

COMPARISON OF THE ROLES OF SOCIAL WORKER VERSUS SOCIAL PEDAGOGUE IN SCHOOL INSTITUTIONS IN SLOVAKIA

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Abstract: The study focuses on the roles of social workers and social pedagogues in Slovak schools, highlighting their professional responsibilities, presence in educational institutions, and their impact on students' social inclusion and behavioural development. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research involved a questionnaire survey (n = 212), semi-structured interviews (n = 25), and document analysis from schools across various regions.

The findings indicate that social pedagogues are more commonly present in schools compared to social workers. Their work significantly contributes to the prevention of risky behaviour and improved collaboration between families and schools. However, the lack of legal clarity, stable funding, and methodological support poses challenges to their effective integration.

The study confirms that schools with consistent support from these professionals show lower levels of truancy, bullying, and behavioural problems. Based on national and international comparisons, the paper advocates for legislative reform, stable system support, and the formation of multidisciplinary teams to enhance educational equity and student well-being.

Keywords: social pedagogue, social worker, school support system, inclusion, educational environment, Slovakia

INTRODUCTION

Social work and social pedagogy are disciplines that focus on promoting the holistic development of the child in the school setting, addressing social problems, and creating an inclusive environment (Matulayová, 2021; Šuvada, 2022). While social pedagogy focuses more on education, prevention and inclusion of pupils into the school team, social work emphasizes practical solutions to problem situations, cooperation with families and the community (Tomeš, 2020).

A key theoretical framework for understanding these professions is Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, which emphasizes the influence of multiple environmental layers on child development. In the school setting, this means collaboration between family, school, community and institutions (Šed'ová, 2023). A multidisciplinary approach that integrates the professional capacities of pedagogues, psychologists, special pedagogues, and social workers is currently considered to be an effective model for supporting pupils (Mesarošová, 2023; Vanková, 2023).

The contribution of these professions is particularly important in the context of growing social inequalities, crisis situations in families and the need for inclusion of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (Cangár et al., 2024). Social work and social pedagogy are two complementary

professions that mainly address the social, educational, and emotional problems of pupils in the school environment. While the social pedagogue focuses on preventive and educational work, the social worker is more focused on intervention, cooperation with the family, and social assistance institutions. Their role is also to promote social inclusion, preventing discrimination and disadvantage for children.

Current legislation in force

The activities of social pedagogues and social workers in the school setting are based on a number of legislative regulations that determine their competences, status, and options:

- ***Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on Education and Training (School Act)*** – defines categories of teaching and professional staff at schools, including social pedagogues. This act defines the main tasks of the social pedagogue in the field of prevention of social pathological phenomena, support of the school setting, and provision of conditions for inclusive education.
- ***Act No. 138/2019 Coll. on Pedagogical Employees and Professional Staff*** – regulates professional qualification requirements, attestation, continuing education, and career growth for social pedagogues. It also states the obligation to comply with the code of ethics and the principles of professional responsibility.
- ***Act No. 219/2014 Coll. on Social Work*** – provides the basic legal framework for the activities of social workers. It defines social work, areas of practice and competence requirements. It also specifies the right to carry out social work in the school setting as one of the areas of public interest.
- ***Act No. 305/2005 Coll. on Social and Legal Protection of children and social guardianship*** – is important for social workers in schools because it regulates cooperation with social and legal protection authorities and reporting of neglect, abuse, or other risky situations in families.
- ***Decree of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic No. 173/2023 Coll.*** – regulates the activities and powers of school support teams, including the classification of professions such as school psychologist, special pedagogue, therapeutic pedagogue, social pedagogue, and, in some cases, social worker.
- ***Methodological guidelines of NIVaM, VÚDPaP, and CPP*** provide a framework for the practice, standards, and recommendations for social pedagogues and social workers in schools (e.g., NIVaM, 2022; VÚDPaP, 2023; CPP, 2024).

These legislative frameworks do not yet explicitly regulate the cooperation between the social pedagogue and the social worker, which in practice leads to confusion in competences. The lack of a unified methodology and central direction for the practice of these professions in the school setting is a subject of debate in the professional community and a challenge for future reforms.

