic synergistically links the field of andragogy and geragogy with the context of public libraries, emphasizing key social determinants in contemporary educational reality. Digitisation and the related digital inclusion/exclusion constitute significant factors affecting access to education and information, especially for vulnerable groups such as the elderly. Public libraries as dynamic third sector institutions have the potential to act as facilitators and mediators in the process of bridging the digital divide and promoting lifelong learning for the elderly. We will provide concrete examples from public library practice. The result of our work is a partial overview of the current situation in the field of non-formal education in libraries in Slovakia and Czechia with regard to the impact of the influence of digital technologies.

Keywords: digital literacy, geragogy, libraries, non-formal education, social determinants

Abstrakt

Téma synergicky prepája oblasť andragogiky a geragogiky s kontextom verejných knižníc, pričom akcentuje kľúčové sociálne determinanty v súčasnej edukačnej realite. Digitalizácia a s ňou súvisiaca digitálna inklúzia/exklúzia predstavujú významné faktory, ktoré vplývajú na prístup k vzdelávaniu a informáciám, najmä u zraniteľných skupín, akými sú seniori. Verejné

knižnice, ako dynamické inštitúcie tretieho sektora, majú potenciál pôsobiť ako facilitátori a mediátori v procese prekonávania digitálnej priepasti a podporovať celoživotné učenie seniorov. Uvedieme konkrétne príklady z praxe vo verejných knižniciach. Výsledkom práce je podanie čiastočného prehľadu o aktuálnej situácii v oblasti neformálneho vzdelávania v knižniciach na Slovensku a v Čechách so zreteľom na dopady vplyvu digitálnych technológií.

Kľúčové slová: digitálna gramotnosť, geragogika, knižnice, neformálne vzdelávanie. sociálne determinanty

1. The role of public libraries in community education for the elderly

Public libraries are increasingly playing a key role in educational processes for the elderly, particularly in the context of digital inclusion as a social determinant. Their role is further emphasized by the growing recognition of digital literacy as a prerequisite for active participation in today's information-rich society. As societal shifts towards digital interfaces continue, the literature points out that public libraries serve as important hubs for promoting digital skills and providing access to technological resources, which is particularly important for the elderly who have not (perhaps) been born in the digital age.

One of the main functions of public libraries is to bridge the digital divide, which affects older adults disproportionately. Their generation often faces challenges related to technological literacy, access to digital resources and overall social connectivity. According to Audunson et al., public libraries help promote a sustainable public environment that supports social justice, including equitable access to digital resources, which is essential for the elderly in order to meaningfully engage with their communities (Audunson et al. (2019)). Furthermore, Wang and Si emphasize the importance of libraries in promoting digital literacy, thereby supporting an inclusive and equitable digital society that supports the educational needs of older adults (Wang and Si, 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of public libraries in facilitating digital inclusion of older adults. Libraries served as inclusive community hubs, providing key digital training and support during this challenging period.

Research suggests that the effectiveness of digital inclusion initiatives depends on the specific social security scheme in place, as noted by Alexopoulou et al., who argue that contextual factors significantly influence the way older adults access digital technologies (Alexopoulou et al., 2022). This highlights the need for a policy framework that not only acknowledges the digital divide but actively seeks to bridge it and ensures that public libraries are well

supported in their efforts to effectively serve the elderly in the field of education.

Furthermore, it has been shown that providing technology-related educational programs increases older adults' autonomy and skills in navigating the digital environment. For example, Morueta et al. found that the availability of literacy support directly influences internet access and use among the elderly (Morueta et al., 2021). This access is key to maintaining social interactions and accessing essential services, thereby **reinforcing the role of public libraries as key players in a multifaceted approach aimed at promoting social well-being**.

Public libraries play an important role in the educational process of the elderly through digital inclusion efforts. They provide basic resources, training, and social support that enable older adults to engage with the digital world. This inclusion is not just a matter of access; it involves broader social determinants that affect the quality of life of the elderly. Digital inclusion is an important social determinant in today's society. As libraries continually innovate their approach in supporting this demographic, the implications extend far beyond individual education and contribute to greater community cohesion and overall public health.

2. Current situation in the field of non-formal education in libraries in Slovakia and Czechia with regard to the impact of digital technologies

Despite persisting stereotypes in the general public about the role, status, and functioning of libraries, these are dynamic third sector institutions with the potential to act as facilitators and mediators in bridging the digital divide. It is right to say that present-day modern public libraries in Slovakia and the Czech Republic are capable of supporting lifelong learning for the elderly. Further below, we provide a brief overview of the current situation and practical examples from public libraries in Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

At a time when quality public space is shrinking under the pressure of hoaxes, misinformation, and accelerated attention, libraries serve as open, thoughtful community places of focus and value stability. When libraries are led with vision and courage, they can be one the most innovative places in the society today. They are no longer just institutions, but rather a network of relationships with the community, librarians, society, and technology, as well as a space for encounters between readers and books, people and technology, the public and trust. (Řehák, 2025). Libraries are transforming from book depositories into dynamic centres for lifelong learning and community life, supporting both formal and non-formal education.

Public libraries play a key role in promoting social inclusion and community life, providing safe and accessible spaces for all members of the community, including marginalized or disadvantaged individuals. By providing free access to the internet and digital technologies,

they enable these individuals to participate in the digital economy and society. By using digital technologies such as voice readers and screen magnifiers, libraries increase their inclusiveness for people with disabilities.

Digital technologies as an opportunity

Digital technologies represent both a challenge and an opportunity for the Slovak and Czech libraries. If libraries fail to understand them, they can become a threat, but if they perceive them as assistance, they will bring many positive changes, especially in terms of their social impact on education. Currently, we see libraries making an effort to actively respond to the changing demands of the times by supporting lifelong learning. Aware of the growing digital divide faced by the older population, libraries are providing training in digital literacy. For example, Krajská knižnica v Žiline has for many years been offering a program teaching the elderly the basics of writing in Word. (Krajská knižnica v Žiline, 2025) Digital literacy programs are especially valuable for the elderly whose digital skills are inferior to those of the younger generations, thus helping to reduce the digital divide and ensuring equal opportunities for all members of the community.

Innovative approaches and programmes for the elderly

Librarians have long been helping adults, including the elderly, to search for relevant information and library resources. These serve not only for leisure and entertainment, but also for personal development. In the context of digital transformation, the role of librarians is changing to that of facilitators of education, mentors of digital adaptation, and guides in the complex world of information. In order for librarians to master this new role, or any of its facets, they need to change their internal mindset and undergo further training in the areas of digitization, information and communication technologies (ICT), and service modernization. Current challenges of lifelong learning in the profession of librarian could constitute a separate area of research.

Libraries implement a broad range of innovative approaches and programmes aimed at the elderly. One of the most significant trends is a **shift towards creating inclusive programs designed specifically for older** adults, which can significantly strengthen community engagement and social inclusion. These include initiatives in literacy, technology education, and health-focused workshops.

Libraries organize workshops and training courses aimed at **improving digital skills**, such as computer use basics, internet safety, and the use of software applications. For example, Verejná knižnica Michala Rešetku in Trenčín offers a computer skills course titled “E-mail it to me, granny”. (Verejná knižnica Michala Rešetku (2025)) Verejná knižnica Mikuláša Kováča (2025) in Banská Bystrica runs a long-term, regular, interactive, and experiential prevention

program for the elderly titled “Safe and Healthy” which includes knowledge quizzes and guided discussions. The didactic principles for working with the elderly include clarity, appropriateness, activity, individual approach, systematicity, emotionality, motivation, and regular feedback. As an example of a larger educational event, we can highlight the three-day mini-festival “Academy for the Elderly 2025” in Trnava. The program included theatre performances with discussions, a tour of the State Archives with a workshop on creating family trees, self-defence lessons, memory training organized by Knižnica Juraja Fándlyho, digital mind training using apps and tablets, lectures on crime prevention, and digital skills workshops focusing on mobile apps. (Knižnica Juraja Fándlyho v Trnave (2025)) “Mahen’s Academy for the 21st Century” offered by Knihovna Jiřího Mahena v Brně (2025) holds regular cycles of author readings, lectures, discussions, and practical workshops throughout the year.

Several libraries in Moravia and Bohemia have launched initiatives in the field of **bibliotherapy**. It should be noted that almost all libraries offer group readings with text analysis as a free informal educational activity. However, professional bibliotherapy is a therapeutic intervention led by a qualified professional – a psychologist, psychotherapist or specially trained bibliotherapist. Its main goal is to promote mental health and address specific psychological problems. Bibliotherapy has a strictly defined structure. Clients (readers) are recommended specific books or texts based on their particular needs (e.g., anxiety, sadness, relationship problems). The goal is not just to read the story but to analyse it and to find a connection to one’s own life. This concept has gained popularity with a view to support the mental health and emotional well-being of the elderly through reading and discussion groups that provide intellectual stimulation and foster social bonds. Bibliotherapy is a unique tool in the education of the elderly that can have a profound impact on digital inclusion as a social determinant. Bibliotherapy sessions create a **safe social environment**. The elderly can meet, discuss and share their feelings and experiences (opk.care, 2024). Such interaction reduces feelings of isolation and loneliness, which are social determinants in themselves, and strengthens the sense of belonging (Fialová, 2020). If these groups focus on the topic of digital inclusion, their members can motivate and support each other in learning new digital skills. Tackling problems together is more effective and less stressful. This form of therapy therefore not only affects mental health, but also indirectly influences the ability and motivation of the elderly to integrate into digital society. Many older people feel afraid or uncertain when using modern technologies. This psychological block is often the main barrier to digital inclusion (Vroman, Arthanat & Lysack, 2015, cited in digitalniseniori.gov.sk, n.d.). Bibliotherapy can help alleviate these feelings of anxiety. Reading stories about characters who overcome technological challenges, or discussing the positive impacts of technology on life (such as keeping in touch with family through video calls) can inspire courage and motivation in the elderly. Regular reading and discussion of texts stimulates memory, concentration, and critical thinking (opk.care, 2024). These cognitive skills are key

