

## Part 3

### School Counseling Practices

# Considering the Challenges of the Further Development of School Counselling: Experiences from Slovenia

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#### Abstract

The school counselling service is specific to Slovenian schools. The concept dates back to the second half of the 1960s, and since the mid-1990s the law has required every public preschool and school to have its school counselling service. This paper presents recent findings on the work of the school counselling service in the Slovenian education system, taking them as a starting point for reflection on its further development. Examining the findings, the author emphasizes the importance of the pedagogically developmental and preventative orientation of the school counselling service. It is crucial in achieving a higher quality of the work of educational institutions, for instance, the introduction of modern pedagogical principles, such as the principle of inclusiveness, the principle of interculturalism, the principle of children's and adolescents' participation. The developmental and preventative orientation of the school counselling service, which includes cooperation with actors inside and outside the school, is found at several levels: 1) the development of the educational institution as a whole; 2) direct cooperation in the educational process; 3) counselling and assistance provided to children, adolescents and parents; 4) the development and co-creation of systemic solutions in education.

Keywords: school counselling service, school counsellors, pedagogues, challenges and problems, cooperation, Covid-19 pandemic

#### Introduction

The school counselling service is specific to Slovenian schools with some unique characteristics, which are presented in the paper. Reviewing the international arrangements of school counselling services and school counselling reveals that the conceptualisation of school counselling services in Europe and around the world differ with reference to their formal set-up, the experts who work there (cf. Carey et al., 2017; Harris, 2013; Popov & Spasenović, 2018). The concept of the school counselling

service in Slovenia dates back to the second half of the 1960s, and since the mid-1990s the law has required every public preschool and school to have its school counselling service.<sup>1</sup>

### *Background of school counselling in Slovenia*

The father of the Slovenian school counselling service F. Pediček described its implementation into the Slovenian school system as the breakthrough of “anthropology-based pedagogical thought” (Pediček, 1992). He saw counselling as assistance in students’ holistic development. Today counselling intertwines humanist and systemic stances, which is the starting point for the proactive, developmental and preventative orientation of counselling. The school counselling service is a (pre)school sub-system, working together with other sub-systems (teachers, head teachers, parents, community) towards the fundamental goal of the (pre)school as a whole. The fundamental goal is the wellbeing of all children and adolescents, their optimum development, learning and a good-quality educational process regardless of their individual or group differences.

### *Characteristics of school counselling in Slovenia*

The formal framework for the work of the school counselling service in Slovenia is set out in the Organization and Financing of Education Act, 2017 (hereafter ZOFVI, 2017). The Act mandates a counselling service in public preschools and schools counselling children and adolescents together with cooperating with parents. It cooperates also with educators and school management in planning, monitoring and evaluating the development of the (pre)school and its educational work.

The key conceptual document for school counselling is the Programme Guidelines for the School Counselling Service (Programske smernice, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c), which were approved by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport in 1999. The Guidelines state that school counsellors participate in resolving pedagogical, psychological and social issues in schools by means of three central activities: activities of assistance, of development and prevention, and of planning and evaluation. Undertaking these three main types of activities, the school counselling service helps students, educators, management, parents and it collaborates with them in the following areas of everyday life and work at the institution: learning and teaching; school culture, school climate and order; physical, personal and social development; schooling and career guidance; socio-economic difficulties (ibid.).

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<sup>1</sup> The school system in Slovenia is divided into three sections of education: primary, secondary and tertiary. Primary education is provided by public and private preschools (kindergartens), elementary schools, elementary schools with an adapted education programme, music schools and educational institutions for children with special educational needs. Secondary education is provided by upper secondary schools and secondary schools. It is classified as general or vocational technical and secondary professional or technical education. The school counselling service is formally part of every public preschool and public school at the primary and (upper) secondary levels of education (i.e., including children and adolescents from 1 to 19/20 years of age).

