Revista Românească pentru Educație Multidimensională
ISSN: 2066-7329 | e-ISSN: 2067-9270
Covered in: Web of Science (WOS); EBSCO; ERIH+; Google Scholar; Index Copernicus; Ideas RePeC; Econpapers; Socionet; CEEOL; Ulrich ProQuest; Cabell, Journalseek; Scipio; Philpapers; SHERPA/RoMEO repositories; KVK; WorldCat; CrossRef; CrossCheck

2024, Volume 16, Issue 1, pages: 482-494 | https://doi.org/10.18662/rrem/16.1/833
Submitted: November 16th, 2023 | *Accepted for publication:* November 23rd, 2023

The Prerequisites of Introducing School Social Workers in Romanian Educational System

Petronela Polixenia NISTOR [1]

[1] Lecturer PhD, Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iaşi, Romania, polixenianistor@yahoo.com

Abstract: *Worldwide professional agencies or associations define school social worker as the professional that assists students with socio-emotional challenges and makes a linkage between school, home, and community services. A school counsellor is different than a school social worker, by guiding students in academic, career, and personal development, supporting those in navigating school-related challenges, but also helps them planning their future. In Romanian school environment the school counsellor somehow supplies the school social worker's attributes, as within the schooling institutions organizational chart there is no specific place for the school social worker's job.*
In an attempt to diagnose a current situation of what the school social worker represents as a professional in connection with Romanian educational system, we developed a brief analysis of the professional grounding of the domain, starting from key concepts such as "school social work", the "educational role of the social worker". The results of the search for such keywords showed us that there is a lack of data on this subject in the Romanian background. What we identify at the level of schooling units is the school counsellor.
The purpose of this work is to bring a better theoretical knowledge of the need for the professionalization of the school social worker in the Romanian public educational sphere. Moreover, the article may be the start of an empirical larger research on the topic, in order to bring to public awareness the usefulness of a social worker at the level of each educational institution. The analysis is of a theoretical nature and is based on the educational-welfare practice models from Romania and USA.

Keywords: *education, school social workers, educational role, necessity, impact, theoretical analysis.*

How to cite: Nistor, P. P. (2024). The prerequisites of introducing school social workers in romanian educational system. Revista *Românească pentru Educație Multidimensională, 16*(1), 482-494. https://doi.org/10.18662/rrem/16.1/833

©2024 Published by LUMEN Publishing. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the school social worker has been part of the American educational system, but it is considered to effectively appear in the American educational system quite late (Livingston & Rock, 1985; Wang, 2003; Higy et al., 2012). The need for professional school social work has been largely fuelled by the phenomena of immigration, poverty and above all the idea that every child has the right to education. Looking at the past, social workers were identified as "visiting teachers" (Agresta, 2004) and their main role was to support and develop the relationship between teachers and new immigrant students, facilitating mutual understanding and acceptance. Later, between 1940 and 1950, the term visiting teacher was replaced by "school social worker" (Agresta, 2004), and over time, the general public transferred to the school social worker the values and responsibilities of a substitute educator, psychotherapist, social planner, the link between home, family and school. This investment made by the public was precisely due to the empathetic nature of the social worker and his work oriented towards the other (Higy et al., 2012).

A child's development is supported by two pillars - the family and the school. Between these two major factors of the harmonious development of the child appears the school social worker who is the professional prepared to identify individual, peer, family and community risk factors (Newsome et al., 2008; Higy et al., 2012). Furtheremore, they provide individual and group counseling to meet mental health needs of children and to facilitate social and peer support (Newsome et al., 2008; Higy et al., 2012). However, the lack of communication appears between the school social workers and the administrative staff with a key role in the development of the school curriculum, educational and social inclusion policies, etc. - namely the principals, special education principals and school board members. Not knowing of the role of a school social worker in supporting children and families to achieve and maintain emotional health and healthy relationships, administrative functions at the level of school institutions may issue negative preconceptions about school social workers. These trends arise from the misunderstanding of the idea of welfare and the absence of school administrators' familiarity with school social workers. (Garrett, 2006; Higy et al., 2012).