in order to successfully acquire digital literacy. Stronger cognitive function makes it easier for the elderly to process new information, understand complex user interfaces, and remember procedures, which is essential for an effective use of digital devices. Bibliotherapy helps the elderly to cope with feelings of sadness, depression or apathy. When a person feels mentally and emotionally stronger, they have more energy and motivation to learn new things, which also applies to digital skills. The improvement in mental well-being that bibliotherapy brings is a prerequisite for any successful educational activity, including digital literacy courses (Fialová, 2020). Knihovna Kroměřížska is often commended for pioneering bibliotherapy in the Czech libraries (Knihovna Kroměřížska, 2025). It was awarded the title "Library of the Year 2016" for its information achievement in this field. It offers a special database of bibliotherapeutic literature and has experience working with clients, including in collaboration with a psychiatric hospital. Městská knihovna Frenštát pod Radhoštěm has a special section on its website dedicated to bibliotherapy (Městská knihovna Frenštát pod Radhoštěm, n.d.; Čížková, 2018). It offers books marked with a pictogram of a heart in the palms of the hands, which are intended to help readers in various life situations (e.g., bullying, death, drugs). Librarians regularly update the list of these books. It is important to note that bibliotherapy is not as widespread in libraries in the Czech Republic as it is in some other countries. It is often used more by psychologists and therapists. Nevertheless, there is growing interest and development in this area in libraries, as shown by the above examples (Fialová, 2020). In Slovakia, we have only found two bibliotherapy events organized in libraries: within its music department, Knižnica Juraja Fándlyho in Trnava offers meetings focused on working with texts and aimed at improving people's mental health. This is a preventive approach that provides psychological support to people in difficult life situations (Knižnica Juraja Fándlyho v Trnave, 2025). Gemerská knižnica Pavla Dobšinského in Rožňava organized an event titled "The Book – My Mirror" which centred on reading and working with text, offering participants the opportunity to reflect on their own values and lives. Although this was a one-off event, it demonstrates libraries' interest in this topic and their efforts to implement bibliotherapeutic elements in their programmes (Košický samosprávny kraj, 2018).

In addition to on-the-spot services in libraries, there are also projects and organizations in the Czech Republic and Slovakia that focus on bibliotherapy and support it throughout the library system, such as the BiblioHelp project. This is a portal that provides a database of books suitable for bibliotherapy (BiblioHelp portal, n.d.). Although not a library in itself, the portal serves as a useful resource for the general public and for librarians who want to use this method.

Biblioterapia.sk is an online teaching aid created with the support of the Erasmus+ program. It provides teaching materials and information on bibliotherapy, including poetry therapy and paremiological therapy. It is an important resource for professionals who want to broaden their knowledge in this field (NIVAM, n.d.). Several libraries, such as Krajská knižnica

Ľudovíta Štúra vo Zvolene, have in the past organized training courses for librarians focused on bibliotherapy basics. These courses serve to disseminate knowledge and enhance skills so that libraries can offer more such services in the future (Fond na podporu umenia, n.d.).

Technological innovation in services

Libraries in Slovakia and the Czech Republic are actively introducing new technologies. In the Czech Republic, **self-service checkout systems** are already more widespread, while in Slovakia they have only been introduced in regional libraries. They are available to readers during library opening hours. These systems free librarians from the routine work of checking books in and out, giving them more time to dedicate to the more complex aspects of their profession, such as individual assistance, organizing community and educational activities, and digital skills development.

In Slovakia, 50 public libraries have set up **SmartLabs** – modern spaces designed for experiential STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, mathematics) learning, to enhance creativity, technological and craft skills, and to popularize science. SmartLabs are equipped with technologies such as 3D printers, cutting plotters, heat press machines and pyrography kits.

Many libraries offer **3D technologies**, providing the elderly, too, with an opportunity to learn how to use a 3D pen, 3D scanner or laser engraver. Městská knihovna v Praze (2025), the largest public library in Prague and one of the most important in the Czech Republic, is testing its **Aia chatbot** based on large language models and trained to answer standard questions from the readers. The library also plans to focus on developing the AI's ability to recommend titles for reading.

3. Conclusion

From their beginnings, libraries have been perceived as places of learning and as part of the national education system in both republics under the common Act on Public Municipal Libraries No. 430/1919 Coll., which played a key role in the development of the library sector in Czechoslovakia and beyond. It was a groundbreaking Act on a global scale, as it was the first to introduce a legal obligation to establish a library in every municipality throughout the country. Its adoption was met with great response abroad and it became a model for library laws drafted in other countries around the world. Libraries in Slovakia and the Czech Republic are now considered by experts to be the ideal institutions for enhancing information literacy and encouraging lifelong learning in communities. Public libraries themselves actively and creatively take on the task to enhance information literacy, despite a frequent lack of clearly defined guidelines or manuals.

Public libraries in the Czech Republic and Slovakia are actively adapting to the changing needs of the public and to technological progress, thereby strengthening their position as key institutions for lifelong learning, digital inclusion and a robust community life, with a particular focus on vulnerable groups such as the elderly. In this paradigm, public libraries are defined not only as information hubs, but also as actors in the area of lifelong learning and in strengthening social cohesion. Projects such as SELCO (Senior Learning Communities) aim to provide a more effective education for older people in order to prepare them for the challenges of the 21st century, develop their skills and strengthen the community. In addition, preventing social isolation and establishing new social contacts are met as secondary goals. Educational activities for the elderly are seen as a way to enhance quality of life in old age, increasing their ability to be active and to contribute to community progress.

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DIGITAL LITERACY AS A MEDIATOR OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES IN LATER LIFE

DIGITÁLNÍ GRAMOTNOST JAKO PROSTŘEDNÍK VZDĚLÁVACÍCH PŘÍLEŽITOSTÍ V POZDĚJŠÍM VĚKU

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Abstract

The accelerating digitalization of society presents a dual challenge and opportunity for older adults, fundamentally reshaping their access to and participation in lifelong learning. This theoretical and literature review article, grounded in a synthesis of recent empirical studies from the Web of Science database, critically examines the mediating role of digital literacy between an older adult's social determinants and their engagement in educational activities. The central objective is to develop a conceptual model that explains how digital literacy acts as a crucial filter, either facilitating or blocking access to diverse educational opportunities, including Universities of the Third Age, community courses, and online platforms. The review addresses three guiding questions: 1) Which social determinants most significantly influence older adults' digital literacy? 2) How does digital literacy mediate their access to educational opportunities? 3) In what ways does digital literacy contribute to the reproduction or reduction of educational inequalities in later life? By integrating findings on the grey digital divide and the mechanism of cumulative advantage/double disadvantage, the article argues that digital literacy is a key determinant of educational equity. The resulting implications call for a paradigm shift in policy and practice, advocating for the seamless integration of digital skills support into all later-life learning programs to ensure genuine inclusion.

Keywords: older adults; digital literacy; lifelong learning; educational inequalities; grey digital divide

Abstrakt

Zrychlující se digitalizace společnosti představuje pro starší dospělé dvojí výzvu a příležitost, zásadně přetvářející jejich přístup k celoživotnímu učení a účast na něm. Tento teoretický a přehledový článek, opírající se o syntézu nedávných empirických studií z databáze Web of Science, kriticky zkoumá mediační roli digitální gramotnosti mezi sociálními determinanty

starších dospělých a jejich zapojením do vzdělávacích aktivit. Hlavním cílem je vyvinout koncepční model, který vysvětluje, jak digitální gramotnost funguje jako klíčový filtr, který buď usnadňuje, nebo blokuje přístup k různým vzdělávacím příležitostem, včetně Univerzit třetího věku, komunitních kurzů a online platforem. Přehled se zabývá třemi vodicími otázkami: 1) Které sociální determinanty nejvýznamněji ovlivňují digitální gramotnost starších dospělých? 2) Jak digitální gramotnost zprostředkovává jejich přístup ke vzdělávacím příležitostem? 3) Jakými způsoby digitální gramotnost přispívá k reprodukci nebo redukci vzdělávacích nerovností ve vyšším věku? Integrací zjištění o šedé digitální propasti a mechanismu kumulativní výhody/dvojité nevýhody článek tvrdí, že digitální gramotnost je klíčovým determinantem vzdělávací rovnosti. Z toho vyplývající implikace volají po změně paradigmatu v politice a praxi, prosazující bezproblémovou integraci podpory digitálních dovedností do všech programů celoživotního učení pro seniory, aby byla zajištěna skutečná inkluze.

Klíčová slova: starší dospělí; digitální gramotnost; celoživotní učení; vzdělávací nerovnosti; šedá digitální propast

1. Introduction

The confluence of global demographic aging and pervasive technological advancement defines the socio-educational landscape of the 21st century (World Economic Forum, 2012; European Commission, 2008; World Health Organization [WHO], 2015). As life expectancy increases, the concept of later life has shifted from a period of retirement and withdrawal to one of active aging, social engagement, and continuous personal development through lifelong learning (LL) (Sibai & Hachem, 2021; WHO, 2015). Lifelong learning is widely recognized as a vital mechanism for maintaining cognitive health, fostering social inclusion, and enhancing the overall quality of life for older adults (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2023; Zhang et al., 2022).

However, the increasing reliance on digital platforms for accessing information, services, and, critically, educational opportunities has introduced a new, complex layer of inequality. The ability of older adults to successfully navigate this digital environment, their digital literacy, is rapidly becoming a non-negotiable prerequisite for participation in contemporary society (Cui et al., 2024; Melchior, 2023). This article posits that digital literacy acts as a crucial mediator in the relationship between an older adult‘s social background and their educational engagement.