Aim of the research

The main aim of our research was to analyse the activities, scope of practice, and perceptions of the professional contribution of the social pedagogue and social worker in the school setting. The aim was to obtain empirical data that would identify specific areas of activity, obstacles to practising the profession, and the extent to which these professions collaborate with other components of the school system.

Research questions:

Based on the research aim, the following research questions were formulated:

1. To what extent are social pedagogues and social workers present in the school setting in Slovakia?
2. What are the differences in the job descriptions and perceptions of the contribution of these professions by school leaders?
3. What obstacles do professional staff identify in the performance of their profession?

The following hypotheses were formulated based on the research questions:

RQ1: We assume that social pedagogues are more frequently present than social workers in schools.

RQ2: We hypothesize that schools with a long-term presence of these professions show a lower incidence of risky behaviour.

RQ3: We believe that the lack of legislative and financial support is a significant factor limiting their activities.

METHODS

The research was conducted between September 2023 and March 2024 and was exploratory in nature. It aimed to gather empirical data on the performance and perceptions of social pedagogues and social workers in schools, and to identify barriers and benefits associated with their inclusion in the school setting.

A **combined quantitative-qualitative design** (questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, analysis of documentation including school records and methodological guidelines of NIVaM, VÚDPaP, and CPP) was used, which enabled triangulation of data and deeper analysis. The research approach was based on a pragmatic methodology that emphasises the practical applicability of the findings. Questionnaire survey, semi-structured interviews, and documentation analysis methods were used.

The research design included the following steps:

1. Preparation of the research instrument (questionnaire) in electronic form.
2. Reaching out to schools through official email contacts, professional networks, and regional methodological centres.
3. Conducting interviews with school employees who have real experience in the profession of social worker and social pedagogue.
4. Collection of school documents and their analysis.

Quantitative data were analysed using Microsoft Excel and SPSS (descriptive statistics, comparisons between regions, analysis of differences by school type). Qualitative data were manually coded according to the principles of thematic analysis and interpreted according to the main categories created from participants' answers.

Sample selection

The research sample consisted of 212 respondents, with each respondent representing a single school; thus, a total of 212 different primary and secondary schools from eight regions of Slovakia participated in the questionnaire survey. The selection of schools was purposefully stratified according to school type (primary, secondary), school size, region, and the social background of students to ensure the representativeness of the sample in terms of regional and typological distribution.

The qualitative part of the research comprised 25 semi-structured interviews conducted with social pedagogues (n = 15) and social workers (n = 10) working in schools across various regions of Slovakia (Bratislava, Trnava, Trenčín, Nitra, Žilina, Banská Bystrica, Prešov, and Košice regions). Participants were selected with regard to their professional position, school type (primary, secondary), and regional representation to ensure that the results reflected the diversity of the school environment.

All research participants were informed in advance about the purpose and process of the research and provided informed consent to participate. The informed consent included information about the voluntary nature of participation, anonymity and confidentiality of data, the right to withdraw without consequences, and the method of data processing and storage. This ensured the protection of the rights and dignity of all participants in accordance with ethical research requirements.

Research Ethics

Research conducted in the school environment is based on the principles of respect for dignity, voluntary participation, protection of personal data, and ensuring the confidentiality of information. A key pillar of research ethics is the protection of the identity of all participants (respondents) and the schools where the research was carried out. Researchers are obliged to act in accordance with the valid legislation of the Slovak Republic, in particular:

- ✓ ***Act No. 18/2018 Coll. on the Protection of Personal Data*** – regulates the processing of personal data and ensures the right to privacy for all involved persons.
- ✓ ***Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on Upbringing and Education (the Education Act)*** – establishes the obligation to respect the rights of children and pupils within the school environment.
- ✓ ***Act No. 219/2014 Coll. on Social Work*** – enshrines the ethical principles of social work practice, including confidentiality and the protection of sensitive information.
- ✓ ***Decree No. 173/2023 Coll.*** – is the fundamental implementing regulation for the operation of school support teams and establishes the rules for their activities, competencies, and cooperation within the school environment.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

Strict adherence to the principle of confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process. The identity of individual participants (social pedagogues, social workers, school principals) and the specific schools involved in the research were not disclosed at any stage of the research or in any published outputs. The identities of the participants and schools were protected; all data were anonymized and processed in accordance with the methodological guidelines of NIVaM, VÚDPaP, and CPP.

