

Social-educational Work with a Problem Pupil in a Czech Primary School

Sociálně-výchovná práce s problémovým žákem v české základní škole
Stanislava Svoboda Hoferková¹, Tereza Matoušková²

Abstract:

This paper presents a problem pupil in a Czech primary school. First, it characterizes problem behaviour and terminology associated with it, touching upon the aetiology and manifestations. It introduces the school counselling system and defines the competences of individual subjects. It touches upon the educational measures that can be applied, including the cooperating organisations involved in the process of working with a pupil with problem behaviour.

Keywords:

Problem pupil; primary school; social-educational action; Czech Republic

Abstrakt:


Příspěvek představuje problémového žáka v české základní škole. Nejprve charakterizuje problémové chování a terminologii s tím spojenou, dotýká se etiologie a projevů. Představuje školský poradenský systém a vymezuje kompetence jednotlivých subjektů. Dotýká se výchovných opatření, která mohou být uplatněna, včetně spolupracujících organizací, které se zapojují do procesu práce s žákem s problémovým chováním.


Klíčová slova:

Problémový žák; základní škola; sociálně-výchovné působení; Česká republika

1 Definition of problem behaviour

Czech terminology is rich in many terms used to describe behaviour that deviates from accepted norms (see, for example, Hoferková, 2015). Individual terms are charged to the specific discipline or field or environment in which they are used. These terms include, for example, risky behaviour, which has become domesticated in the school environment, but equally problem behaviour (or child with problem behaviour, problem pupil, problem class, etc.), conduct disorder (or child with conduct disorder), delinquent behaviour, anomalous and abnormal behaviour, deviant or socially pathological behaviour,

¹ Institute of Social Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Hradec Králové, The Czech Republic, stanislava.svoboda@uhk.cz, ORCID 

² Department of Special Education, Faculty of Education, Charles University, The Czech Republic, matouskova.tereza@email.cz, ORCID 

antisocial, dissociative, criminal behaviour, etc. At this point we will briefly introduce the terminology used in this paper, i.e. problem behaviour.

The term problem behaviour is most often associated with the school environment and the behaviour of the pupil(s); the term is also used in the phrase problem classroom. As the phrase 'problem behaviour' suggests, it is behaviour that is unwanted, undesirable, an obstacle to the educational objectives of the school institution, and that needs to be addressed. Fontana (2014) also understands problem behaviour as behaviour that is unacceptable to educators. However, he adds that a behaviour is only perceived as problematic if a particular teacher evaluates it as such.

Problem behaviour is a terminology that belongs to the special education discipline of etopedics. (Vojtová, 2008b) Compared to a "true" behavioural disorder, problem behaviour is characterised by milder undesirable behavioural manifestations, a limited duration of time and motivation to change. In most cases, problem behaviour can be successfully addressed by conventional pedagogical means. Vojtová (2008a) points out that a pupil who faces behavioural problems is aware of his/her difficulties, perceives them negatively and tries to eliminate them. He unintentionally violates the established norms because of the conflict between external demands and his internal dispositions and possibilities. Problems are short-lived and may occur sporadically or at certain times. The label "problem learner" evokes unpleasant emotions in the individual. According to Presslerová (2013), problem behaviours should be considered in relation to the child's current life situation (e.g., family conflicts) and a developmental perspective, where specific behaviours may be a normal part of development (e.g., a period of defiance in the third year). The developmental aspect is more widely taken into account in pre-school education.

The term problem behaviour is used in a similar or the same sense as **risky behaviour**. Risk behaviour is then defined as behaviour that poses a risk of harm to the health of the pupil or his/her environment, in the biopsychosocial understanding of the word health. Risk behaviour includes a range of phenomena from substance abuse to risky behaviour in transport or risky sports.

