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## PARADOXES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSULTING FOR TEACHERS IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

**Abstract:** The basic legislative document regarding the position of teachers in the SR is Act No. 317/2009 Coll [2] on teaching staff and vocational training employees. The Act brought a new dimension into the field of pedeutology regarding the direct «representation» of psychology and psychologists in the teaching profession. The Act introduced a requirement regarding the mental capacity of teachers – as a precondition for the performance of their work – and addressed their need to seek help in order to solve certain problems in the form of psychological consulting. This paper discusses actual possibilities, mainly limitations and paradoxes, related to the implementation of psychological intervention for teachers in the educational practice. This paper was supported by Slovak Research and Development Agency (SRDA) based on Agreement No. APVV – 16 0573.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Today, consulting activity has become a part of the job performed by experts in a range of helping professions – not only psychologists, but also educational counsellors, social workers, special pedagogues, andragogues, experts in ethics, physicians, etc. In every profession which involves mainly working with people, at some point, the expert encounters a person in distress who needs help.

Consulting has been developing as a specific field in different scientific disciplines – or at least, as a specific activity implemented using methods and procedures of the given discipline. This paper addresses psychological consulting specifically in order to point out the areas in which the psychologist

as an expert should be involved to assist in resolving of difficult situations as well as teachers' personal issues.

The system of consulting services in the Slovak educational environment is specified in Act 245/2008 Coll [7]. The Act sets out the basic components of educational and psychological consulting as a system. Basic components of educational consulting and prevention are represented by facilities providing educational, psychological, specialised pedagogical and prevention-related consulting (hereinafter «consulting facilities»), including the Slovak pedagogic-psychological consulting and prevention centre as well as the specialised pedagogical consulting centre. Consulting is usually provided by the educational counsellor, school psychologist, special pedagogue, prevention coordinator and other experts. Individual components of the educational consulting and prevention system cooperate mainly with the family, school, educational facility, employers, public administration authorities and civic associations. The educational consulting and prevention system components are interconnected in terms of organisation and contents.

Act No. 317/2009 Coll. on teaching staff and vocational training employees [2] represents another important legislative document; it provides the classification of teaching staff and their responsibilities. Section 20 of the Act also defines the position of the school psychologist.

### **Psychologist and school psychologist**

(1) According to the Act, the psychologist performs specialised activities related to psychological diagnostics; individual, group or collective psychological consulting, psychotherapy, prevention and intervention for children and pupils with the specific focus on the process of education and upbringing in schools and educational facilities; specialised activities related to psychological consulting in the area of family, marital and other social relationships. They provide psychological consulting for legal representatives and teaching staff at schools a school facilities.

(2) The school psychologist performs specialised activities related to preliminary psychological diagnostics; individual, group or collective psychological consulting, psychotherapy, prevention and intervention for children and pupils with the specific focus on the process of education and upbringing in schools and educational facilities; specialised activities related to psychological consulting in the area of family, marital and other social relationships. They provide psychological consulting for legal representatives and teaching staff at schools a school facilities. They prepare documents for other specialised employees in consulting facilities.

Psychological consulting targeting children, legal representatives and school staff provided by the school psychologist or psychologist, which focuses

on healthy personality development and mental health, has a specific position in the system.

The aim of this paper is to bring attention to the teacher as a possible client in the consulting process. All components of educational and psychological consulting focus mainly on the pupil, their family and educational or upbringing-related problems.

## **2. AIM AND TASKS**

### **Teacher – a potential client in psychological consulting**

The teacher – and their personality characteristics – play an important role in the educational environment. The teacher is required to possess professional qualifications and health capacity, including mental capacity. These requirements are set out in Act No. 317/2009 Coll. on teaching staff and vocational training employees. Section 10 of the Act defines teacher's health capacity as physical as well as *mental capacity necessary* to perform educational or specialised activity. The explanatory report on this amendment provides reasons why health capacity has been extended by mental capacity as follows:

Pedagogic a vocational training employees facilitate education and upbringing of children and pupils through immediate contact. Research has shown that this profession is highly psychologically demanding and in practice, a number of employees failed to prove their capacity to perform it (e. g. using physical punishments, aggressive behaviour, sexual deviation). Based on this, mental capacity has been listed along with physical capacity among the requirements for the performance of educational and specialised activities (the Section also includes communication skills). Due to the high load and stress, health or mental capacity may change or even deteriorate over time. Therefore, the employer has been allowed to require teachers to prove their health capacity at any point of their career. In order to protect the employee, a period has been specified for them to prove their capacity. If the employee fails to do so during this period, the employer will act in accordance with the Labour Code.