This study contributes directly to the academic discourse on social determinants of educational reality by examining how pre-existing social factors influence educational outcomes in the specific context of later-life learning. While traditional research on educational inequality

often focuses on early life stages, this article highlights that the influence of social factors, such as prior education, income, and health, does not cease in retirement. Instead, these factors are now channeled through the lens of digital competence. The core argument is that digital literacy is a newly emerged, yet powerful, social determinant that shapes access to lifelong learning, thereby either mitigating or reinforcing existing educational inequalities among seniors.

The shift of educational provision to digital spaces, dramatically accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has fundamentally altered the landscape of later-life learning (Boeren et al., 2020; Di Pietro & Karpiński, 2021). Even traditionally in-person institutions, such as the Universities of the Third Age (UTA), now rely heavily on digital tools for registration, material distribution, and hybrid course delivery (Janouchová & Obršálová, 2024; Kamanová & Pevná, 2022). This reliance has brought the issue of the grey digital divide, the gap in digital access and skills among older adults, to the forefront of educational policy (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2025).

The grey digital divide is often conceptualized in two levels (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014): the first-level divide concerns access to hardware and internet connectivity, while the second-level divide relates to the skills, confidence, and ability to use digital tools meaningfully (Büchi et al., 2016). For older adults, the second-level divide, rooted in varying levels of digital literacy, is the more significant barrier to educational participation (Melchior, 2023).

The primary goal of this article is to theoretically and empirically analyze, based on a review of recent literature from the Web of Science database, how digital literacy acts as a mediator between social determinants and participation in later-life learning.

To achieve this goal, the review is guided by three specific research questions:

What are the main social determinants influencing the digital literacy of older adults?

How does digital literacy mediate (facilitate or block) older adults‘ access to formal, non-formal, and informal educational opportunities?

How does digital literacy contribute to the reproduction or reduction of educational inequalities in later life?

The following sections will first define the diverse landscape of later-life educational opportunities, then theoretically anchor the concept of digital literacy as a mediator, synthesize recent empirical evidence, and finally discuss the implications for practice and policy.

2. Access to Educational Opportunities in Later Life

Lifelong learning (LL) for older adults is characterized by its heterogeneity, encompassing formal, non-formal, and informal educational activities (Villar & Celdrán, 2013). The digitalization of these opportunities means that digital literacy is now a prerequisite for engagement across the entire spectrum.

Types of Educational Opportunities and Digital Requirements

Formal opportunities typically involve accredited university programs or vocational training, which often require sophisticated use of Learning Management Systems (LMS), academic databases, and digital submission platforms (Lu et al., 2022).

Non-formal settings, such as U3A, community colleges, and public libraries, are crucial providers of education for older adults. While traditionally focused on in-person delivery, these institutions increasingly rely on digital tools for administrative functions (online registration, payment) and communication (email, video conferencing for hybrid models) (Xie & Bugg, 2009). Informal learning, self-directed activities like watching educational videos, using MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), or participating in online interest groups, is entirely dependent on the individual‘s digital competence (Liyanagunawardena & Williams, 2016).

The shift to digital delivery has created a digital gatekeeper effect, whereby access to services and learning opportunities is effectively limited by older adults’ digital skills. The ability to find course information, complete the registration process, access course materials, and communicate with instructors are all now mediated by digital skills. For example, a senior with low digital literacy may be unaware of a local UTA course simply because they cannot navigate the institution‘s website or use the online registration form (Wilson-Menzfeld et al., 2023). Table 1 summarizes the digital demands and associated barriers across key educational settings, highlighting the pervasive nature of digital requirements.

Table 1 Digital Demands and Barriers to Participation in Later-Life Learning Across Educational Settings

Type of Course	Typical Digital Requirements	Barriers for Low Digitally Literate Seniors
Universities of the Third Age (UTA)	Online registration, email communication, accessing materials via website/LMS, occasional video lectures (e.g., Zoom).	Difficulty with initial online sign-up, fear of technology, lack of confidence in using institutional platforms, inability to troubleshoot basic technical issues.
Community Courses/ Libraries	Online search for local offerings, pre-registration via web form, use of library digital resources (e-books, databases, online archives).	Inability to effectively search for local, non-standardized information; reliance on staff for basic digital tasks; lack of awareness of digital resources.
Online Courses (MOOCs) / Informal Learning	High level of self-directed learning, managing multiple platforms, technical troubleshooting, active participation in online forums, critical evaluation of online content.	Lack of advanced digital skills (information, communication, content creation), high dropout rates due to technical frustration, lack of social support and self-efficacy.

Source: Author's synthesis

3. Digital Literacy as a Mediator of Educational Participation

Drawing on Hayes' (2018) mediation framework and empirical evidence that social background shapes digital inequality among older adults (Hu & Xu, 2024) and that digital skills mediate the effect of education on participation (Lybeck et al., 2024), this article posits that digital literacy is a crucial mediator.

Digital literacy is a multi-dimensional concept that extends far beyond mere technical proficiency. For older adults, digital literacy can be conceptualized as a dynamic capability encompassing four key dimensions – basic technology, communication, problem-solving, and security literacy (Yu, Wu, & Yang, 2025):

Functional Skills: The ability to operate hardware (e.g., tablet, smartphone) and software (e.g., browser, apps).

Information Skills: The ability to search, evaluate the credibility of, and manage digital content (e.g., distinguishing reliable educational sources from misinformation).

Communication Skills: The ability to interact and collaborate effectively online, including using email, social media, and video conferencing for learning purposes.

Strategic Skills: The ability to use digital tools to achieve specific life goals, such as accessing educational resources, managing health information, or engaging in civic life (Chen & Li, 2024).

A deficit in any of these areas can create a barrier to educational participation. For instance, a senior may possess functional skills but lack the information skills to critically evaluate the quality of a free online course, leading to disengagement or frustration (Pihlainen et al., 2022).

Social Determinants of Digital Literacy

The distribution of digital literacy among older adults is not random; it is systematically patterned by pre-existing social inequalities (Hunsaker & Hargittai, 2018). Research consistently identifies several key social determinants that significantly predict digital competence:

Prior Education: This is arguably the strongest predictor. Higher levels of formal education correlate with greater cognitive flexibility, a higher capacity for abstract learning, and a positive disposition towards new knowledge acquisition, all of which facilitate the development of digital skills (Hargittai & Dobransky, 2017).

Socioeconomic Status (SES) and Income: Higher income mitigates the first-level digital divide by enabling the purchase of quality devices, reliable high-speed internet, and private training (König et al., 2018). Low SES often means reliance on outdated technology or limited data plans, which hinders the consistent practice necessary for skill development.

Health Status: Cognitive and physical health limitations (e.g., poor eyesight, reduced dexterity, cognitive decline) can directly impede the use of digital devices, creating a health-related digital divide (Wilson et al., 2021).

Social Networks and Support: The presence of a supportive network (family, friends, community groups) who can provide technical assistance and encouragement is a critical factor in overcoming initial barriers and building digital confidence (Thalhammer, 2024).

Retirement Status: The transition to retirement can either free up time for learning or lead to a loss of work-related digital practice, making the effect complex (Morrison et al., 2020).

These determinants shape the initial level of digital literacy, which then acts as the mechanism through which social background influences educational outcomes.

4. Digital Literacy as a Mediating Mechanism in the Production of Educational Inequalities

The conceptual model Social determinants → Digital literacy → Participation in later-life learning provides a framework for understanding how digital literacy either facilitates or blocks access to education, thereby reproducing or reducing educational inequalities.

The analysis of educational inequalities in later life is strongly informed by the sociological theory of Cumulative Advantage/Disadvantage (CAD), originally formulated by Robert K. Merton (1968) to explain stratification in scientific careers (the „Matthew effect"). The core tenet of CAD is that initial advantages (or disadvantages) tend to multiply over time, leading to increasingly unequal outcomes. In the context of later-life learning, the theory suggests that those who enter retirement with high levels of educational attainment and socioeconomic status (initial advantage) are better positioned to acquire digital literacy, which then provides a further advantage in accessing LL opportunities (Dannefer, 2003).

The interaction between social determinants and digital literacy results in distinct profiles of older learners, often explained by the theory of cumulative advantage/disadvantage (Jenkins, 2024; Kalenda & Kočvarová; 2022).

Cumulative Advantage (The Digitally Empowered)

This profile includes older adults with high prior education, high SES, and strong social support. Their existing social advantages are compounded by high digital literacy, which acts as a powerful **facilitator**. They can easily access, evaluate, and engage with the most advanced and diverse educational opportunities, including international MOOCs or specialized online university courses. This mechanism ensures that those who were already privileged in their earlier life continue to accumulate educational capital in later life, thereby reproducing existing social inequalities (Vilhena et al., 2019).

Double Disadvantage (The Digitally Excluded)

This profile represents the most vulnerable group, characterized by low prior education, low income, and often poor health or limited social support. They face a **double disadvantage**: a lack of traditional educational capital combined with low digital literacy (Ueno et al., 2023). For this group, digital literacy acts as a significant **blocker.** The digital requirement for participation effectively excludes them from a growing number of LL opportunities, deepening the grey digital divide and **e**xacerbating educational inequalities (Lu et al., 2022; Tomczyk et al., 2023).

Compensated Disadvantage (The Supported Learners)

This intermediate profile is crucial for policy intervention. It includes individuals who may have lower SES or prior education but benefit from strong external support, such as community-based digital training programs or intergenerational mentoring (Lu et al., 2024; Miller et al., 2024). In this case, the lack of intrinsic digital capital is compensated by external social capital. Digital literacy is acquired through supported learning pathways, allowing these individuals to overcome the initial barrier and access LL opportunities. This profile demonstrates a pathway for reducing educational inequalities through targeted, non-digital interventions that build digital skills.