The Czech School Inspectorate (Česká školní inspekce, CSI, 2021) has chosen the term **challenging behaviour** as an umbrella term for children's behaviour that deviates significantly from the expected behaviour for a given age and negatively affects learning and relationships at school. "Rather than the more traditional term problem behaviour, this term emphasises the fact that the assessment of a child's behaviour is always a subjective matter, as it is based on the expectations, preferences and experiences of the person assessing the pupil's behaviour... The perception of the challenging behaviour of particular children is based on the individual expectations and personal characteristics of individual teachers. This needs to be reflected in the setting of preventive measures and in the implementation of intervention in the case of already present challenging behaviour." (Česká školní inspekce, 2021, p. 10)

The manifestations of problem behaviour are varied; the common denominator is deviation from the usual and expected standards of behaviour in the school environment. Typical manifestations of problem behaviour include disrespect for authority, failure to follow instructions, classroom disruptions, cheating, discipline problems, lying, stealing, truancy, excessive attention-getting and, last but not least, physical and verbal aggression (e.g. HutYROVÁ, 2013; Presslerová, 2013). Some of these behaviours are rarely registered on school grounds, some more frequently (e.g. lying). Kaleja (2013) points out two types

of pupils with problem behaviour. These are pupils who are disruptive during class, and on the other hand, there are pupils who refuse to work and follow the teacher's instructions during class. Auger and Boucharlat (2005) define four subcategories of pupils who disrupt during class. These are restless, conflicting, provoking and aggressive pupils.

The etiology of problem behavior is multifactorial (e.g., Vágnerová, 2008; Adamus et al., 2016; HutYROVÁ, 2019).

2 Social-educational work and school counselling system

The term social-educational activity/work is not yet so common in the Czech environment, although it seems appropriate. Kraus (e.g., 2014, p. 112) refers to social-educational activity as, among other things, the action of the school and defines it as "helping teachers to orient pupils in contemporary everyday life, to cope with life situations and to actively participate in social life." Among the tasks of social educational activities (Kraus, 2014, p. 114):

- to prevent deviations in pupils' behaviour within the school,
- promote the social competences of children and young people through targeted events and activities,
- to act as an intermediary between extra-curricular work and school activities,
- to look after different groups of pupils in agreement with teachers and pupils,
- and to alert parents of disabled, socially or otherwise disadvantaged pupils to assistance and support programmes.

The common goal of all these activities is "educational assistance for coping with life and self-help" (Kraus et. al., 2001, pp. 58-59). It is clear from the above that social educational work does not have to take place only in schools. Therefore, social-educational work can be understood in the broadest sense as the action of professionals in the school and out-of-school environment in the field of prevention of risky behaviour of children and youth, its early detection and early intervention (Hoferková, 2017).

The term "**preventive educational care**" appears in Czech legislation, specifically in Act No.109/2002 Coll. (zákon č. 109/2002 Sb.), on the performance of institutional education or protective education in school establishments and on preventive educational care in school establishments, and belongs as an activity of educational care centres.

In the Slovak environment, the term /preventive/ social-educational work is used for various activities, especially those of social pedagogues (e.g. Hroncová et al., 2013). We find this designation very appropriate, especially because the position of social pedagogue is slowly but surely becoming established in Czech schools. Preventive educational care can then be understood as part of social and educational work with children and youth.

In the Czech Republic, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MEST) plays a crucial role in primary and secondary prevention of risky behaviour. Social and educational work in the school environment is fulfilled by the so-called **school counselling system**, which is regulated by Decree No 72/2005 Coll. (vyhláška č. 72/2005 Sb.), on the provision of counselling services in schools and school counselling facilities, as amended. This system rests on two basic pillars. The first pillar consists of school counselling centres, while the second is represented by specialised teaching staff in schools, who may be assigned to a school counselling centre set up by the headmaster.

School counselling centres include pedagogical-psychological counselling centres (PPP), special education centres (SPC) and, since 1991, educational care centres (SVP). These centres work closely with schools to provide advice and assistance in the field of social and pedagogical counselling, care for pupils with disabilities and help prevent the emergence and development of negative behavioural manifestations in children. The second pillar of the counselling system consists of the teaching staff themselves, who work in primary and secondary schools. Specialized pedagogical workers in schools include an educational counselor, a school prevention methodologist and a school psychologist, or even a school special educator (more e.g. Hoferková, 2016).