In terms of the contents of the consulting process, two related aspects are of importance: Psychological diagnostics which aims to evaluate teachers' mental capacity and intervention – direct assistance of the psychologist in resolving of difficult situations or teachers' personal issues.

## **3. THE THEORETICAL BACKGROUNDS**

### **Psychological diagnostics – a part of psychological consulting**

As it was already mentioned, psychological diagnostics represents an aspect of the consulting process. The aforementioned Section directly

emphasizes that teachers' mental capacity needs to be evaluated, however, its justification as well as practical implementation prompt several questions:

1. Who will define «health» or «mental capacity» and when will it be defined?

2. Who will evaluate it and what criteria will be used?

3. Who will create the set of diagnostic methods and procedures to evaluate mental capacity in teaching staff and what criteria will be used?

In search for the answers to these questions, we examined legal norms and legislative measurements that require the workers to prove their mental capacity in different professions. It is required in the police force, fire and rescue force, border police, railway police, as well as from train drivers, professional drivers, and gun holders. These professions (or activities) legally require the job candidate to prove their mental capacity; relevant laws and regulations specify who is the evaluator of «mental capacity» – either the psychologist working for the police, fire and rescue force, or «specialised psychologist», or the «psychologist certified to perform this activity», e. g. traffic psychology. In case of some professions, contraindications are directly listed to indicate risks related to the professions (activities). Individual laws and decrees take the form of binding regulations issued by the Ministry of Health of the SR and other relevant ministries. The objective of psychological diagnostics is to provide a complex evaluation of the candidate and their suitability for the job. Therefore, the candidate proves their mental capacity to perform the given job by submitting the confirmation about having absolved a psychological examination focused on the evaluation of their personal capacity to perform specific activities required in the job performance.

The Concept of Psychological Work in the Police Force of the SR of 2003 represents an example of a document which elaborated on the psychological care system. The Ministry regulation defines psychological care as “expert, purposeful and organised activity of psychologists employed by the Ministry and the Police Force aiming at protection, enhancement and recuperation of mental health in police officers in order to ensure their mental capacity, personality development as well as their ability to efficiently perform their state service.”

Psychological care includes:

- a) psychodiagnostics,
- b) psychological education for police officers,
- c) school psychologists' services,
- d) psychohygiene, awareness raising and prevention,
- e) psychological preparation,
- f) psychological consulting,
- g) post-trauma intervention care,

h) psychological analysis, research and expertise. (Journal of the Ministry of Interior of the SR, No. 36).

On the other hand, Act No. 317/2009 Coll, on teaching staff and vocational training employees does not include any regulation regarding the way mental capacity is to be evaluated. The Ministry of Education employs psychologists in pedagogic-psychological consulting and prevention centres or school psychologists who might be able to perform entrance or interim psychological diagnostics if the conditions were precisely specified. Moreover, based on the Act, the new teaching staff and vocational training employees have to prove their health (including mental) capacity before starting the job.

The general regulation issued by the Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family lists diseases limiting job performance in any (including teaching) position. This list includes:

*Mental disorders* – psychical function disorders (thinking, emotional experiencing, behaviour) including mental illnesses such as psychoses – schizophrenia; mood disorders – depression, bipolar personality disorder; mental disorders – mental retardation, dementia, Alzheimer’s disease; personality disorders – psychopathy, neurosis, stress disorders, etc. According to the type and severity of the illness as evaluated by a psychiatrist, the person may partially or completely lose their capacity to work, be listed as a candidate for protected workshop, lose their capacity to work in certain professions, or be regarded as fully disabled. Jobs with high mental load are not suitable for such candidates.

*Behavioural disorders* – include e. g. aggressive, asocial or defiant behaviour of permanent nature, often associated with unfavourable psychosocial environment and dysfunctional family relationships. It manifests as the inclination towards isolation, hostility, or on the contrary, seeking authorities and groups with the inclination towards antisocial and delinquent activities. They can limit the job selection, excluding mainly those which require psychological examination.

*Severe psychosomatic diseases* – diseases in which health problems and functional changes in body organs are determined by the person’s mental state. These problems often manifest in the cardiovascular (heart palpitations, stabbing pain in the heart, shortness of breath) or digestive system (feeling full, stomach cramps, nausea, diarrhoea, constipation). These disease may limit one’s ability to perform stressful jobs.