The article comes to approach the necessity of the school social workers in the educational institution, as a complementary role with the school counsellor. In the Romanian curricula the school counsellor is the

professional who is directly responsible with the counselling of the students within the educational institutions.

Social workers act with both individuals and families to help create outcomes in their lives. Working with social workers can help protect vulnerable people or help people live independently. Social workers support people, act as advocates and refer people to services they may need, often working in multidisciplinary teams, alongside health and education professionals (Stuart, 2013). Worldwide, schools and associations of social workers define school social worker as the professional that assists students with socio-emotional challenges and makes a linkage between school, home, and community services (School Social Work Association of America, 2023). A school counsellor is different than a school social worker, by guiding students in academic, career, and personal development, supporting those in navigating school-related challenges, but also helps them planning their future. In Romanian school environment the school counsellor somehow supplies the social worker's attributes, as within the schooling institutions organizational chart there is no specific place for the social worker's job.

In an attempt to diagnose a current situation of what the social worker represents as a profession in connection with Romanian educational system, we developed a brief analysis of professional grounding of the domain, starting from key concepts such as "school social work", the "educational role of the social worker". The results of this surface search by using such keywords showed us that there is a lack of data on this subject in the Romanian background. What we identify at the level of schooling units is the school counsellor as offering both academic and personal development guidance.

The multiple professional duties and responsibilities of school counselors are grouped around three essential directions (Muro & Kottman, 1995):

° actual psychopedagogical counseling (individual and group)

° consultancy (given to teachers, parents and managers of school units)

° coordinating the educational services offered to students - organizing and developing a unitary and coherent program of support and guidance for students, teachers, parents and school managers in order to increase the quality and educational efficiency and the optimal personal development of all and each one.

The tasks and responsibilities of counselors in primary and secondary schools are assigned to the following types of specific activities (Muro & Kottman, 1995):

° advising and guiding students in curriculum issues
° personal development counseling (including career counseling)
° counseling of special cases
° coordinating educational services and ensuring support for psichopedagogical counseling programs.

The article will focus on bringing a better theoretical knowledge of the need for the professionalization of the school social worker in the Romanian public educational sphere. Moreover, the article may be the start of an empirical larger research on the topic, in order to bring to public awareness the usefulness of a school social worker at the level of each educational institution. The analysis is of a theoretical nature and is based on the educational-welfare practice models and legal framework from Romania and USA.

National and international frameworks for school social workers and school counsellors

The question may rightly arise: between the school social worker and the school counsellor, who does what concretely in the school? We will discuss the differences between a school social worker and a school counsellor from the legislative framework and roll points of view, considering the Romanian practice and the American one.

For many decades welfare organizations have provided "visiting teachers". Their role was the safety and well-being of children. This was later adopted by school institutions that came to prevent the difficulty which prevents parents from supporting their children's education, both inside and outside the school (Higy et al., 2012). Visiting teachers later evolved into a specialized profession, present nowadays throughout America. In 2001 the promulgation of the "No Child Left Behind" act took place, which determined that *school social work* are considered able to identify and clearly communicate how their outcome later influences student learning (Bye et al., 2009; Higy et al., 2012). The overarching goal of *school social workers* today is to address the environmental factors that most prevent vulnerable and disenfranchised students from achieving academic success (Altshuler & Webb, 2009; Higy et al., 2012).

However, the school social worker is not yet embraced as specialized profession in all countries, and most of the educational institutions adhere to

the school counsellor role and activities, without considering the necessity of a school social worker or they relate to the school counsellor as accomplishing both educational/academic and social/emotional support in guiding the students. There is relatively little research documenting the contributions of school social workers to the educational activities of students. The paper published by Michelle E. Alvarez et al. (2013) manages to address the specialized literature that exposes such results, as well as a result of an analysis that indicates that the number of social workers in the school was a significant predictor of the number of students who graduated from high school in the 100 largest school districts in the United States in the 2008-2009 school year (Alvarez et al., 2013). A multiple regression was thus calculated, and it was identified that the number of students, the poverty rate and the number of social workers in the school were significant predictors of high school graduation. The article (Alvarez et al., 2013) shows that the number of school social workers in a school district positively influences the number of high school graduates. Furthermore, school districts with school social workers had more students graduating from high school. The study results indicate that the knowledge and skills that school social workers bring to school districts can lead to better educational results (Alvarez et al., 2013). At the time of 2013, the researchers supported the need for additional research that would make connections between the efforts of social workers in the school and continuing education, at the level of the American states, where the practice received support long before the European practices.