The mediation is evident in how social determinants influence the *type* and *quality* of digital engagement, which then affects educational outcomes. For example, a high-income senior (Social Determinant) can afford a tablet and private tutoring, leading to high functional and strategic digital skills (Digital Literacy), enabling them to enroll in a high-quality online course (Participation). Conversely, a low-income senior (Social Determinant) may rely on a shared, outdated device and lack social support, resulting in low digital literacy, which prevents them from even completing the online registration for a free community course (Non-Participation).

5. Conclusion, Limitations and Future Research

This review confirms the central thesis that digital literacy functions as a critical mediator of educational opportunities in later life. The level of digital competence an older adult possesses is not a matter of chance but is systematically determined by their social background, leading to the reproduction of educational inequalities through the mechanism of cumulative advantage and double disadvantage.

The central theoretical contribution of this review is the conceptual model illustrating the pathway: Social determinants → Digital literacy → Participation in later-life learning. This model underscores the necessity of addressing the digital skills gap not in isolation, but as an integral part of any strategy aimed at promoting equitable lifelong learning. These findings collectively support the conceptual model: social determinants shape digital literacy, and digital literacy, in turn, acts as the primary filter for accessing later-life educational opportunities. The empirical evidence strongly suggests that without targeted, supportive, and context-specific interventions to boost digital literacy, the digital transformation of education will continue to reinforce the double-disadvantage profile. Digital literacy among older adults acts as a key mediator between social conditions and participation in continuing education, so support cannot be based solely on „computer courses“ but must be integrated

directly into teaching, administration, and program funding. It is essential to provide targeted support to the most vulnerable groups facing a „double disadvantage“ (low education, low income, weak social support) – while removing both barriers to access to technology and barriers to skills. Community and intergenerational forms of support have great potential, as they strengthen social networks and confidence in using technology, thereby providing a real opportunity for lifelong learning.

This review is subject to several limitations. First, the literature search, while focused on the Web of Science, was limited by the search terms and the English language, potentially excluding relevant studies from non-English speaking contexts. Second, the concept of digital literacy itself is complex and often operationalized differently across studies, making direct comparison challenging. Finally, the rapid pace of technological change means that the definition of „necessary“ digital skills is constantly evolving, requiring continuous updating of the research base.

Future research should focus on: investigating the long-term impact of digital skills interventions on actual educational participation and life outcomes.

Deepening the understanding of the psychological and emotional barriers (e.g., fear, lack of motivation) that mediate the relationship between social determinants and digital literacy.

Systematically evaluating the effectiveness of integrated digital skills support models within lifelong learning institutions to identify best practices for mitigating the double disadvantage policy evaluation.

By continuing to explore the complex interplay between social context, digital competence, and educational engagement, researchers can provide the evidence base needed to ensure that the promise of lifelong learning is realized for all older adults.

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EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION AS A KEY TO SUCCESSFUL STUDENT ADAPTATION IN SECONDARY SCHOOL

ZÁŽITKOVÁ PEDAGOGIKA JAKO KLÍČ K ÚSPĚŠNÉ ADAPTACI ŽÁKŮ NA SŠ

Alena Knotková (Czech Republic)

Abstract

The adaptation course plays an important preventive role in the transition of students from primary to secondary school. This theoretical article focuses on the use of experiential education principles within adaptation programs and their potential to foster a positive classroom climate, interpersonal relationships, and cooperation between students and teachers. It describes the structure, preparation, goals, and stages of the adaptation course. Furthermore, it discusses its function in primary prevention of risky behaviour, the building of trust, and integration of new students into the collective. The article also highlights the benefits for the teaching staff and the importance of creating a safe and supportive school environment. Experiential methods are presented as tools for consciously shaping classroom dynamics and strengthening students' psychosocial well-being.

Keywords: experiential education; adaptation; adaptation course

Abstrakt

Adaptační kurz představuje důležitý prvek prevence při přechodu žáků ze základní na střední školu. Příspěvek se zaměřuje na využití principů zážitkové pedagogiky v rámci adaptačních kurzů a jejich potenciál podporovat pozitivní klima třídy, vzájemné vztahy i spolupráci mezi žáky a učiteli. V teoretické rovině je popsána struktura adaptačního kurzu, jeho příprava, cíle a jednotlivé fáze realizace. Dále je diskutována jeho role v oblasti primární prevence rizikového chování, posilování důvěry a začlenění nových žáků do kolektivu. Text rovněž poukazuje na přínos adaptačního kurzu pro pedagogický sbor a jeho význam pro budování bezpečného a podpůrného školního prostředí. Zážitkové metody jsou zde chápány jako nástroj pro vědomé formování třídní dynamiky a posílení žákovy psychosociální pohody.

Klíčová slova: zážitková pedagogika; adaptace; adaptační kurz

Introduction

The transition from elementary to secondary school is a period of significant change that affects not only academic performance but also the psychosocial development of the individual. This process is associated with a change of environment, new social relationships, and greater demands for independence and responsibility. From a developmental psychology perspective, early adolescence (approximately 12–15 years of age) is a sensitive period when individuals experience an increased need for integration into a group, acceptance by peers, and the formation of their own identity (Erikson, 1968). In the absence of a supportive environment and adequate adaptation, feelings of isolation, loss of self-confidence, and an increased risk of risky behaviour may arise (Hanewald, 2013). The importance of prevention and support during the transition is confirmed by research focused on school adaptation. Kingery, Erdley, and Marshall (2011) point out that negative experiences in the first months at a new school—such as difficulty integrating into the group or lack of support from teachers—can lead to a decline in academic motivation, increased absenteeism, or anxiety. Conversely, well-designed adaptation interventions based on strengthening relationships and social skills have the potential to alleviate these problems.

Experiential learning is an effective methodological framework for developing personal and social skills in adolescents. It is based on the concept of learning through experience, which Kolb (2014) formally developed into the so-called learning cycle. This cycle comprises four phases: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. In practice, this means that the student first experiences something (e.g., a team game), then reflects on what happened and how they felt about it, then formulates general principles (e.g., the importance of cooperation), and finally applies these insights in another situation. Kolb's model has been successfully applied in both formal and informal education, and its effectiveness has been confirmed in a number of studies. The theoretical framework of experiential learning can also be linked to approaches in positive psychology (Seligman, 2011), which emphasizes the importance of supporting strengths, positive emotions, and meaningful experiences. An adaptation course can thus become not only a tool for prevention, but also an opportunity to support the wellbeing of students and teachers.

Benefits of the adaptation course for individual development

The adaptation course is not only a preventive tool facilitating the transition to a new school environment, but also a powerful means for the personal and social development of individuals. This form of intensive group experience creates conditions for the development of key competencies that are important not only for successfully coping with the transition to secondary school, but also for lifelong learning and interpersonal functioning.

One of the most significant benefits of adaptation courses is the promotion of self-awareness, i.e., the ability to recognize one's own strengths and weaknesses, values, ways of responding in different situations, and interactions with others. Through targeted experiential activities and subsequent reflection, students can become aware of their behaviour in a team, their level of empathy, and their ability to take responsibility. This type of learning promotes metacognitive skills, i.e., the ability to think about one's own thinking and behaviour (Zins et al., 2004).

Adaptation courses focus on building and strengthening social skills such as:

- effective communication,
- active listening,
- the ability to cooperate,
- constructive conflict resolution,
- and empathy.

Research shows that participation in experiential learning programs significantly contributes to the improvement of these skills (Conrad & Hedin, 1982). In a safe and structured environment, students have the opportunity to "practice" their skills without fear of evaluation, which facilitates the transfer of experience to school and personal reality.

Experiencing success in more challenging situations, overcoming minor obstacles or tasks in adaptation courses increases students' belief in their own abilities – so-called self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). This inner belief is an important factor not only for school performance but also for overall coping with stressful and new situations. In addition, adaptation programs strengthen resilience—an individual's ability to adapt to change, withstand stress, and recover from difficult events (Masten, 2014).

Transitioning to a new school is often associated with anxiety, fears of unfamiliar surroundings, loneliness, or loss of social support. A structured adaptation program can prevent these phenomena by offering a safe environment for forming new relationships and open communication. Creating a positive first impression of the school and a feeling of acceptance in the class is a key factor in preventing school anxiety and depressive symptoms (Eccles et al., 1993; Benner, 2011).

Adaptation courses also contribute to the development of intrinsic motivation—students are guided toward independence, decision-making, and active participation. This style of leadership promotes autonomy and strengthens feelings of competence and meaningfulness, which are key needs according to self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Motivation to cooperate and learn increases when the process is perceived as meaningful and supportive of personal growth.

The benefits of an adaptation course for individual development are therefore complex and extend to the areas of self-regulation, relationships, and emotional well-being. A well-designed course based on the principles of experiential education can significantly contribute to students' academic success, personal development, and mental health, especially when it is part of a broader strategy to support the school climate.

Adaptation of individuals during the transition to secondary school

The transition from primary to secondary school is one of the key periods of change in an adolescent's life. It is associated not only with a change of environment, new requirements, and a different educational style, but also with the significant developmental tasks of adolescence, which influence the way in which an individual copes with this change. The adaptation process during this period is not uniform, but takes place on various levels – psychosocial, social, emotional, and behavioural – and is influenced by a number of individual and contextual factors.

From a developmental perspective, the transition to secondary school often coincides with early adolescence (approximately 12–15 years of age), when individuals begin to undergo profound changes in identity, autonomy, and relationships. Erikson (1968) describes this phase as a period of developmental conflict between "identity" and "role confusion," and successfully navigating this stage is essential for future psychosocial stability. School plays an important role in this process as an environment where adolescents not only acquire knowledge but also form ideas about themselves, their competence, and their integration into society.

Adaptation difficulties during this period often relate to the disruption of existing social ties (loss of friends, teachers, familiar routines) and the need to cope in a completely new and often anonymous environment (Benner, 2011).