According to the Guidelines (*ibid.*), school counselling as conceptualized in Slovenia has never been limited only to assisting students in their personal development and learning. As such, it provides not only student counselling, directly helping students with their development, but it also helps to the functioning of the educational institution as a whole in terms of planning, implementing and evaluating everyday educational work in (pre)schools as well as planning, creating and maintaining favourable conditions for a safe and encouraging educational environment that allows children/adolescents optimum progress. This means that when looking after the child's/adolescent's optimum holistic development, it is first necessary to ensure the conditions for this development, to organize adequately the physically and socially stimulating environment of the (pre)school. The help of a counsellor to students in their development and learning remains incomplete if his/her activities do not embrace the work of the educational institution and classes, consultation work with teachers, school management, parents and the external environment (i.e., the local community), as most of protective factors are found in everyday activities and the general culture of coexistence at school (Mikuš Kos et al., 2017).

Due to a complex interrelation of pedagogical, psychological and social issues, the school counselling service is at its most effective when it incorporates a team of different experts. Thus, it is important that counsellors of different professional profiles from different schools cooperate, and that professional school counsellors also cooperate with other experts from relevant external institutions (*ibid.*).

The school counselling service in Slovenia is interdisciplinary, which means that it is made up of counsellors with different professional profiles. These are pedagogues<sup>2</sup>, psychologists, social workers and others (Gregorčič Mrvar & Resman, 2019; ZOFVI, 2017). All of the profiles are professionally qualified to do school counselling work, but each brings specific knowledge, skills and competences to the work. According to the rules on norms and standards for the implementation of (pre)school programmes, each preschool must appoint one counsellor per 30 classes/educational groups, and each primary and secondary school must appoint one counsellor per 20 classes.

It should be pointed out that the work of school counsellors in (pre)school differs slightly in tasks, content and strategies of work, which is mainly related to the level and type of school, as well as to the developmental characteristics of children and adolescents.

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<sup>2</sup> Pedagogues must complete a master's study programme in pedagogy in order to perform the tasks of school counsellors. The studies provide them with a quality social sciences and humanities education with an emphasis on the systematic knowledge of pedagogy and andragogy. They have knowledge of the scientific paradigms and orientations that are important for understanding and analysing educational processes and for understanding the connections between pedagogical phenomena, processes and society. They are qualified to co-create systemic and other documents in the field of education, to take on managerial/leadership positions in education and other social activities, and to carry out (school) developmental and counselling activities. (Gregorčič Mrvar & Resman, 2019)

## Research on the work of the school counselling service in Slovenia

### *Positive aspects of the operation of the school counselling service in Slovenia*

There have been a few representative empirical studies done of the school counselling service in Slovenia since the mid-1990s, when its functioning became formally regulated and each (pre)school started to employ one or more school counsellors. Those that have been done (e.g. Bezić, 2008; Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2020; Resman et al., 1999; Valenčič Zuljan et al., 2011; Vogrinc & Krek, 2012) demonstrate that the school counselling service is an important constituent part of each (pre)school. According to a study done among educators in Slovenian schools (Valenčič Zuljan et al., 2011), the majority of head teachers and teachers take the counselling service to be an integral part of each school. Nearly three quarters of the teachers and most of the head teachers described their own collaboration with the school counselling service as either very good or good (ibid.; Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2020). Parents, likewise, demonstrated considerable knowledge of the work of the school counselling service and positive attitudes towards it. Similar responses and assessments were given by students (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2020).

In addition, other positive aspects of the school counselling service's work have been observed. Practising school counsellors report that (Bezić, 2008; Vogrinc & Krek, 2012): undergraduate studies provided them with adequate theoretical knowledge; they are fairly satisfied with the system of further training; they are satisfied with the system of promotion to professional titles; they have relatively good conditions for work; despite the great stress, three quarters of professional school counsellors would not change their work even if they could, because they see their work as their mission.