All collected data were anonymized and processed so that it was impossible to retrospectively identify any person or institution.

- ✓ Data were stored in a secure environment, and access was restricted to members of the research team only.
- ✓ Only aggregated or coded data were used when presenting results.
- ✓ Respondents and participants were informed in advance about the purpose of the research, the method of data processing, and their right to withdraw at any time without providing a reason.

Consent and Information for Participants and Respondents

Each research participant provided informed consent to participate in the study. The informed consent included information about:

- ✓ the voluntary nature of participation,
- ✓ the anonymity and confidentiality of the data,
- ✓ the possibility to withdraw without consequences,
- ✓ the method of data processing and storage.

Adherence to ethical standards and legislative requirements is essential for ensuring the credibility of the research and the protection of the rights of all participants. Acceptance of confidentiality and the protection of the identity of participants and schools are fundamental prerequisites for high-quality and responsible research in the school environment.

We used several methods to collect and analyse the data, e. g.:

- **Questionnaire** - contained 26 items, including 22 closed questions with a Likert scale (1-5) and 4 semi-open questions. They focused on identifying areas of activity, frequency of performance, perception of cooperation, and subjective assessment of the contribution of the professions. The questionnaires were anonymous and distributed electronically.
- **Semi-structured interview** - conducted with 25 employees (15 social pedagogues, 10 social workers). The questions covered job description, perceived challenges, collaboration with teachers, contact with families, and suggestions for improving working conditions. The interviews lasted an average of 40 minutes, were recorded, transcribed and analysed.
- **Thematic analysis of interviews** - we used open coding (identification of main themes) and then axial coding (linking themes and creating analytical categories). The aim was to identify recurring patterns in the participants' experiences.
- **Documentation analysis** - we reviewed 35 school documents (school rules, reports from educational meetings, reports from counselling and prevention centres) that provided context for the formal establishment of these professions, descriptions of activities, and cooperation.

Table 1 Methodological overview

Method	Tool / Technique	Aim	Number / Range
Quantitative research	Questionnaire (online)	Identification of activities, benefits, frequency	212 respondents
Qualitative research	Semi-structured interview	Subjective experience, challenges	25 interviews (40 min average)
Qualitative analysis	Thematic coding	Analysis of behaviour patterns	25 transcriptions of interviews
Documentation analysis	Analysis of school documents	Legislative and operational context	35 documents (schools, counselling and prevention centres)

RESULTS

Research conducted between 2023 and 2024 highlighted a number of important aspects of the work of social workers and social pedagogues in schools. The data collected allowed for a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the scope of their activities, the way they work, as well as the obstacles they face.

The questionnaire survey (n = 212) came to the following conclusions:

- 38% of schools have established the position of social pedagogue or social worker, with this proportion being higher in urban areas than in rural areas.
- 72% of school principals described cooperation with these professions as beneficial, particularly in the areas of risky behaviour prevention, inclusion support, and working with families.
- **61 % of respondents** reported that there is confusion about the respective responsibilities of different professions, which leads to inefficiency and misunderstandings within school teams.
- 48% of respondents feel that there is a lack of methodological support from school grantors and the state.
- 32% reported the absence of a multidisciplinary team at school, which they consider to be one of the main obstacles to solving complex cases.

Interviews with social pedagogues and social workers came to the following conclusions:

- Social pedagogues mainly implement preventive activities (talks, project teaching, adaptation programmes) and often act as mediators between pupils and teachers.
- Social workers prioritise case work: contact with the family, mediation, referrals to the Authority for the Social and Legal Protection of Children and communication with institutions.
- Respondents consistently cited the need to improve collaboration between professions as well as to increase the number of field workers. They also expressed the need for regular supervision, further training and standardisation of methodologies in accordance with the recommendations of NIVaM, VÚDPaP, and CPP.