An important aspect of adaptation is the ability to form new peer relationships. Given that group identity and peer acceptance are strong psychological motivators in adolescence, integration into the group is key to successful adaptation. For some individuals, this process may be easy and natural, but others may experience loneliness, social anxiety, or even alienation. Early support and the creation of opportunities for informal contact between students play a crucial role.

A study by Kingery et al. (2011) shows that students who are able to quickly form quality friendships in a new group have lower levels of school anxiety and better academic results. Conversely, loneliness and social isolation are risk factors for school failure and risky behaviour.

The transition to secondary school is also associated with changes in the organization of teaching, work style, and demands on student independence. Unlike elementary school, secondary school teaching is often more structured and specialized, with higher expectations in terms of performance, time management, and personal responsibility. This can be challenging for many adolescents, especially if they lack self-regulation, planning, and learning skills (Eccles & Roeser, 2009).

According to the concept of stage–environment fit theory, adaptation is optimal when the school environment corresponds to the current developmental needs of the student (Eccles et al., 1993). If there is a mismatch—for example, if the school is too authoritarian or insufficiently supportive—it can lead to a decline in motivation, poorer performance, or the emergence of problem behaviour.

Emotional adaptation refers to how the student feels at school—whether they feel safe, accepted, and satisfied. Students who feel in control of the situation and have a supportive environment show higher levels of school wellbeing and lower stress. Conversely, feelings of threat or loss of control can lead to the development of anxiety, psychosomatic difficulties, or avoidant behaviour.

The behavioural component of adaptation manifests itself in attendance, behaviour towards teachers and peers, and involvement in school activities. The relationship with authority figures is also important—teachers who are able to create a welcoming yet structured atmosphere support faster adaptation among students.

Successful adaptation depends on several key factors:

- Family support: active parental interest, emotional support, and open communication reduce stress during the transition.
- School climate: a safe, respectful, and inclusive environment increases the likelihood of positive adaptation.
- Teachers and classmates: positive relationships with teachers and classmates play a crucial role in how students feel and engage in their new environment.
- tructured interventions (e.g., adaptation courses): activities focused on supporting relationships, teamwork, and reflection increase the level of inclusion and reduce social anxiety.

Adaptation course – preparation, implementation, and evaluation

An adaptation course is an educational tool designed to facilitate students' transition to a new school environment through structured activities focused on getting to know each other, building trust, developing cooperation, and establishing a positive classroom atmosphere. The success of an adaptation course depends on its high-quality preparation, effective implementation, and thorough reflection on the results. It is the complexity of this approach that distinguishes it from mere field trips or school trips.

1. Preparation of the adaptation course

The preparatory phase is crucial to ensuring the effectiveness of the adaptation course and should be planned well in advance. It includes several levels:

Analysis of class needs and context – For example, identifying students' previous experiences, possible risks (e.g., inclusion, language barriers, tensions between groups).

- Setting goals – Clearly formulated goals help keep the program on track and evaluate its impact. These may be social goals (promoting teamwork), emotional goals (building trust), or prevention goals (e.g., strengthening resilience to bullying).
- Choosing the location and time – An environment outside of school is recommended, preferably in nature, with plenty of space for movement and interaction.
- Creating a methodological plan – The plan should include not only a list of activities, but also their sequence, timetable, requirements, and forms of evaluation.
- Involvement of the teaching team – Ideally, the class teacher, school psychologist, or educational counsellor or external facilitator with expertise in experiential education should participate in the course.

2. Implementation of the adaptation course

- Practical implementation is usually divided into several phases that mirror the logic of group dynamics:
- Getting to know each other phase – Focuses on reducing barriers and establishing initial contacts. Activities such as "name and movement," group games, or brief sharing of interests are used.

- Cooperation and trust-building phase – Includes team tasks, cooperative games, and simulation activities that require shared responsibility and the involvement of each group member.
- Reflection and sharing – Regular reflection should be an integral part of the course, e.g., in a circle, in writing, or in the form of a guided discussion. Reflection helps students realize what they have experienced, how they reacted, and what they have learned about themselves and others.
- Final activity – The goal is to symbolically conclude the course, evaluate it, and transfer the experience to the school environment (e.g., writing a class decalogue, handing over the "class key," a collage of experiences, etc.).

The course should be flexible and open to changes according to the current situation in the group. Leading the course requires the facilitator's ability to work with emotions, conflicts, and group dynamics.

3. Course assessment and evaluation

The assessment of the adaptation course is an important but sometimes overlooked part of the process. It should take place on three levels:

- Individual evaluation of students – e.g., through questionnaires, feedback forms, or anonymous reflections. Feelings of safety, belonging, trust, and the benefits of individual activities are monitored.
- Evaluation by the teaching team – focused on achieving goals, group functioning, identifying risks, and planning further work with the class.
- Group reflection – e.g., in the form of a class discussion where students have the opportunity to express their experiences, what they liked, what they would change, and what they take away from the course.

In the long term, it is important to follow up the adaptation course with further activities (e.g., class lessons, workshops focusing on communication or conflict resolution) so that the positive effects last and become part of the class culture (Brackett et al., 2019).

The adaptation course is an important element of school prevention and support for student development. However, its benefits depend on the quality of preparation, a well-thought-out structure, and sensitive leadership. If implemented correctly, it has the potential to positively influence not only classroom relationships, but also the motivation, self-confidence, and

overall well-being of individual students and teachers.

Empirical research

This chapter presents the results of qualitative research aimed at examining the use of experiential education in helping students adapt to secondary school. The main research question was:

How are elements of experiential education used in helping students adapt to secondary school?

The empirical research took the form of eight semi-structured interviews with secondary school teachers who have experience with adaptation courses and working with first-year students. The data was analysed using open coding and divided into three main thematic areas corresponding to the sub-research questions.

1. Specifics of students' adaptation to secondary school

The interviews revealed that the initial period after entering secondary school is challenging for students both socially and organizationally. The most frequently mentioned topics were change of environment, uncertainty, transition to greater independence, and fears of a new group of peers.

Students often come from an environment where they had stable relationships and find themselves among strangers, which can lead to feelings of isolation. Another significant topic was the loss of daily parental supervision, especially for students living in boarding schools.

Teachers perceive that starting secondary school brings greater freedom, which not all students are able to use constructively. There is also a tendency to test boundaries, which must be corrected sensitively but consistently.

The adaptation of students is therefore not just an organizational process, but a complex psychosocial change that involves new roles, relationships, and responsibility for their own learning.

2. Means and methods for successful adaptation

Research has shown that the most commonly used tool to support adaptation are adaptation courses, which usually take place at the beginning of the school year. Teachers emphasized the importance of experiential activities, teamwork games, and an informal environment for building relationships.

The courses are organized in various forms—from two-day trips to week-long stays—and are often run in collaboration with external organizations. These activities help to develop trust, cooperation, and mutual understanding among students.

In addition to adaptation courses, class hours, during which teachers include various games, discussions, and reflections, are also an important tool. In some cases, school psychologists also play a supporting role, carrying out individual or group interventions.

Teachers who have been involved in adaptation activities for a long time report that they have a positive impact on the classroom atmosphere and facilitate subsequent work during the school year.

3. Teachers' experience with experiential learning and adaptation courses

Respondents' statements indicate that experiential learning is perceived as an effective tool for supporting student adaptation. Teachers consider it particularly beneficial in the areas of interpersonal relationships, trust building, and creating a positive classroom climate.

However, some respondents point to practical barriers – primarily the time and organizational demands, lack of methodological support, and limited opportunities for further education in this area.

It has been shown that external organizations in particular bring new impetus and inspiration, while also managing to engage students more. Where there is a lack of support from school management or resources, adaptation courses are not implemented at all or are only implemented in a limited form.

The research therefore shows that experiential activities have the potential to be an effective means of adaptation, but their effectiveness depends on a systematic approach, pedagogical support, and space for professional development for teachers.

The research results show that experiential education plays an important role in students' adaptation to secondary school. Adaptation courses and experiential activities help create a positive climate, support classroom relationships, and facilitate students' transition to a new school environment.

Although teachers evaluate experiential education positively, they encounter obstacles that prevent its wider and more systematic use – primarily a lack of time, methodological support, and suitable educational programs. To increase the effectiveness of adaptation processes, it would be advisable to reflect on these barriers and strengthen support for teachers in this area.

Conclusion

The transition from elementary to secondary school represents a significant developmental and social change that places high demands on adolescents in terms of adaptation, identity, autonomy, and relationships. Theoretical knowledge and research findings confirm that this period is particularly risky for the development of anxiety, feelings of insecurity, and disruption of school motivation.

Experiential education—applied mainly in the form of adaptation courses—has proven to be an effective means of supporting this challenging transition. It allows students to develop social skills, strengthens self-awareness, and provides space for building trust in a new group. Teachers confirm that adaptation courses help to create a more cohesive classroom environment, reduce initial tension, and promote well-being at school.

Empirical research has shown that although adaptation programs are very beneficial, their implementation faces certain limitations, particularly in terms of methodological preparation, organizational capacity, and teachers' time constraints. Respondents express the need for greater support in the form of training, sharing of best practices, or involvement of external experts.