Ever since the professionalization of school social work, school social workers have provided a crucial link between school, home and community, and have been doing so for over a hundred years. The school social worker profession has consistently focused on coordinating the efforts of schools, families, and communities to help students improve academic and social outcomes, as well as develop emotional and behavioral skills. All these beneficial influences were possible through the unique perspective of school social workers to see the person in their own environment of evolution and to help them adapt to the challenges (Dziegielewski & Holliman, 2019). NASW describes school social workers as professionals who aim to ensure equitable educational opportunities, that students are mentally, physically and emotionally present in the classroom; and promotes respect and dignity for all students (Anastas & Clark, 2012).

At the United States level, The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) is the largest membership organization of professional social workers (https://www.socialworkers.org/) and provides support in

professional growth for social workers worldwide. NASW sustains school social work as a specialized and complex practice which is much influenced by educational policies changes, but also by research in the field and evolving practice models. As a transparent and helpful support for the professionals, NASW succeeds to periodically revise the Standards for School Social work services and for this paper we will bring into discussion the standards as they were updated in 2012.

The American social work model aims to provide the community with well trained, ethically grounded professionals, whose practice grounds on ethical standards and principles. The legislation of the United States has been in place since 2002 in support of the collaboration between social welfare system and the educational system. Passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 helped reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which supported the introduction of social work services into schools. The act itself was written with the aim of creating a stronger and more responsible educational system, empowering the parents, by involving them in the educational process, building educational strategies based on evidence, and making decisions based on data.

In the same direction of improving the school's relationship with parents, with the community, the IDEA Act (2004) - The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was implemented. This act represents a reauthorization of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142), which comes to support school social services through a series of initiatives and impact actions. A particular focus of this reauthorization was prevention, giving district schools the opportunity to substantially modify screening and identification procedures for children with disabilities. In fact, IDEA makes it easier for school districts to use a process that determines students' ability to respond to scientific, evidence-based interventions as criteria for special education eligibility. The "response to intervention" (RtI) approach was applied in the academic and behavioural environment, supporting special and normal education. The new model introduced came to replace the model based on the comparison of skills and competencies to identify students with learning difficulties (Anastas & Clark, 2012).

These educational models came to the American system with the strong support of professionals from the sphere of social services, thus the school administrations being aware of and accepting the need for school social workers to support the effective implementation of legislation.

The NASW standards for school social work were to define on a larger scale the scope of services that school social workers shall provide, and that school administrators should support, for students and families to

benefit from them. At the same time, these standards were designed for broad awareness of the skills, knowledge, values, methods and sensitivity that school social workers need to work effectively within school systems. NASW's vision associates these standards with a high impact on the development of clear, objective, and school-related social work directions in social work services, research, policy, and education.

We will list all the 11 standards promoted by NASW for school social workers, in order to understand the focus this organization puts on supporting best practices and best transparency among communities and professionals: 1st Standard - Ethics and values; 2nd standard - Qualifications; 3rd Standard - Evaluation; 4th standard - Intervention; 5th standard - Decision making and practice evaluation; 6th standard - Record keeping; 7th standard - workload management; 8th standard - professional development; 9th standard - cultural competence; 10th standard - Interdisciplinary leadership and collaboration; 11th standard - advocacy (Anastas & Clark, 2012).

We salute the interest for ethical behaviour and systemized framework of the school social workers and we consider it is valuable to understand how this role of school social workers is understood in Romanian practice. The Romanian welfare practice has undoubtedly originated in the American practice and it is important to understand to what extent the school social work model has been replicated in the Romanian context.

The Romanian national social work system is regulated by the Social Work Law no. 292/2011. The national social work system is based on the following general values and principles: *social solidarity, subsidiarity, universality, respect for human dignity, individual approach, partnership, participation of beneficiaries, transparency, non-discrimination, effectiveness, efficiency, respect for the right to self-determination, activation, uniqueness of the right to social work benefits, proximity, complementarity and integrated approach, competition and competitiveness, equal opportunities, confidentiality, equity, focus, the right to freely choose the social services provider*. Each of these principles can be consulted in article 5 of Law 292/2011 (Romanian Parliament, 2011).