It is important to specify undesirable personality attributes also for teachers and set the limits above which the candidate is already considered unsuitable for the teaching profession. This point in mental capacity proving could be implemented if contraindications were specified as it has been done in

other professions. The conditions should be determined by experts in psychology, pedagogy and medicine.

In our efforts to determine who and under what conditions should evaluate teachers' mental capacity, we proceeded as follows:

In Act No. 199/1994 Coll. on Psychological Activities and Slovak Chamber of Psychologists [3] the term "specialised psychological activity" is defined as examination, explanation, influence and prognostic assessment of behaviour and/or mental state (or internal experiencing) of a person or group of people using psychological methods, tests, techniques and other specialised psychological procedures in line with the current knowledge in psychological sciences and practice.

Based on the amendment to Act No. 199/1994 Coll, on Psychological Activities [4], they can only be performed by a person who successfully completed the *five-year Master studies in the field of psychology*. According to this provision, specialised psychological activities – particularly psychodiagnosing teachers – could not be performed by a school psychologist since they have not completed the single-field psychological studies (i. e. their study field was combined). According to Section 20 of Act No. 317/2009 Coll. on teaching staff and vocational training employees, the *school psychologist* also performs specialised activities related to psychological consulting for teaching staff in schools and educational facilities. The valid decree of the SR Ministry of Education of 26 January 1996 on educational consulting and consulting facilities No. 43/1996 which entered into force on 1 March 1996 includes a concept of the schools psychologist's work in schools and educational facilities, specifying their activities in relation to pupils, teaching staff, parents or legal representatives, and the school.

The concept of the school psychologist's work is of general nature; it is a binding document navigating the activities of school psychologists based on which every school psychologist plans their work in line with the specific conditions in the given schools as well as their own professional and personality attributes. The decree states that for the teaching staff and the educational facility the school psychologists provides the following:

- consulting and informing,
- consulting services for teaching staff,
- addressing teachers' psychological load and its management,
- resolving interpersonal relationships.

As can be seen, it does not explicitly state that the school psychologist is supposed to perform psychological diagnostics on the teaching staff.

The Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family website provides a database of position types explicitly listing psychologists' positions, however, only in the police force, fire and rescue force, railways and army. All these

positions include psychological diagnostics or psychological consulting among work responsibilities along with psychotherapy for the professionals in the given field. The school psychologist is also listed in the database, however, their psychodiagnostic expertise is hereby limited to children and youth.

#### 4. RESEARCH METHODS

##### Characteristics of psychological consulting for teachers

In Slovakia, mainly J. Koščo studied consulting (and consulting psychology); in 1987 he described it. Although almost 40 years passed since then, his characteristics of consulting remains applicable, clear and comprehensive as it covers all important attributes of consulting as an activity as well as a scientific discipline. J. Koščo et al. (1987) [5] provide basic characteristics of consulting. For the purpose of this paper, only features that apply to direct consulting intervention for teachers have been selected. The author lists that consulting is of:

- *institutionalised nature*, i. e. it is organised and performed in specialised institutions certified to perform such activities; these are exclusively consulting facilities or facilities which provide a number of specialised activities including consulting; field consulting represents an exception. In the SR the consulting service system is institutionalised (e. g. the Ministry of Education manages school psychologists or psychologists in pedagogic-psychological consulting and prevention centres);

- *biodromal nature*, i. e. the consulting system should be continuous to serve people experiencing crises in all stages of their lives; the individual consulting systems focused on different age groups should follow one another. Teachers match the characteristics in terms of ontogenetics as well as stages in the performance of their profession.

- *personal nature*, i. e. consulting is targeted at mature people in their holistic nature although consultants sometimes achieve their goals through influencing an individual personality component of their clients as well as specific situations. «Maturity» understood as the teacher's mature personality is one of the preconditions for their professionalization.

The consulting process includes also the so called *facilitating consulting* which can be described as a long-term process during which the consultant and client build a relationship. Instead of providing quick advice or information, its aim is to lead the client towards independence in achieving reconciliation, resolution or managing the problem situation. The aforementioned Act on teaching staff also lists activities which can be performed by psychologists, corresponding with the aims of facilitating consulting. These shared points include preventive psychological consulting, trainings aimed at prevention and

aggression management, load management, self-knowledge and conflict resolution.