In conclusion, adaptation courses are a key tool for preventing school failure and strengthening school belonging. However, for maximum effect, they should be systematically integrated into the broader school strategy, linked to other educational activities, and methodologically supported. In times of psychological stress for the younger generation, the emphasis on the

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SPECIFIC ASPECTS OF SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL WORK WITH ROMA CLIENTS IN THE CONTEXT OF LOW-THRESHOLD FACILITIES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

SPECIFIKA SOCIÁLNĚ VÝCHOVNÉ PRÁCE S ROMSKÝMI KLIENTY V PROSTŘEDÍ NZDM

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Abstract

The paper highlights the specific aspects of working with Roma children and youth from the perspective of staff at low-threshold facilities for children and youth. It begins by describing the characteristics of the Roma minority, including issues related to social exclusion. The text then addresses selected phenomena that may negatively affect Roma children and adolescents. Attention is also given to selected social and pedagogical methods currently employed in socio-educational work with Roma communities. This is followed by a section on low-threshold facilities for children and youth, outlining the nature of this social service, its activities, and guiding principles. The research focuses on the specific features of working with Roma clients as perceived by staff at these facilities. Data collection was conducted using a qualitative research method through semi-structured interviews. The aim is to demonstrate, based on the experiences of low-threshold facility workers, what is typical in working with Roma clients in such settings and to explore the underlying causes of these specific features.

Keywords: Roma; social and educational work; low-threshold facilities for children and youth; minorities

Abstrakt

Příspěvek poukazuje na specifika práce s romskými dětmi a romskou mládeží z pohledu pracovníků nízkoprahových zařízení pro děti a mládež. Nejprve jsou zde popsány charakteristiky romské minority včetně problematiky sociální exkluze. Text se dále věnuje vybraným jevům, které mohou mít negativní vliv na romské děti a mládež. Pozornost je dále věnována vybraným sociálním či pedagogickým metodám, které se aktuálně při sociálně výchovné práci s Romy využívají. Na toto téma navazuje část o nízkoprahových zařízeních

pro děti a mládež, která danou sociální službu a její činnosti a principy popisuje. Výzkum se zaměřuje na specifika práce s romskými klienty optikou pracovníků NZDM. Pro sběr dat byla zvolena kvalitativní metoda zkoumání prostřednictvím polostrukturovaných rozhovorů. Cílem je na základě zkušeností pracovníků nízkoprahových zařízení pro děti a mládež demonstrovat, co je typické pro práci s romskými klienty v nízkoprahovém zařízení pro děti a mládež a z čeho tato specifika pramení.

Klíčová slova: Romové; sociálně výchovná práce; nízkoprahová zařízení pro děti a mládež; minority

Introduction to the current concept of the Roma minority in the context of social exclusion

The Roma minority is one of the most marginalized groups in both the European and Czech social space. Although the Roma constitute the largest ethnic minority in Europe, their position has long been marked by social exclusion, discrimination, and persistent prejudice. In the Czech Republic, only 21,691 people identified as Roma in the last census in 2021, while estimates suggest that there are up to 245,800 members of this minority (Government of the Czech Republic, 2022). This discrepancy reflects the Roma minority's deep-rooted fear of stigmatization and distrust of institutions.

Social exclusion, as defined by Mareš (2000), refers not only to a lack of economic resources, but above all **to the exclusion of individuals and groups from full participation in the political, social, and cultural life of society**. This concept thus goes beyond the traditional understanding of poverty and also reflects factors such as spatial segregation, loss of access to education, employment, healthcare, and civil rights.

Roma are often perceived through stereotypes that have persisted for centuries. These stereotypes are reflected in public opinion and in the everyday practice of social workers. Research shows that Roma children continue to be disproportionately placed in practical schools, which reproduces their disadvantage and limits their future employment opportunities (PAQ Research, STEM, 2022). At the same time, up to half of the Roma population in the Czech Republic lives in conditions of social exclusion (Gruber, 2018), which has a direct impact on their life chances.

This chapter serves as an introductory framework for a professional article entitled *„Specifics of social and educational work with Roma clients in the NZDM environment.*" The aim is to present the basic characteristics of the Roma minority and to define the key aspects of social exclusion that affect the everyday lives of Roma children and youth. These factors are essential for understanding the specifics of work in low-threshold facilities for children and youth (NZDM), which often represent the only safe space where Roma clients can find support, understanding, and opportunities for positive change.

Selected methods used in social education work with minorities

Social and educational work with minorities, especially with the Roma community, requires specific approaches that reflect the cultural differences, historical experiences, and current social conditions of these groups. In practice, three key methodological approaches have proven particularly effective: **intercultural education**, **community work**, and **social work methods**.

Intercultural education promotes mutual understanding between different cultural groups. Unlike multicultural education, which merely recognizes the existence of different cultures, the intercultural approach emphasizes **dialogue, cooperation, and mutual enrichment** (Buryánek et al., 2002). In the context of working with Roma children, the aim is not only to bring their culture closer to the majority society, but also to strengthen their own identity and self-confidence.

Community work focuses on **activating and strengthening the competencies of community members**. In the case of Roma localities, this involves supporting community leaders, facilitating civic activities, and creating safe spaces for meeting and cooperation (Borovičková et al., 2021). An important principle is participation – involving community members themselves in decision-making processes and solving problems that affect them.

Social work with minorities is based on the principles **of respect for human rights, dignity, and cultural diversity**. In socially excluded communities, the main methods used are field work, individual planning, and community service planning (Hajer & Škoda, 2009). The emphasis is on **strengthening clients' self-sufficiency,** preventing socially pathological phenomena, and facilitating access to education, employment, and healthcare.

In addition to the above approaches, other **interactive methods** that promote the active involvement of clients and the development of their competencies have also proven successful in social and educational work with minorities:

- **Project-based teaching** combines theory with practice and promotes independence, cooperation, and creativity.
- **Group work** develops social skills, mutual respect, and the ability to communicate within heterogeneous groups.
- **Dramatization and simulation games** allow clients to explore different roles, situations, and attitudes, thereby developing empathy, self-reflection, and the ability to resolve conflicts.
- **Brainstorming** promotes creativity and active participation by all group members.

- **Discussions** serve to clarify attitudes, formulate opinions, and develop argumentation skills.

These methods are particularly suitable in low-threshold facilities, where the goal is not only education but also strengthening clients' identity, self-confidence, and ability to actively participate in society. Their use requires a sensitive approach, respect for differences, and the ability to facilitate the learning process. In the context of working with the Roma minority, it appears that interactive and experiential forms of education have the potential to overcome barriers, promote inclusion, and create a safe environment for personal development.

The role of NZDM environments in working with the Roma minority

Low-threshold facilities for children and youth (NZDM) are a key element in the social services network that responds to the needs of Roma youth at risk of social exclusion. Their environment is specifically designed to eliminate barriers to access, whether spatial, temporal, financial, or psychological (Act No. 108/2006 Coll.). The low-threshold principle allows clients to access the service without the need for a formal commitment, which is particularly important for children and young people from Roma communities, who often face mistrust of institutions (Hirt, Jakoubek et al., 2006).

The NZDM environment creates a safe space where Roma children can form relationships, gain support, and develop their skills. The emphasis on voluntariness, anonymity, and a partnership approach contributes to building trust, which is key when working with the Roma minority (Zemanová & Dolejš, 2015). NZDM also offers opportunities for meaningful leisure activities, thereby preventing risky behavior and promoting positive social inclusion (Chovancová, 2023).

A specific benefit of NZDM is also individual work with clients, which reflects their cultural and social context. Facility staff often fill in for missing role models and provide support in areas such as education, relationships, and emotional management. The NZDM environment thus plays an irreplaceable role in supporting Roma youth on their path to greater self-sufficiency and integration into society.

Insight into the specifics of social and educational work with roma clients through the eyes of NZDM social workers

A qualitative strategy was chosen for data collection in the form of semi-structured interviews with five NZDM social workers, specifically two men and three women aged 22 to 46 with between 8 months and 11 years of experience. On the one hand, the number of informants (hereinafter referred to by the abbreviations I1-I5) is a certain limitation of the study, but we

managed to conduct interviews with workers who come not only from different NZDMs but also from different cities. Nevertheless, we are aware that our research provides only a small insight into the issue under investigation and therefore the results cannot be generalized in any way. The aim is to demonstrate what is typical for working with Roma clients in NZDM and where these specifics originate. The main research question is therefore: „What are the specifics of social and educational work with Roma clients from the perspective of NZDM social workers?“

At the beginning of the interviews, the informants mentioned various motivations that led them to work with the Roma minority, which they perceive as a group often exposed to prejudice. The right motivation is essential in the NZDM environment, as it contributes to resilience to psychological stress and reduces the risk of burnout, which is relatively common in this field. The responses did not reveal any attitudes based on prejudice against Roma; on the contrary, there was a prevailing interest in Roma culture, an effort to contribute to changing stereotypical perceptions, and a need to offer children a safe and supportive environment. Most workers perceive their work as meaningful, which can be considered a key protective factor.

The interviews also revealed that prejudice against the Roma minority often comes from the workers‘ surroundings. They encounter misunderstanding, belittlement, or open criticism of their profession and are thus forced to defend their work or remain silent about it. This pressure can negatively affect their mental well-being, which is why it is important for them to be internally motivated and convinced of the meaningfulness of their work.

Another source of prejudice may be the workers themselves. Some declared that they had no prejudices, while others admitted that working with Roma clients had caused them to reevaluate their previous stereotypes, such as the inability of Roma to respect rules or authority. However, they all agreed that prejudice is risky in this work and that it is necessary to approach clients individually, based on their specific behavior, not their ethnicity. One of the informants noted that a worker who approaches Roma clients openly and with respect is able to perceive their positive aspects, while those who act on the basis of prejudice usually only confirm their prejudices. It follows that a positive attitude towards the Roma minority is desirable not only when joining an NZDM, but also throughout one‘s entire professional career.

There was consensus among workers that Roma clients exhibit specific behavioral traits that significantly influence the nature of social education work. The most frequently mentioned aspect was strong family cohesion and community solidarity. This dynamic manifests itself, for example, in collective reactions to perceived injustices, where a wider group of clients becomes involved in a situation concerning an individual. The tendency to form separate Roma and non-Roma groups can also have a negative impact on the atmosphere in the facility.