The direct association of *education* with the welfare system can be found in the law in Section 2, Categories of social work benefits, article 11, the paragraphs dedicated to social work beneficiaries for the prevention and combating of poverty and the risk of social exclusion. Paragraphs d) and e) state the contribution of the social work system through: "d) social scholarships and financial aid to facilitate access to education, supported by the state budget and/or local budgets; and e) help in-kind, food and

materials, including those granted within educational support programs for children and young people from disadvantaged families, supported by the state budget and/or local budgets, such as programs for food supplements, supplies and other necessary materials in the education process;" (Romanian Parliament, Law 292/2011).

The activity of social work professionals is represented in Romania by the National College of Social Workers. The College's activity is regulated by the Law on the Status of the Social Worker (Law no. 466 of 2004 regarding the status of the social worker). In accordance with this law, in Romania the social workers who are members of the College are guided by a series of ethical principles reflected in the law through chapter III, Ethical principles, on articles 19 - 25. Thus, the main purpose of the assistant's activity social is to assist people or communities in need, getting involved in the identification, understanding, correct evaluation and solution of social problems (Romanian Parliament, Law no. 466/2004, art. 19).

Social workers promote the principles of social justice, stipulated in the normative acts regarding social work and social services (Romanian Parliament, Law no. 466/2004, art. 20); ensure equal opportunities regarding assisted persons' access to information, services, resources and their participation in the decision-making process; respects and promotes the dignity of the individual, the uniqueness and value of each one persons (Art. 20); also, social worker must not practice, tolerate, facilitate or collaborate in any form of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender and orientation sexual, age, political or religious beliefs, marital status, physical or mental deficiency, material situation and/or any other preference, characteristic, condition or status (Romanian Parliament, Law no. 466/2004, art. 21).

Although we do not find references to the school social worker in the content of the Law of social worker or in the Law on the status of the social worker, we can identify the availability or the possibility of transferring the role of the social worker in educational institutions. We consider this possibility is found in the Law on the Status of the social worker through article 22 and 23, according to those, the social worker supports the assisted persons in their efforts to identify and clarify their goals, in order to choose the best option (Law no. 466/2004, article 22) and contributes to strengthening the relationships between people with the aim of to promote, restore, maintain and/or improve the quality of life of individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities (Romanian Parliament, Law no. 466/2004, article 23).

School social workers are defined by being the link between the community, family and school for the direct and indirect benefit of the

student and his personal, emotional and school development. Precisely these descriptive articles of what social workers can be in Romania could be part of the potential position of school social worker.

Considering the contribution of each specialist in the higher interest of the students, it is worthy understand better the differences between the roles of *school social workers* and *school counsellors*, both from national Romanian perspective as from the United States perspective.

In international literature, *school counsellors* are educated, certified professionals who come to the aid of students to be successful during their school studies and to plan their careers. School counsellors are an integral part of the entire educational system, helping students to form their own academic development goals, mentalities and healthy behaviours (Burnham & Jackson, 2000). Helped by a school counsellor, students learn to develop effective collaboration and cooperation skills, practice perseverance, as well as develop time management and study skills and learn self-motivation and self-direction habits (Stone & Dahir, 2016). All these directions are based on a foundation emotional health supported by family, community, school (American School Counselor Association, nd).

If a school counsellor contributes to the academic guidance of students, a school social worker - especially in predominantly vulnerable communities - comes to support how students face the social-emotional challenges given by the environment in which they develop. In the American models, the school counsellor is specialized for each educational level in need: elementary, middle and high school. American School Counselor Association considers that a health effective counselling relationship can be established at 250 students to 1 counsellor, the counsellor main duties resuming to the following: individual student academic planning and goal stability; student-based classroom counseling lessons; success standards; short-term counseling for students; recommendations for long-term support; collaboration with families/teachers/administrators; community for student success; advocacy for students on an individual education plan; student-focused meetings; data analysis to identify student issues, needs and challenges; acting for systems change to create an equity agent and access to opportunities for all students (American School Counselor Association, nd).