### *Negative aspects of the operation of the school counselling service in Slovenia*

Preschools, schools and the school counselling service have been undergoing changes in the last decade that have had an impact on their work and the work of individual profiles in them. With the conceptual and systemic changes including, for instance: the design and evaluation of the school's plan of moral and character education; working with gifted children and adolescents; the continuum of assistance for students with learning difficulties; working with children and adolescents with special educational needs; working with immigrants; cooperation with cultural and arts institutions; the education of the Roma, etc., school counsellors have had to shoulder great professional burdens in recent years with numerous educational, coordination and administration tasks. This is also suggested by the findings of school counselling service evaluation studies (e.g. Bezić, 2008; Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2020; Resman et al., 1999; Valenčič Zuljan et al., 2011; Vogrinc & Krek, 2012), which confirm that professional school counsellors spend most of their time on remedial

work with students, that is, individual work with students with learning difficulties, special needs, education and discipline problems as well as those with problems in their physical, personal and/or social development, while they work less frequently with the entire populations of students or with individual classes. A lack of time is the primary reason for their infrequently doing preventative and developmental work as well as monitoring and evaluating work in educational institutions (Bezić, 2008; Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2020). They also report that in recent years the range of their tasks has increased, that the tasks are not clear to all those who find themselves in the educational institutions and that, consequently, the currently established norms are inappropriate (Bezić, 2008; Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2020; Vogrinc & Krek, 2012).

### *School counselling in Slovenia during Covid-19 pandemic*

The work of the counselling service changed with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic last year. The educational process took place remotely and it was in many ways restricted and altered, which was also true of the developmental and counselling work of the school counselling service. The findings of a survey among school counsellors in Slovenia (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021), which examined how the counselling service dealt with the issues, challenges and problems that arose during the implementation of distance education and counselling, demonstrate that during the pandemic counsellors were important actors in resolving various situations related to the relationship between adults and children/adolescents, to educational work and issues, teachers' dilemmas in the implementation of distance schoolwork, as well as to managing educational institutions. The consequences of the pandemic and the interruption in the regular pedagogical process in preschools and schools are expected to increase the need for assistance activities (i.e., remedial interventions) for some time to come (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021; Savitz-Romer et al., 2020). Situations marked by uncertainty can trigger apprehension in both adults and children, there may be more mental irritability, feelings of anxiety, mental health problems, and suchlike. At the same time, we can expect more distress as the consequence of the already strained family relationships, higher unemployment of parents and carers. Going to preschool or school on a daily basis can be an important protective factor in children's and adolescents' development (Mikuš Kos et al., 2017). Therefore, the efforts of educational institutions, local communities and several professional organizations to provide children and adolescents in need with the necessary support in distance education are all the more worthwhile.

### *Reflection on current trends in development of school counselling in Slovenia*

It should be emphasized that an (exclusively) remedial/reactive orientation of the counselling service involves a "danger" of the service becoming an auxiliary or crisis service. That would lay emphasis on crisis counselling and a remedial concept, which favours individual and personal counselling and which reduces the work of school counsellors to providing individual assistance to the children/adolescents with

difficulties in learning, personal development or adaptation to the social environment (cf. Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2020).

Such an approach does not bring appropriate solutions to work in (pre)schools. To illustrate this with the findings of an evaluation of work with students with special educational needs: an evaluation study on various forms of additional professional assistance to children and adolescents with special educational needs (cf. Vršnik Perše et al., 2016) showed that the concept of inclusion continues to evolve. The whole process related to additional professional assistance to children/adolescents with special needs still takes place by foregrounding individual assistance (most often outside the class), dealing with the child's deficits, obstacles or disorders. Lesar (2019) rightly points out that the focus on individual assistance to students with special needs reinforces medical discourse and the discourse of professionalism, which Fulcher described in the 1980s as the basis of disability discourses and problematic forms of the inclusion of children with special educational needs in school policies. This is a major obstacle to promoting an inclusive school culture.

Further to this issue, it is necessary to work towards a paradigm shift from the counsellor's remedial activities to developmental and preventative ones (cf. Bezić, 2018; Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2020). Nowadays, such efforts are clearly present in Slovenia (cf. Bezić, 2018; Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2020). It is emphasized that in the future developmental and preventative work of the counselling service at the level of classes, groups and entire educational institutions will have to be expanded. Developmental and preventative activities are part of the vision of the educational institution, the plan of moral and character education, the development plan and the annual (pre)school's and (pre)school counsellor's plan of work (Bezić, 2018; Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2020).

Only such a conceptualisation of the school counselling service – placing the developmental role not only in the direct function of the development of children and adolescents, but also in the function of the development of the educational institution, making the service the initiator and “engine” of its development – can justify its place inside the (pre)school and distinguish between the philosophy of personal (individual) and school counselling (Resman et al., 1999).