For many years now, the need to establish a full-time social care and counselling specialist at the school with a relevant university degree has been intensively discussed. It seems appropriate to follow the model presented in Slovakia - i.e. a social pedagogue in the school environment (e.g. Hroncová et al.). The social pedagogue would thus be a professional - a specialist trained through undergraduate preparation, whose job would be to prevent risky behaviour (Emmerová, 2014). Currently, Czech schools already have dozens of social pedagogues and we can only hope that in the future there will be a legislative anchoring of the social pedagogue in the school environment.

3 Social-educational work with problem pupils

Education is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. The Education Act, Act No. 561/2004 Coll., as amended, regulates all matters relating to basic education. Compulsory schooling lasts nine years, coinciding with primary education; pupils generally attend primary school between the ages of 6 and 15. For all pupils, and in particular for pupils with special educational needs, the head teacher is obliged to provide counselling services.

Educational measures are a key element of the pedagogical process aimed at addressing and supporting pupils with risky and problematic behaviour. These measures are introduced to improve pupils' behaviour, create an environment for effective learning and contribute to pupils' overall development. According to the Education Act (zákon č. 561/2004 Sb.), disciplinary measures and praise or other awards fall under educational measures. These measures are granted or imposed on pupils of a school depending on their fulfilment of their obligations under the school's regulations.

Disciplinary measures are among the common measures used in connection with problem behaviour of pupils. According to Decree No. 48/2005 Coll., as amended, these disciplinary measures are imposed in the event of violations of school rules. The measures include a reprimand by the class teacher, a reprimand by the class teacher and a reprimand by the school principal.

The school also has measures to curb aggressive behaviour and violence by pupils, some of which are relevant in the case of bullying. These remedial measures include the establishment of an individual educational programme, the reduction of the pupil's behavioural grade, the transfer of the pupil to another class, and the recommendation to the parents for the voluntary placement of the pupil in a residential unit of an educational care centre or a diagnostic institute. In case of serious bullying, it is also possible to consider expulsion from school, which can only be implemented in a situation where the pupil is no longer attending compulsory school and is therefore in secondary education (Ministerstvo školství, mládeže a tělovýchovy ČR, 2016).

Mertin, Krejčová et al. (2013) state that the concept of the **Individual Educational Programme** (hereinafter IVýP) was created in 2010 by transforming the original concept of "contracts with parents." This approach is based on parallels with the individual education plan implemented by educational care centres and the individual education plan for pupils with special educational needs. The IVýP focuses on the prevention of problem behaviour and the intervention of undesirable behaviour that has already occurred. The formal development of an IEP occurs when standard methods of dealing with educational problems are not effective. According to the Czech School Inspectorate (Česká školní inspekce, 2017), the IVýP is one of the intervention tools aimed at addressing risky and problematic behaviour, which was developed in response to the increasing manifestations of such behaviour. It is applied when the educational process is significantly disrupted. This concept involves a complex cooperation between the educational institution, the pupil himself, the pupil's legal representative or other interested parties. The main objective of IVEP is to eliminate risky behaviour and prevent potential negative consequences of such behaviour.

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (Ministerstvo školství, mládeže a tělovýchovy, 2013) points out that the individual educational programme provides "a space for mutual dialogue and the opportunity to seek and set up appropriate support for the pupil/legal representative to acquire the necessary competences..." (Ministerstvo školství, mládeže a tělovýchovy, 2013) The cooperation of the parties involved is based on commitment, in contrast to the aforementioned interviews, and thus increases the likelihood of successful outcomes.

Parents are not obliged to sign the IEP, but the school has the right to create individual educational programmes without parental consent, however, only those measures that fall within the exclusive competence of the school will be implemented. The plan should include a commitment to regular progress review meetings with a frequency of days or weeks at most. The development is a one-off exercise, but the final effectiveness will be judged mainly in the subsequent systematic care of all stakeholders (Mertin & Krejčová et al., 2013).