In 2022 Romania, the Ministry of Education released a press statement that made known both the status of school counselors' activity and the desired number of professionals for the year 2027. Thus, in 2022, a school counselor could be put in the situation of working in relation to 1 per 2,400 students, with 3,138 school counselors nationwide. The objective of the Ministry of Education for 2027 was to professionalize 10,000 school

counselors in schools in Romania (Cîmpeanu, Minister of Education, July 28, 2022).

The necessity of school social workers as partners in school and students evolution

In a study conducted in 4 district schools in Minnesota, among school social workers and school administrators, Bye et al. (2009) identified how the involvement of school social workers in the institutions under study contributed to the increase in school attendance and the decrease in discipline problems. The context described by Bye et al. (2009) is relevant to any social and political space, as we are in an era of fiscal constraints, and periods that demand budget reductions, increased responsibility regarding the allocation of funds, these factors being barriers to developing networks of school social workers in educational institutions. A form of making these actions more efficient is precisely the communication and reporting of the results of the school social workers, in such a way that their contribution in improving the socio-emotional, educational, relational status of the community actors is understood: students, parents, teaching staff, administrative forums.

In Romanian practice, school counsellors also perform didactic functions too, and this aspect can make communication between student and counsellor difficult, through the lens of a potential violation of the confidentiality of conversations or the influence of the teaching staff on the student they guide. Of course, this challenge can be overcome by applying professional ethics rules. Considering the usefulness of the school social worker in the learning environment, it is valuable to understand his/her neutrality towards the didactic learning process and his/her orientation towards making a positive difference in the lives of children and young people. Thus, school social workers can support students to develop coping skills, resilience, self-esteem and academic motivation. Moreover, they can facilitate access to resources and services that can improve their health, safety, and family stability. School social workers can also collaborate with teachers, administrators, and other professionals to create a supportive and inclusive school climate that promotes learning and diversity.

School Social workers work by virtue of respecting the ethical principles that underpin their profession, we reproduce here a series of them, inviting you to analyse the code of ethics of the profession: respect for justice, respect for the autonomy and dignity of the person, respect for equity and equal opportunities for resources, respect for confidentiality, etc.

A more recent theoretical analysis, developed by Nadine Finigan-Carr and Wendy E. Shaia shows the actual role of the school social worker in each social relationship they can improve by their practice (Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 2018). We can identify here a real triad constructed from the family - school - community, in the benefit of the student, where the school social worker comes to facilitate communication between them.

In the first supported relationship, the one between the child and the parents, the school social worker becomes a communicative facilitator, as well as support in the child's adaptation to school when it is difficult for him/her to do so. How does the school social worker go into action in such cases? by supporting the parents, who in turn offer support to the children. It is an almost systemic support, validating family values. Thus, school social workers could be the ones who develop programs to help new students acclimatize to school or help students after a prolonged absence due to illness or family stressors, such as a divorce or death (Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 2018). They could also help parents of children with special needs access programs available specifically for these needs. Such actions are desirable to be implemented with a preventive character, even before the difficulty in adaptation is felt by the child directly, through communication with the parents. Adapting or overcoming a financial challenge is again a context that can be improved by the contribution of creativity and the presentation of a school social worker who can facilitate the access of families in such a challenge to the specialized financial coping program (Shaia & Finigan-Carr, 2018; Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 2018).

School social worker may also connect families with the communities. In Romania, as in many countries, the school institutions as well as the social welfare professionals work with community stakeholders – priests, doctors, mayors, churches, hospitals, small communities oriented towards helping those in need.

School social workers can play an important role in the professional development of the student, by facilitating his/her relationship with the teaching staff. They can help teachers and administrators identify evidence-based practices for maintaining a safe and effective learning environment without over-relying on suspensions, expulsions, and other coercive disciplinary measures (McCarter, 2017; Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 2018). They can be the link between educators and the community to help educators obtain resources to meet classroom and student needs (Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 2018).