Another notable feature is the focus on the present, which is typical of part of the Roma population. This attitude complicates long-term planning, reduces motivation to pursue education, and affects attitudes toward health and financial issues. Therefore, NZDM workers must adapt their interventions to reflect this time perspective.

Another significant challenge is the initial distrust of Roma clients towards staff, often stemming from negative experiences with institutions. Informants agreed that the key tool for overcoming this barrier is knowledge of Roma culture and respect for its specific characteristics. The cultural competence of staff greatly helps to establish trust and supports relationship building.

Informants also pointed to the temperamental and emotionally expressive behavior of Roma clients, which is characterized by immediacy, loudness, and impulsiveness. This style of communication requires a high degree of tolerance from workers, as well as the ability to

sensitively set boundaries and explain appropriate forms of behavior. Last but not least, the difference in the parenting styles of Roma families was mentioned, which is reflected in the value framework of children and young people. Workers must therefore actively promote mutual understanding and cultivate dialogue between clients and the majority society.

The specifics of working with Roma children and youth in NZDM are closely related to their unfavorable social situation and the type of cases they come to the facility with. Most often, these are cases related to education, school attendance, and academic performance. Informants repeatedly pointed to the influence of the family environment, which can be demotivating – children often adopt the attitudes of their parents, who do not perceive education as a priority. It follows that a negative attitude towards school, truancy, and low motivation to learn have their roots in the family background.

Another important area is leisure time behavior. Roma clients often spend their time in an unorganized manner, without structure or purpose. NZDM thus serves as a safe space that offers alternatives to risky behavior. This situation is often caused by material deprivation, which makes it impossible to participate in paid activities outside of school.

Social workers have also identified specific characteristics of Roma families, in particular their community-based lifestyle, multigenerational households, and strong ties to their neighborhood environment. This model contributes to cohesion and collective action, which can manifest itself, for example, in the defense of an individual by the whole group.

When asked whether these specific characteristics are determined by ethnicity, most informants stated that they see the main causes in social and economic conditions, not in ethnicity itself. Only a minority of respondents perceived cultural differences as the primary factor, emphasizing the influence of a specific culture on individual behavior.

At the end of the interviews, the workers proposed measures to improve work with the Roma minority. They most often mentioned the need to increase public awareness of Roma culture, develop individual work, facilitate access to social assistance, support education, and increase the representation of Roma workers in social services. They also considered the existence of positive Roma role models who could motivate the younger generation to be key.

Conclusion

The research shows that working with Roma clients in low-threshold facilities for children and youth has a number of specific features related not only to the cultural and social context of the clients, but also to the nature of the low-threshold environment itself. It is precisely the principles of low-threshold services – such as voluntariness, anonymity, openness, and barrier-free access – that create a space where Roma children and youth can build trust, develop their skills, and seek support without fear of rejection or stigmatization. Low-threshold service workers agree that the safe and informal environment of the facility is a key prerequisite for establishing relationships with clients, who often come with a distrust of institutions and authorities.

The specifics of working with Roma clients in the NZDM environment are reflected in particular in the need for a flexible approach, the ability to work with collective dynamics (e.g., strong family cohesion), and an emphasis on individual planning that reflects a present-oriented lifestyle. Low-threshold facilities are thus not only a place of intervention, but also a space for everyday socialization, prevention of risky behavior, and reinforcement of positive patterns. The research results confirm that if the worker is motivated, culturally sensitive, and able to utilize the potential of the NZDM environment, this service can play a crucial role in supporting Roma youth on their path to greater self-sufficiency and integration into society.

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THE FACE OF RELATIONSHIP: THE FORMATION OF JEWISH WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS IDENTITY BETWEEN THE CZECH REPUBLIC AND ISRAEL

TVÁŘ VZTAHU: FORMOVÁNÍ NÁBOŽENSKÉ IDENTITY ŽIDOVSKÝCH ŽEN MEZI ČESKEM A IZRAELEM

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Abstract

This paper presents a thematically focused segment of a broader dissertation project that explores how Jewish women living in the Czech Republic and Israel reflect on their identity, responsibility, and relationship to the Other in the context of memory, upbringing, and wartime experience after October 7, 2023. The theoretical framework is grounded in Emmanuel Levinas's concept of the Face as an ethical appeal and a site of interpersonal encounter. The study does not offer empirical findings but serves as a conceptual and methodological grounding for research based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Keywords: religious identity; Jewish women; the Face of the Other; upbringing in crisis; war and spirituality

Abstrakt

Příspěvek představuje tematicky vymezenou část širšího disertačního výzkumu, který zkoumá, jak židovské ženy žijící v České republice a Izraeli reflektují svou identitu, víru, odpovědnost a vztah k druhému v kontextu paměti, výchovy a válečné zkušenosti po 7. říjnu 2023. Teoretickým východiskem je pojetí Tváře Emmanuela Lévinase jako etického apelu a místa mezilidského setkání. Studie nepředkládá empirické závěry, ale slouží jako konceptuální a metodologické ukotvení výzkumu, jenž se opírá o interpretativní fenomenologickou analýzu (IPA).

Klíčová slova: náboženská identita; židovské ženy; tvář druhého; výchova v krizi; válka a spiritualita

Introduction

In moments of uncertainty and rapid transformation of the world around us, fundamental existential questions emerge: Who are we? What shapes us? How do we stand in relation to the Other? These questions gain urgency when war enters a person's life, together with the experience of threat, uprootedness, or loss. In such emotionally charged circumstances, religious identity may not only serve as a point of reassurance but also provide a resource for resilience and spiritual orientation (Shevchuk, Shevchuk, & Zaitsev, 2023). Here, identity becomes a process in which individuals strive to preserve wholeness under conditions of existential rupture. As Binder (2022) notes, "choices and actions grounded in the awareness of these life contexts and in an understanding of the existential vulnerability contained within them can be regarded as the core of authentic personal identity" (p. 2237). Thus, the relation to existential vulnerability plays a crucial role in the way individuals shape their identity in a constantly shifting world. In this respect, the text also touches the sociopathological discourse, as it reflects the impact of crisis and traumatization on the subject, family, and community, while at the same time tracing how spiritual structures can provide resources for overcoming such rupture.

This text turns to the stories of Jewish women living in the Czech Republic and Israel and anticipates how they perceive their faith, identity, and place in the world under the current circumstances. The effort of the research is to approach the experience of the Other in its concrete, personal form. For this purpose, I employ a philosophical–ethical framework rooted in Lévinas' concept of the Face, which I understand as a call to responsibility and as a space where alterity manifests itself in a way that cannot be bypassed. Through this relation, profound existential questions may be uncovered.

Within this perspective, I pay particular attention to how women who speak about their religious practice reflect the influences of environment, upbringing, family tradition, and cultural expectations. Although this text captures only one thematic strand of a broader research project, it formulates several guiding questions that structure the forthcoming empirical inquiry:

- How did family upbringing and socialization shape the religious identity of these Jewish women? What specific values, habits, and attitudes were transmitted in childhood, and how did they imprint themselves on their faith and spiritual orientation in adulthood?
- In what ways do the experiences of faith and religious practice differ between women in the Czech Republic and Israel?
- What roles do intergenerational memory and family storytelling play in the

formation of religious identity? How do narratives of survival, loss, migration, continuity of faith, or trauma shape moral and spiritual orientations?

- What role does the concept of the Face of the Other play in these women's life stories? How do experiences of interpersonal encounter become a call to responsibility—toward others, toward oneself, and the Transcendent?
- How have the wartime events of October 7, 2023, been inscribed into the spiritual life and educational strategies of these women? Have their faith, their need for ritual, their levels of trust or anxiety changed? How have these events influenced the way they raise children (if they are mothers), share values, or seek meaning?

The aim is to listen to how the women themselves understand, interpret, and articulate their experience of religious practice in the context of everyday life, social variables, and the ethical relation to the Other.

The Face

The Face comes as an appeal, as the idea of infinity (Lévinas, 2020, p. 170), which disrupts the self-evidence of my world and simultaneously raises the question of what, within me, is shaped by the very presence of the Other. The Face of the Other is not merely an image, but a call; it bears within itself their presence, their alterity, which approaches me as an appeal to responsibility. Through this Face, not only does the Other reveal themself, but also how the I is capable of seeing, hearing, understanding, and being affected. Education, then, is not merely a social process of transmitting values, but also takes place in the sphere of intersubjective encounter, where ethical experience and pedagogical act intersect. The Face of the Other speaks even without words, and its eloquence is the beginning of moral consciousness—something that cannot be fully grasped conceptually, but can be experienced as disruption, summons, and responsibility. And how does this experience affect my self, transforming it, addressing it, and at the same time placing it under responsibility? Isn't the tragedy of a modern man the result of being a creature that has forgotten to ask: *Who is man?* (Heschel, 2017, p. 14). How does his authentic existence manifest itself in the inner space (Heschel, 2017, p. 15) through the Face?

A way in which a human being experiences oneself about the Other contains both ontological and ethical dimensions. The relation to the Other is not merely a framework for interaction; it is a constitutive element of personal identity. Martin Buber expresses this interconnectedness in the following words: "I become truly myself only through my relation to the Thou; becoming myself, I say Thou" (Buber, 2016, p. 14). He thus indicates that subjectivity is realized only through relational determination—through the address of the Thou. The alterity of the

Other shapes and transforms the way individuals exist in the world, and thereby the way they understand reality around them. Encounter with the Other thus becomes an ethical event, which not only discloses the interpersonal dimension of existence but also demands the acceptance of responsibility. This responsibility is neither optional nor conditioned by reciprocity; it is part of the very essence of human coexistence.