Table 2 Social pedagogue vs. social worker

Area of activity	Social pedagogue	Social worker
<i>Primary orientation</i>	Educational, preventive	Intervention, socio-legal
<i>Cooperation with the class</i>	Yes, group work	Limited, individual intervention
<i>Cooperation with the family</i>	Supportive	Key, direct
<i>Cooperation with institutions</i>	Schools, counselling and prevention centres, SP	Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, Authority for the Social and Legal Protection of Children, courts
<i>Legislative anchorage</i>	Act No. 245/2008 on Education	Act No. 219/2014 on Social Work
<i>Legislative definition</i>	Not explicitly mandatory	It is defined professionally in the SP Act

<i>Funding</i>	From the Ministry of Education or project resources	From the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, project and local sources, from the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic, often from projects or local budgets
<i>Focus</i>	Prevention, support, education	Social assistance, crisis resolution
<i>Educational impact</i>	Promoting school performance and inclusion	Help in overcoming social barriers
<i>Focus on the family</i>	Indirect support	Direct intervention, home visits
<i>Presence in schools</i>	More often present in schools	Rarer, tied to the social system
<i>Relationship to other professionals</i>	Cooperation especially with teachers and psychologists	Cooperation with counselling and prevention centres, Authority for the Social and Legal Protection of Children, psychologists
<i>Challenges in practice</i>	Low knowledge on the part of teachers Overload, lack of supervision	Social assistance, crisis resolution Prevention, support, education Need for supervision.

The results also showed that where a social pedagogue and/or social worker is present for a long period of time, there are lower rates of bullying, truancy, and disciplinary problems. Pupils and teachers alike rate their presence as beneficial and supportive.

These findings point to the necessity of systemic support for both professions, clearly defining competencies and creating teamwork in the school setting.

Analytical Framework for Interpreting the Increase in Risk Behaviors

When interpreting data on the increase in risk behaviors, it is necessary to apply an analytical framework that takes into account the impact of improved detection due to the presence of helping professions (such as social pedagogues and social workers). In the initial years after the introduction of these professions into the school environment, there is typically an observed increase in recorded cases of risk behaviors. However, this does not indicate a real deterioration of the situation; rather, it is a consequence of earlier identification and more effective detection of problems. This phenomenon is described in the professional literature as the "detection effect"—the increased incidence is attributable to more efficient identification, not to an actual rise in the prevalence of problematic behaviors.

The presence of professional staff enables early intervention, prevention, and more targeted support for students, which, in the long term, leads to a decrease in severe cases and an overall improvement in the school climate.

DISCUSSION

Our research results address several formulated research questions. Research question RQ1, whether social pedagogues are present more often than social workers in schools, was answered affirmatively—the questionnaire data showed a higher proportion of schools with a social pedagogue employed. Research question RQ2, whether the presence of these professions leads to a reduction in the incidence of risky behaviour, was supported by findings of a positive impact on school climate and collaboration with classrooms. Research question RQ3, whether the lack of legislative and financial support limits the practice of these professions, was also confirmed—respondents repeatedly mentioned problems with funding, methodological support, and lack of clarity of competences.

In terms of research questions, we can state:

On research question 1: The prevalence of these occupations is regionally uneven, more common in urban areas and larger schools.

On research question 2: Differences in job descriptions and perceptions of contribution were evident - social pedagogues are perceived as part of the school team, whereas social workers operate more from outside the school.

On research question 3: Obstacles were mainly due to a lack of financial resources, unclear methodological guidance and limited legislative anchoring.

The findings of our research are consistent with several foreign studies that point to the need for the systematic integration of social workers and social pedagogues into school support teams. For example, research by Trotter (2013) in Australia shows that multidisciplinary teams, including social workers, make a significant contribution to reducing students' risk-taking behaviour and improving school-family relationships. Similarly, Barnes and Bennett's (2016) study in the UK confirms that the presence of a social pedagogue leads to increased participation of disadvantaged children in the classroom and better integration into the classroom.