In 2002, the Ministry of Education of the Czech Republic issued a guideline for dealing with high and unexcused absenteeism and truancy, which mentions the so-called **educational committee** as one of the corrective measures. (Ministerstvo školství, mládeže a tělovýchovy, 2002) The Czech School Inspectorate (Česká školní inspekce, 2017) states that the reasons for the application of this instrument are nowhere officially defined. The thematic report shows that schools address not only high absenteeism, but also educational problems and other manifestations of problem behaviour in the form of an educational committee. The main and unquestionable advantage of using this form of measure is the direct contact of all relevant stakeholders. It also has the advantage of immediately agreeing on proposals for further procedures. The educational committee functions as an optional body of the school, whose meetings are convened by the headmaster as necessary. The educational committee consists of the aforementioned headmaster, the legal representative of the minor pupil, the class teacher, the school counselling centre, a representative of the OSPOD (Orgán sociálně-právní ochrany dítěte, Social and Legal Protection of Children) and, where appropriate, representatives of other authorities and organisations (e.g. the Police of the Czech Republic).

The educational committee may be convened before the individual educational programme is drawn up or after it has been drawn up. Typically, however, it takes place

after an interview with the pupil and his/her legal representative (Asociace sociálních pedagogů, 2023).

Support measures for pupils with problem behaviour are based on the concept of non-specific prevention of risky behaviour. These measures may be preventive in nature or respond to emerging problem behaviour as intervention measures. According to Zapletalová and Mrázková (2016), support measures are designed with regard to the manifestations of the pupil's problem behaviour and the goal to be achieved through the measures. The measures then take place not only at the school level, but also at the family level. The school is able to provide adjustments to the environment, teaching style or even the ratio of workload and rest. The family should, first and foremost, ensure that communication styles are adjusted, that time for work and play is structured appropriately and that homework is assisted. The family also provides significant support and control for the pupil. By working together, the school and the family can set up a consistent system of motivation and assessment to be used in working with the pupil.

The school may support a pupil with challenging behaviour through **Tier I. support measures**, which do not have to be approved by the school counselling centre. The application of these support measures should begin early. In the first level of support, according to Zapletalová and Mrázková (2016), measures focus on correcting common deviations from expected behaviour. However, it is essential to find the causes that trigger the undesirable behaviour. In case of suspicion of more serious risky behaviour, school counselling staff refer to other institutions and specialists such as psychologists, psychiatrists and others.

Different strategies can be chosen in response to specific manifestations of challenging behaviour. Brodská, Dubec and Vaníčková (2015-2024) describe the first option as increasing supervision during breaks, then avoiding situations that have previously triggered problematic behaviour in a given pupil. Organisational adjustments to the environment, workplace and learning conditions are also among the effective measures, including temporarily moving the pupil away from other classmates, thus eliminating a potential source for the emergence of undesirable behaviour. The use of praise and rewards encourages desirable behaviour, while the use of warning signals and sanctions dampens undesirable behaviour. Elements of relaxation, physical release, self-reflection and expressing one's own feelings are also important. Group and individual interventions can be used (see, e.g., Kucharská & Mrázková, 2014), or social skills training during and outside of class (Vaňková, 2015-2024).

In the United States, schools use, for example, "Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports" (PBIS), an approach that can be loosely translated as "Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports," for which a key component is to teach students positive and desirable behaviors and, conversely, to minimize the learning of problem behaviors. (Horner, Macaya, 2018) This set of methods has recently been implemented in Czech schools, which are applying the method under the supervision of Society for All (Society for All, 2023).

There is a wide range of techniques, methods and approaches that can be used when working with a student with problem behaviour. However, it is important to take into account the specific needs of each individual and then tailor the course and process of interventions to the needs and goals of the pupil.

4 Research probe focused on intervention of problem behaviour of pupils

In this section, we present a research probe that aimed to look into the work of a particular primary school with troubled pupils (more Matoušková, 2024). For the purpose of the probe, it was mapped what behaviours are assessed by teachers as problematic, how the cooperation between the school counselling staff and teachers takes place, how prevention and intervention of problematic behaviour takes place and what educational measures are most used in the selected primary school. The method of data collection was a semi-structured interview. The informants were five employees of the selected primary school (about 600 pupils). Specifically, they were an educational counsellor and a teacher at the second level of the primary school, a school special education teacher, a school prevention methodologist and also a class teacher at the second level, a school psychologist and a class teacher at the first level who identifies three pupils in her class as having problematic behaviour. The informants were female, aged 34-52 years, with varying lengths of teaching and professional experience. The school psychologist has been working at the selected primary school for the shortest period of time (2 years), while also working in her private practice; she works two days a week at the selected primary school. The educational counsellor and the school special education teacher are currently on maternity leave; their working hours at the selected primary school are now reduced. The results of the investigation showed, among other things:

- Despite the different professions within the selected primary school, it is possible to find a common definition of a pupil with problematic behaviour: a pupil whose behaviour deviates from the norm and disrupts the smooth course of the educational process. The results obtained are consistent with, for example, the results of the research by Petrek and Pavlas Martanová (2020), who investigated how prevention methodologists perceive pupils' problem behaviour.
- Among the most frequent manifestations of problematic behaviour, the informants highlighted disturbance, disrespect for authority, substance abuse and aggressive behaviour.
- The school counselling unit consists of an educational counsellor, a school prevention methodologist, a school special educator and a school psychologist; they meet once a month and communicate via digital technology as needed in urgent cases. Prior to the departure of some staff members on parental leave, the unit met once a week.
- The school psychologist (before her arrival, no one was strictly in charge of working with these pupils), in cooperation with the school special educator and the school prevention methodologist, most often works with pupils who have already registered signs of problematic behaviour. Most of her time is devoted to individual interventions with pupils, followed by consultations with parents and then work with the class collective. This division of work activities is confirmed by a study by Palová and Šmahaj (2020). The school psychologist's "favourite" methods are understanding one's own emotions with the help of emotional cards, training in social behaviour and using elements of art therapy. As a supportive measure, we can also understand the increased surveillance in the corridors, which has been significantly intensified during the Blackout challenge trend that has occurred in the school (note: the Blackout challenge is a challenge on social media, especially on TikTok, encouraging users of the platform to strangle themselves or each other to the point of unconsciousness).

- The class teacher most often cooperates with the school psychologist and the school special educator in dealing with problem behaviour, but does not hold regular meetings with them, but deals with everything "as needed". Instead of the class teacher, the teaching assistant, who is present in the classroom with the problem pupil, has regular consultations. The class teacher also does not participate in the interventions and is not informed about their progress. (The informant points out that she has never received any reports or recommendations from the psychologist on how to work further with the pupil; she would like to establish closer cooperation with the psychologist, which could be beneficial for all in the future.)
- In case of manifestations of problematic behaviour in the classroom, the class teacher conducts a group intervention with the children (pupils sit in a circle and together discuss inappropriate behaviour and the possibilities of solving it). The initiators of solving pupils' problems in a selected primary school class are the class teacher, the teaching assistant and occasionally the parents of the pupils.
- Classroom lessons are not implemented, the teacher includes them in a modified form during the course of teaching (according to their words, classroom lessons are used especially at the second level).
- Schools often use common disciplinary sanctions according to school rules, as confirmed by Houšť'ovová's research (2021). Before or after a disciplinary sanction is given, school staff try to establish a conversation with the pupil and find out the reasons. Staff seek to understand the pupil and understand the reasons for the problem behaviour. For more serious problems, school staff initiate contact with the pupil's parents.
- Educational commissions are held for more serious offences. Educational committees are attended by the school principal, first/second grade representative, classroom teacher, guidance counselor, parents of the student, and others as needed. There is no retrospective check on whether the objectives set by the education committee are being met. Other professionals are involved when there are repeated behavioural problems.
- Most of the informants do not know the individual education programme. The selected primary school previously used agreements with the pupil and parents. However, the school does not use them now, and there is no interest on the part of the school in reintroducing an individual education programme.
- The school psychologist, as well as other members of the school counselling centre, actively cooperate with PPP, SPC, OSPOD and the Police of the Czech Republic. The informants would welcome the establishment of social activation services or low-threshold facilities.
- The selected primary school regularly invites external organisations (e.g. Christian Youth Academy). Long-term intervention programmes of external organisations are not used by the school.