Limit Experience and Ethical Disruption after October 7 as Social Determinants

These conceptual foundations reveal themselves as profoundly relevant considering the events that followed the attack on Israel on October 7, 2023 (Saposnik, 2024). In the atmosphere of a limit experience, an experience of evil, powerlessness, threat, and loss, the ethical relation to the Other discloses itself with renewed urgency. It does not remain an abstract idea but transforms into a concrete experience in which the subject is existentially confronted with the vulnerability of the Other, and thereby with one's ethical situatedness.

This experience, however, is not confined to women living in Israel. Women in the Czech Republic who identify with Judaism also live through these events as an intrusion into their own spiritual and ethical space. Even though they are not directly physically endangered, they perceive the pain of the community as their own; they share anxieties, uncertainties, and the need to rethink the boundaries between their identity, solidarity, and the public sphere. Thus, the limit situation proves to be *translocal*, affecting not only the body but also identity, memory, and spiritual belonging, as shown in research on existential resilience in the everydayness of war (Shevchuk, Shevchuk, & Zaitsev, 2023).

In this context, one cannot avoid the question: What does the face of the Other mean where human dignity is systematically denied? The Face—in the Levinasian sense—is not merely a visual phenomenon but an expression that speaks even in silence; a summons that addresses even when it articulates no message. Where the face is no longer recognized as face, where it is instrumentalized, humiliated, exposed as an object, what takes place is not only physical violence but a rupture in the very ethical structure of the human world (for example, the event of the release of Israeli hostages after 491 days of captivity).

Women's Experience in the Context of War

Facing a confrontation with war, there is a need arising within the human being, a need to understand not only through logical explanation but also through attentive listening to one's own lived experience and relationships with others. The Face of the Other—as Lévinas writes—resists being reduced to an object or content (Lévinas, 2020, p. 168). I proceed

from the assumption that women living in cultural and geographical proximity to war, who share the Jewish tradition, undergo a profound inner transformation, not only in how they understand themselves, but also in the way they form relationships, seek meaning, and bear responsibility for transmitting values to the next generation. The experience of war likely affects their attitudes toward upbringing, not only on the practical level of care, but also in what and how they wish to convey to their children about the world, about faith, and humanity.

Questions resonating with the themes of my planned research are also articulated by Shiri Levinas and Nitza Berkovitch (2020) in their study of women's narratives from Ofakim, a peripheral Israeli town struck by conflict. The women in their research oscillate between an acute awareness of threat and the effort to preserve everyday life. Motherhood emerges as a key motif, an active, ethically grounded force that transcends traditional gender frameworks. Their narratives, albeit indirectly, disclose Levinas' "Face" as an appealing presence that cannot be bypassed. The experiences of these women are not universal; rather, they arise from concrete conditions of marginalization and uncertainty, and it is precisely in this situatedness that they acquire ethical urgency.

Methodological Note

The research is based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which focuses on subjective experience and the meaning individuals ascribe to that experience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 6). It does not aim to identify general patterns or construct typologies. Rather, it is oriented toward a detailed understanding of how women themselves interpret their experiences in relation to the world, to others, and their own inner life. All research activities are conducted by the ethical principles of qualitative research and have been approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Hradec Králové.

Within the preliminary phase of the research, I have already created personal portraits of five women living in Israel. These portraits will serve as contextual grounding for the subsequent research process. The main research phase is yet to begin. It will involve in-depth semi-structured interviews in Czech, which will be recorded and transcribed verbatim. The research sample consists of two groups of women aged 20 to 40. The first group comprises Czech women who identify with Judaism and live in Israel, while the second group consists of women living in the Czech Republic.

These interviews will be complemented by an ongoing reflexive diary. The diary is not only a means of capturing details of the research situation but also a space for recording my reactions and questions. I will consciously attend to what is easily overlooked: pauses,

repetitions, hesitations, shifts in tone. Reflexivity here forms part of the responsibility for how the research unfolds (Gulová & Šíp, 2013, p. 107).

The similarity between the narratives of women from Ofakim and the anticipated structure of the narratives in my research shows that this work will not be merely a matter of data collection. The research situation opens itself as a relation, a shared space in which language, experience, and vulnerability meet. It is not about speaking *for* the Other but about being *with* the Other, in openness to her word. In this sense, research itself transforms. The methodological framework becomes a space of encounter, where ethics precedes the very articulation of data. Responsibility begins before the first question is asked.

This proximity, however, carries both methodological and ethical risks, above all, the risk of projecting my meanings. Reflexive practice, articulating one's positions, expectations, and emotional reactions, becomes a tool for making present what enters the interpretative field.

The purpose of this approach lies not only in enhancing the validity of the research but also in its anthropological reach. The human being becomes intelligible not through strength but through vulnerability. In times of crisis, vulnerability emerges with the greatest urgency, as the vulnerability of the body, of relationship, of memory, and of the entire ethical world. As Gutman and Landau (2024) show, the collective trauma of the Jewish community after October 7 has generated new questions concerning the ethical and communal grounding of resilience, including how faith and religious identity become tools of orientation in a lost moral horizon. In this context, philosophy is not a luxury but an attempt at orientation. How can one think a human being when the world itself is collapsing?

Conclusion

This paper has thematized the significance of the Face as an ethical appeal that situates upbringing and religious socialization within a relational framework. It suggests that the formation of religious identity cannot be understood in isolation from social determinants: family environment, cultural memory, and the experience of threat. A phenomenological analysis of the subjective accounts of Jewish women in the Czech Republic and Israel thus opens a space for exploring identity as an intersubjective process in which education in a state of crisis plays a crucial role. Here, the concept of the Face is not only a philosophical metaphor but also a tool for capturing interpersonal responsibility and pedagogical ethics born in the presence of the Other.

In this perspective, subjectivity may be understood not as a stable entity but as a response, and as a relational event realized in the situation of being addressed. The events of October 7, 2023, represent in this context an ethical disruption that transforms the way women experience

faith, responsibility, and their relation to themselves and others. Thus, the research emerges as a task of a dual nature—both methodological and ethical—where the two cannot be separated. It may also be seen as a modest attempt to respond to the question of what it means to preserve one's face in a time when everything is being called into question *face to face*.

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ACTA SOCIOPATHOLOGICA IX

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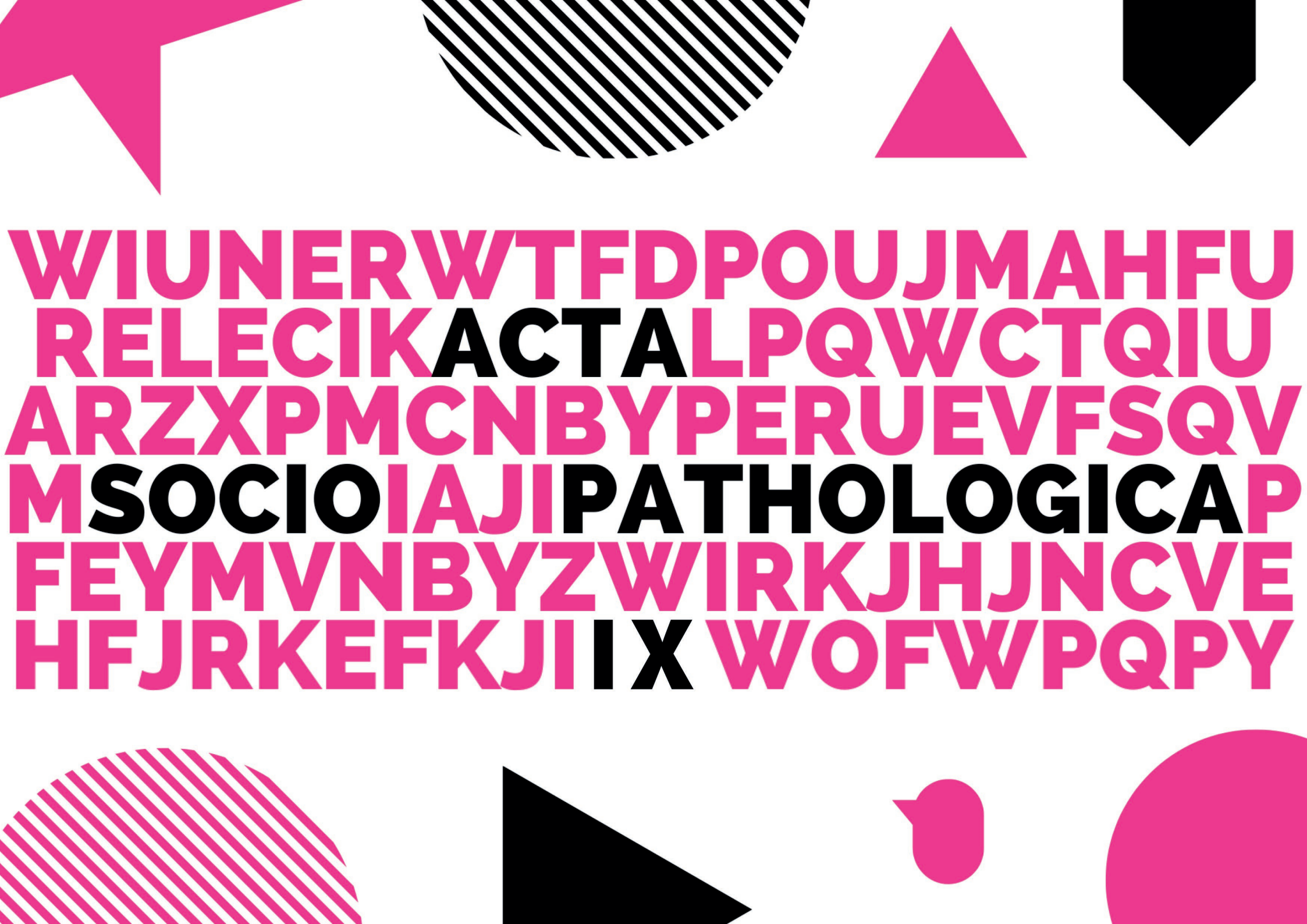
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