## The importance of the pedagogically developmental and preventative orientation of the school counselling service

We define and understand the school counselling service of the future as providing developmental work, oriented towards the development of the entire (pre)school. The developmental orientation of the counselling service means a long-term, proactive and preventative orientation that supports all children and adolescents, raises professionalism and transforms the school culture and climate. This, however, cannot be achieved with individual treatments during school counselling only. Rather, conditions for mutual cooperation ought to be established in

the educational institution among all the participants (children/adolescents, teachers, parents, the management). Only this will allow for good-quality educational work in generally and with all children and adolescents.

Pedagogically developmental and preventative activities are key to achieving a higher quality of work in educational institutions for several reasons (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2019, 2020). The developmental activities of the counselling service are indispensable in the introduction of modern pedagogical principles, such as the principle of inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Ermenc, Jeznik & Mažgon, 2019; Lesar, 2019; Mikuš Kos et al., 2017; The Salamanca Statement, 1994), the principle of interculturalism (Ermenc, Jeznik & Mažgon, 2019; Mikuš Kos et al., 2017), the principle of children's and adolescents' participation (Hart, 1992; Kodele, 2017), and the necessary paradigmatic transformative changes in education included in the new principles (Lesar, 2019). The developmental activities of the counselling service are crucial for a more successful implementation of modern approaches to instruction, such as collaborative learning, problem-oriented teaching, the introduction of e-learning (Dumont, Istance & Benavides, 2010) and education through art (UNESCO Road Map for Arts Education, 2006). Developmental and preventative work is essential for the establishment of conditions for the educational activities that presuppose compliance with the principles of safety, acceptance, equity, participation, respect, care for others and mutual assistance. The counselling service focuses on the activities and processes aimed at the entire educational institution as a community. It deals with issues of group dynamics, communication, the culture and climate of the educational institution; it establishes conditions for interdisciplinary cooperation. Last but not least, in situations where educational institutions have more autonomy, the counselling service takes over tasks in the field of quality assurance, which means planning, implementing and evaluating the educational process and the educational institution as a whole (Gregorčič Mrvar & Resman, 2019; Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2020).

### *The importance of the pedagogically developmental and preventative orientation during Covid-19 pandemic*

The developmental and preventative orientation of the counselling service is imperative in the current Covid-19 pandemic, when many questions and uncertainties arise in the educational work and processes. In a study on the work of the counselling service in Slovenian preschools and schools during the pandemic in the first wave of distance education (March 2020) (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2021), educators reported that resolving crises and emergency situations and issues of distance education opened up a number of positive responses and opportunities for prosocial action. The situation has stimulated reflection on the protection of particularly vulnerable people, offered many new opportunities for access to the activities that can enrich our everyday lives (access to art content, suggestions for physical activity during limited outdoor activities, tips for creative free-time activities) (ibid.; Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2020). The school counselling service is

certainly the part of professional support for children and adolescents that helps them make sense of and improve their lives during the epidemic, considering that teachers have been heavily burdened with the preparation of pedagogical materials and communication with students to carry on with day-to-day school tasks (ibid.).

### *Recommendations*

The outlined changes require a thorough consideration of the starting points of educational activity. We should certainly emphasize the importance of the multifaceted justification of the values of educational activity, such as the values of solidarity, positive recognition of all children/adolescents, child/adolescent representation in decision-making, empowering forms of assistance, care, emotional support (cf. Kroflič, 2003; Lesar, 2019). As previous research shows, it is not possible to develop (pre)schools in the direction of inclusiveness, interculturalism, participation and active active forms of learning without a well thought-through conceptual consideration of education.

These changes require the school counselling service to radically shift from a remedial and individual response to the problems of individual children/students to pedagogically developmental and preventative orientation, that is, to the development of the school's plan of moral and character education and comprehensive approaches to quality assurance in the work of educational institutions. The professional profiles of school counsellors make up a solid core of experts who can work together with school leaders and teachers to tackle contemporary professional challenges. However, they require more appropriate system support (appropriate norms, schedules, distribution of working hours) (Bezić, 2018).