Compared to the Slovak context, it appears that foreign school systems are more likely to have legislated multidisciplinary teams with clearly defined roles and funding. In countries such as Finland, Germany and the Netherlands, cooperation between school, family and community services is a common part of school life (Vanková, 2023). These systems often include regular supervision, continuing education and a high level of institutional support.

In Slovakia, these elements are not yet present or are implemented in an unsystematic way. The research also shows that social workers in school settings are mainly project-based and their role is not uniformly understood. In contrast, in countries such as Sweden and Canada, positions are embedded in national standards and performance indicators.

The comparison shows that the Slovak system needs in particular:

- stable funding for these positions,
- legislative and methodological guidance,
- systematic support for training and cooperation between professionals,
- greater confidence on the part of managers and the state in the contribution of these professions. The research findings point to significant differences in the representation and use of social workers and social pedagogues in Slovak schools. Especially in regions with high rates of social exclusion and unfavourable conditions of pupils' family background, their presence is insufficient, which reduces the effectiveness of preventive and intervention measures (Šuvada, 2022; Cangár et al., 2024).

Several respondents and participants raised the problem of the unclearly defined competences of these professions, which often leads to confusion or ineffective collaboration. At the same time, it has been shown that pedagogues are often not sufficiently informed about opportunities to collaborate with social workers, which hinders the effective use of multidisciplinary teams (Matulayová, 2021).

The lack of funding and the absence of a compulsory presence of these professions in schools is also reflected in the high burnout and work overload of those working in the system. Comparisons with foreign countries, especially countries such as Finland, the Netherlands and the Czech Republic, show that systematic support and legislative anchoring leads to stability of teams and higher levels of support for pupils (Šed'ová, 2023).

Further, our research revealed the following findings in terms of ethical aspects and professional challenges.

The work of a social pedagogue and social worker in a school setting is not only professionally but also ethically demanding. These professions are based on the principles of confidentiality, respect for the dignity of the client and neutrality towards conflicts of interest (Act No. 219/2014 Coll., Code of Ethics of Social Workers). Ethical dilemmas often arise in the context of reporting neglect, dealing with family violence or working with the courts and the Authority for the Social and Legal Protection of Children. Professional support in the form of methodological guidance and supervision is therefore essential.

One of the identified risks of pursuing these professions is burnout syndrome. Research has shown that high workloads, lack of recognition and loneliness when dealing with challenging cases lead to emotional exhaustion and loss of motivation. Respondents and participants repeatedly expressed the need for systematic mental health hygiene and the availability of supervision sessions.

To prevent burnout, it is important to:

- ✓ conduct regular supervision,
- ✓ ensure mutual team support,
- ✓ maintain a balance between work and private life,
- ✓ provide methodological support from grantors and the state.

We also present a current reflection as of 2025.

The research findings from 2023–2024 confirmed that the presence of social pedagogues and social workers in schools has a positive impact on the prevention of risk behaviors and the promotion of an inclusive environment. Since the completion of data collection, however, several significant changes have occurred in the area of legislation and systemic support for these professions.

Legislative changes and recognition of the social worker profession

As of 2025, the position of the social worker in the school environment has been legislatively recognized, resolving the longstanding ambiguity regarding the competencies and status of this profession. New legal regulations clearly define the roles, qualification requirements, and placement of the social worker within school support teams, in accordance with the recommendations of NIVaM, VÚDPaP, and CPP, which contributes to improved multidisciplinary cooperation and more effective responses to students' needs. This step reflects the recommendations of the professional community and research findings that highlighted the necessity of clear systemic anchoring and equitable availability of professional staff in schools.

Impacts of the absence of professional staff and system fragmentation

In schools where professional staff (social pedagogue, social worker, school psychologist) are still absent, their competencies are often transferred to other members of the teaching staff—especially guidance counselors, special educators, or homeroom teachers. However, these staff members do not always have sufficient professional background or capacity to address the complex social and family issues of students, which can lead to overload and reduced support effectiveness.