Conclusions

As we understood each of these two types of professionals – school social worker and school counsellor – the school social worker is the one who transcends the educational space of the student's evolution. A social worker goes beyond the didactic perspective and academic trajectory of a student and facilitates the communication between agencies in the higher benefit of the student, student's family and school representatives. The emotional and social support that a school social worker can provide may influence both the academic results and the relational success of the student in its further connections in life. We see the professionalization of school social worker in the Romanian educational system as necessary as the school counsellor was considered in the Ministry of Education press communication released in 2022. This brief analysis of few benefits a school social worker can bring into an educational institution may be a start for future researches in the Romanian welfare system in collaboration with the educational system.

References

Agresta, J. (2004). Professional role perceptions of school social workers, psychologists, and counselors. *Children & Schools, 26*(3), 151-163. http://www.naswpress.org/publications/journals/cs.html

Altshuler, S. J., & Webb, J. R. (2009). School social work: Increasing the legitimacy of the profession. *Children & Schools, 31*(4), 207-218. http://www.naswpress.org/publications/journals/cs.html

Alvarez, M. E., Bye, L., Bryant, R., & Mumm, A. M. (2013). School social workers and educational outcomes. *Children & Schools*, *35*(4), 235-243. https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdt019

American School Counselor Association (nd). School Counselor Roles & Ratios. https://www.schoolcounselor.org/About-School-Counseling/School-Counselor-Roles-Ratios

Anastas, J. W., & Clark, E. J. (2012). *NASW standards for school social work services*. N. A. o. S. Workers (Ed.). Washington DC: National Association of Social Workers.

Burnham, J. J., & Jackson, C. M. (2000). School counselor roles: Discrepancies between actual practice and existing models. *Professional school counseling*, *4*(1), 41.

Bye, L., Shepard, M., Partridge, J., & Alvarez, M. (2009). School social work outcomes: Perspectives of school social workers and school administrators. *Children & Schools*, *31*(2), 97-108. http://www.naswpress.org/publications/journals/cs.html

Cîmpeanu, S.M. Minister of Education (July 28, 2022). *Press statement: In 2027, we must have 10,000 school counselors in Romanian schools!* https://www.edu.ro/comunicat_presa_73_2022_declaratie_dezbatere_consilieri_scolari

Dziegielewski, S. F., & Holliman, D. C. (2019). The changing face of health care social work: Opportunities and challenges for professional practice.

Finigan-Carr, N. M., & Shaia, W. E. (2018). School social workers as partners in the school mission. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *99*(7), 26-30. https://kappanonline.org/finigan-carr-shaia-school-social-workers-partners-school-mission/

Higy, C., Haberkorn, J., Pope, N., & Gilmore, T. (2012). The role of school social workers from the perspective of school administrator interns: A pilot study in rural North Carolina. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, *2*(2), 8-15.

Livingtson, J., & Rock, P. F. (1985). The interface of school social workers with teachers and administrators. *School Social Work Journal, 9*(2), 135-143.

Muro, J. J., & Kottman, T. (1995). *Guidance and counseling in the elementary and middle schools: A practical approach.* Brown & Benchmark

Romanian Parliament (2004). Law no. 466 of 2004 regarding the status of the social worker. Official Gazette, https://www.cnasr.ro/storage/app/media/uploads/12c6a09675620f589055800ba6ceceee/2016/09/Legea_nr.466_din_2004_privind_statutul_asistentului_social.pdf

Romanian Parliament (2011). Law of Social work nr. 292/2011. Official Gazette, Part I no. 905 of December 20, 2011.https://lege5.ro/gratuit/gi4diobsha/legea-asistentei-sociale-nr-292-2011

School Social Work Association of America (accessed October 2023). Role of school social worker.https://www.sswaa.org/school-social-work

Shaia, W.E. & Finigan-Carr, N.M. (2018). Moving from survival to fulfillment: A planning framework for community schools. *Phi Delta Kappan, 99* (5), 15-18.

Stone, C. B., & Dahir, C. A. (2016). *The transformed school counselor.* Cengage Learning.

Stuart, P. H. (2013). Social work profession: History. In *Encyclopedia of social work.*

Wang, S. (2003). *Perceptions of the school social worker's role: A survey of school personnel* (Master's thesis). ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. (Order No. 1415534)