Conclusion

The paper focused on the issue of primary schools working with pupils exhibiting problem behaviour. The theoretical part of the paper defined the nature of this behaviour, characterised the social-educational action and defined the role of the school counselling centre as a key actor in the work with these pupils. Furthermore, the topic of educational measures used by schools was examined.

In the final part, a small research probe was presented to map how the selected primary school works with pupils who exhibit problem behaviour. The results show that the biggest role in working with these pupils is played by the teacher, who has to influence the child during the lessons, and also by the school psychologist, who most often works with them in the form of individual intervention. The importance of establishing communication and a relationship with the pupil is at the heart of the work, as is the effort to understand the problem and look for possible solutions. If even these methods are not effective, it is necessary to involve parents or guardians, to convene an education committee and, if necessary, to contact external experts. The contribution of the school psychologist's work is considerable and essential, which points to her irreplaceable role in the school counselling team. In this respect, the school counselling centre is an important support and an opportunity to provide assistance to pupils in dealing with problematic situations. Their presence and interdependence are central to effectively supporting the emotional and psychological development of pupils, which contributes to the overall mental well-being not only of pupils but also of teachers and other staff.

We cannot generalize the results of the research probe, but we can draw some generalizations and **recommendations for social-educational work with students with problematic behaviour:**

- The school counselling centre plays an important role in social and educational work with pupils at risk or with problematic behaviour. The school counselling centre is a great asset, augmented by a school psychologist, a school special educator and ideally a social educator.
- The teaching assistant plays an important role as part of the educational process of a student with special educational needs. It is essential that he/she actively collaborates with members of the school counseling staff, especially the school psychologist and special education teacher (if present).
- It is evident that the school psychologist plays the most important role in the prevention and intervention of problem behaviour. Here again, communication between all those involved and subsequent cooperation with the entire teaching staff is essential for effective social-educational work with a problem pupil.
- Schools have more educational resources at their disposal. In addition to the standard ones used under the Education Act, schools can use adaptation courses, classroom lessons and other similar extra-curricular activities that have strong preventive and depistive potential (helping to detect pupils at risk or those with incipient behavioural problems). For more serious problems, schools have other resources such as an education committee or an individual education plan (formerly an agreement with parents).
- In their own interest, schools should cooperate not only with organisations of the school counselling system (such as pedagogical-psychological counselling centres), but also with external organisations such as the police and the OSPOD, ideally using certified and proven long-term prevention and intervention programmes.
- Low-threshold facilities for children and young people are slowly coming to the forefront of cooperation with schools, which are no longer perceived as a mere "filling" of out-of-school time. The main benefits of cooperation between the school and these facilities are not only the early identification of children at risk, but also the alignment and completion of an effective support plan for each pupil, especially those with behavioural problems. Low-threshold facilities do not only provide tutoring for pupils (as is sometimes wrongly perceived by schools), but they can also be helpful in this area, improving children's performance and ultimately

relieving teachers in the process. Low-threshold facilities can be appropriate protective agents, especially for children at risk or for children who are socially or otherwise disadvantaged.

- We recommend cooperation with organisations providing social activation services (if there are any such facilities in the school's vicinity). These organisations can again help in working with a pupil with behavioural problems and his/her family, as this work cannot be done without the involvement of other organisations and professionals, not only from the state sector. Peer networking and sharing information about the pupil and their family and using the multiple services offered in a particular locality can help to set up the help and support needed effectively.
- Schools have other means of support such as supervision, hospitalization or mentoring, depending on the interest, awareness and possibilities (including financial) of the particular institution. Of course, support for teaching staff in further education on children's risk behaviour and mental health should be a matter of course. It should be remembered that schools should not only look after pupils and their families, but above all their staff.

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Authors:

Mgr. et Mgr. Stanislava Svoboda Hoferková, Ph.D., LL.M.

University of Hradec Králové,

Faculty of Education, Institute of Social Studies

The Czech Republic

stanislava.svoboda@uhk.cz

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3804-1898>

Bc. Tereza Matoušková

Charles University,

Faculty of Education, Department of Special Education

The Czech Republic

matouskova.tereza@email.cz

ORCID ID <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6096-2837>

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