In addition to the organizational issues related to job descriptions, working hours and norms, developmental and preventative activities also necessitate clear theoretical solutions and the identification of the main strategic goals of managing educational institutions. This should be done in accordance with the above-mentioned principles of inclusion, interculturalism, participation, restorative approaches and active learning. These principles should be reflected in the professional guidelines at the four levels of the work of the counselling service highlighted below. This is especially true for the professional profile of the pedagogue as a school counsellor, whose fundamental focus is on the environment and culture of the school, which primarily affects the child's/adolescent's development and learning.

### **The school counselling service's work levels in developmental and preventative activities**

The developmental and preventative orientation of the school counselling service, which includes cooperation with actors inside and outside the school, is observable at several levels (cf. Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2020; Gregorčič Mrvar & Resman, 2019): the development of the educational institution as a whole; direct cooperation in the educational process; counselling and assistance provided to

children, adolescents and parents; the development and co-creation of systemic solutions in education.

### *The development of the educational institution as a whole*

In this area the school counsellor's work primarily relates to the *pedagogical leadership of the educational institution and collaboration with the head teacher*. In the circumstances that give more autonomy to educational institutions and in which work quality largely depends on the institutions themselves, educators' and head teachers' work has become extremely varied. Head teachers' responsibilities consist of both managerial (administrative) and pedagogical leadership (ZOFVI, 2017, Article 49). The school counsellor's knowledge and competences greatly assist the head teacher in the latter, that is, in the pedagogical leadership of the educational institution and the execution of associated tasks (cf. Stone & Clark, 2001; Wingfield et al., 2010).

### *Direct cooperation in the educational process (during school instruction, group work)*

One of the most important contexts for each child/adolescent in the educational institution is the class, that is, the group where everyday educational work and processes are carried out. This makes *collaboration with (pre)school teachers* especially relevant for school counsellors (Programske smernice, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c). Consequently, independently and/or together with (pre)school teachers, school counsellors, especially pedagogues do the *developmental, analytical and preventative work related to the processes of education, teaching, learning and playing in the class/group*. Having the knowledge of planning educational work and general didactics, pedagogues plan, present and practically demonstrate the use of the various *educational and teaching methods, didactic concepts and strategies* required by instruction.

### *Counselling and assistance provided to children, adolescents and parents*

School counsellors' counselling and assistance include *a variety of activities, tasks and projects intended for children and adolescents* in the educational institution. In this context school counsellors are important *consultants to teachers, head teachers, parents and families*. As experts in counselling, school counsellors participate in *direct counselling (individually or in groups)* or in implementing *developmental and preventative programmes in groups* in order to identify, together with children and adolescents, existing worries and problems regarding personal and social development. They organize active forms of assistance, such as interactive workshops, discussion groups, round tables, camps. School counsellors encourage students' independence and responsibility in education and in deciding on further education, changing programme or levels and employment.

### *The understanding, development and co-creation of systemic solutions in education*

School counsellors, especially pedagogues, are familiar with the history of and trends in the development of pedagogical theory and school practice in Slovenia and abroad, which makes them the right people to turn to on the issues of the development of educational institutions. School counsellors are qualified to carry out critical analyses of content and system solutions in education (including different education systems), to develop educational programmes and other curricular materials, to analyse whether the educational institution and individuals in it function in accordance with the regulations and to plan the measures that ensure the legality of work. They actively participate, for example, in experts' debates on the reform of the education system, in the preparation of textbooks and other didactic materials, and suchlike.

## Conclusion

School counsellors realize their programme and plan together with other educators in the educational institution, especially with the other profiles of professional school counsellors, (pre)school teachers and head teachers. They collaborate with other counselling profiles in interdisciplinary ways and carry out activities in expert teams in (pre)schools and external institutions.

It is necessary to emphasize the advantages of the Slovenian organization of school counselling, the core of which is internal/school-based counselling services, that is, services located in educational institutions. The position of counselling services inside educational institutions enables them to achieve a great deal in the field of development and prevention and to contribute to the creation of the institution's stimulating learning/development climate (Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2019; Resman et al., 1999). Therefore, it is important to make permanent attempts at a paradigm shift from the counsellor's crisis and remedial activities to developmental and preventative ones (see Gregorčič Mrvar et al., 2020).

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