The complex and fragmented system of school counseling in practice leads to unclear division of competencies, duplication of activities, and the risk of neglecting some student needs. System fragmentation is also reflected in regional disparities in the availability of professional services and the lack of unified methodological support (NIVaM, VÚDPaP, CPP). The practical consequence is uneven quality and scope of support across schools, which reduces the effectiveness of preventive and intervention measures.

Current state as of 2025

The situation in 2025 shows that legislative changes and systemic support for professional roles in schools are crucial for ensuring equal opportunities, preventing risk behaviors, and improving the overall school climate. At the same time, challenges persist related to system fragmentation and the need for further development of multidisciplinary teams capable of responding comprehensively to the evolving needs of students and the school environment.

We identified limitations of the research and make recommendations for further research.

The research was conducted on a sample of schools that had existing experience of the professions of social pedagogue or social worker. Therefore, the results may not be fully generalizable to all schools in Slovakia. Another limitation is the voluntary participation of respondents and participants, which may have influenced the composition of the sample. The interviews took place in a work environment, which may have influenced the openness of the statements.

Recommendations for further research:

- ✓ Conduct longitudinal studies on the impacts of the presence of professional occupations on students' academic achievement and mental health.
- ✓ Explore pupils' and parents' perspectives on working with a social pedagogue and social worker.
- ✓ Examine differences in the application of these professions between regions and types of schools (urban vs. rural).

Recommendations for practice

The following recommendations for practice emerged from our research:

- **Legislate the position of social worker in education**, similar to that of school psychologist or special pedagogue.
- **Increase funding for support professions** through the state budget and European funds to ensure their availability throughout Slovakia.
- **Introduce mandatory training for teaching staff** on the competencies and possibilities of cooperation with social workers and social pedagogues.
- **Support the creation of multidisciplinary school teams** that would include psychologists, special pedagogues, social pedagogues, and social workers.
- **Expand research in this area** to monitor the long-term impact of these professions on school performance, social behaviour and pupil attendance. The findings point to an uneven representation of these professions across counties and school types. Several

employees reported that they would like to see better legislative anchoring of social work in education and a clear definition of the collaboration between pedagogues and social workers. At the same time, there is a need for multidisciplinary teams to provide complex support to pupils and families.

Table 3 Recommendations by target group - summary

Target group	Recommendations
School principals	✓ Actively create conditions for the inclusion of social workers and social pedagogues in the school team
	✓ Promote cooperation between professional staff
	✓ Enable staff training and supervision
School grantors	✓ Create the financial and staffing conditions for the creation of these positions
	✓ Cooperate with counselling and prevention centres and other institutions to meet the needs of schools
	✓ To provide technical and spatial facilities for the exercise of the professions
Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic	✓ Legislate the position of social worker in education
	✓ Establish standards for professional teams in schools
	✓ Support systematic methodological guidance and supervision for professional staff

CONCLUSION

Research has shown that both the social pedagogue and the social worker play an indispensable role in the school setting. Their activities contribute to preventing risky behaviour, promoting inclusion, improving the classroom climate and strengthening cooperation with the family. Nevertheless, their presence in Slovak schools is still insufficient and often dependent on project funding or the initiative of a particular grantor.

In conclusion:

- ✓ Educational institutions need systematic support from the state to ensure the stable functioning of these professions.
- ✓ It is necessary to clearly legislate the competences and roles of the social worker and social pedagogue in the school setting.
- ✓ Multidisciplinary cooperation appears to be key to effective help for pupils - it involves professionals from different fields (pedagogy, psychology, social work).
- ✓ Educating teachers and management personnel on the importance of and opportunities for collaboration with the social worker and social pedagogue is key to their effective inclusion.

A complex approach to tackling social and educational problems in schools should be based on collaboration, expertise and the availability of support for every pupil. Strengthening the positions of these professions in the school system is a prerequisite for meeting the goals of inclusive education and children's mental health.

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