A survey has been carried out on 103 teachers which indicated that teachers may be interested in psychological consulting. 47% respondents stated that they have been experiencing situations in which they could use the help of a psychologist. Although the survey did not aim to identify specific problems, the aforementioned situations can be divided into those which are directly related to the performance of the teachers' job and the educational environment, and those related to their personal or private lives; obviously, these problems can overlap.

The topic is currently researched at the Faculty of Education, Matej Bel University and the andragogical consulting model will be employed in the context of professionalization of Slovak teaching.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

### **Paradoxes in the implementaton of psychological consulting for teachers**

1. The greatest problem and paradox can be seen in the fact that despite the legislative requirements, only the school psychologist can perform the job in the institutional context. In reality, a minimal number of schools provide this position. Moreover, if the psychologist is employed by the school they are directly supervised by the school management, which does not encourage teachers to consult this psychologist regarding disrupted relationships in the work collective since both the teacher and the psychologist belong to the same collective.

2. If the school has a school psychologist, they focus mainly and specifically on children and youth. In the area of psychological consulting targeted at adult clients long-term psychotherapeutical training is recommended.

3. Paradoxically, diagnosing teachers has not been resolved either; its criteria and the experts responsible for the job have never been specified.

4. Another paradox is that in the SR, a teacher professiogram which would determine the desirable personality attributes and other requirements related to teaching is missing.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

An expert group should be established under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic to tackle the following tasks:

1. Specify what «mental capacity» means in the context of the teaching profession and take into account all categories of teaching staff and vocational training employees as provided in the relevant laws.



2. Define what specialisation should the psychologists pertain if they are to assess mental capacity in teaching staff and vocational training employees, since the psychologists currently working in the field of education are limited as follows:

a. school psychologists can perform the job only if they have completed the single-field Master studies in psychology;

b. psychologists in pedagogic-psychological consulting and prevention centres are currently overloaded and their job is mainly to assist target groups of pupils and students at primary and high schools or universities.

3. The position of the specialised psychologist needs to be established at least on the level of the higher territorial units to take the responsibility for psychological diagnostics of teaching staff and provide expert guarantee for the assessment process.

4. A research should be performed under the auspices of the Ministry of Education to create a comprehensive profesiogram for teachers as the basic tool for the evaluation of their mental and physical capacity. The profesiogram should also specify standardised psychodiagnostic methods to be used by psychologists. The research team should clarify the contraindications for the teaching profession and its performance.

## **7. REFERENCES (TRANSLATED AND TRANSLITERATED)**

- [1] Parliament Journal No. 958 of 2 March 2009. Available at: <http://www.nrsr.sk/web/Default.aspx?sid=zakony/zakon&MasterID=2726>.
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- [7] Act 245/2008 Coll. on Upbringing and Education (the School Act) as amended.

## **ПАРАДОКСИ В РЕАЛІЗАЦІЇ ПСИХОЛОГІЧНОГО КОНСУЛЬТУВАННЯ ДЛЯ ВЧИТЕЛІВ У СЛОВАЦЬКІЙ РЕСПУБЛІЦІ**

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**Анотація:** Основним законодавчим документом стосовно позиції викладачів в Словацькій Республіці є Закон № 317/2009 Coll [2] про працівників викладацької та професійної підготовки. Закон поставив новий вимір у поле психології стосовно безпосереднього «представництва» психології та психологів у професії педагога. Закон запровадив вимогу стосовно психічних здібностей вчителів – як передумови для виконання їхньої роботи – і вирішував їх потребу шукати допомоги для вирішення певних проблем у формі психологічного консультування. У цьому документі розглядаються фактичні можливості, переважно обмеження та парадокси, пов'язані з реалізацією психологічного втручання для вчителів у навчальній практиці. Цей документ був підтриманий Словацькою агенцією досліджень та розвитку (SRDA) на підставі Угоди № APVV-16 0573.

### **ПАРАДОКСЫ В РЕАЛИЗАЦИИ ПСИХОЛОГИИ, КОНСАЛТИНГ ИНСТИТУТА В СЛОВАЦКОЙ РЕСПУБЛИКЕ**

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**Аннотация:** Основным законодательным документом о положении учителей в Словацкой Республике является Закон № 317/2009 Coll [2] о преподавательском составе и профессионально-технических работников. Закон внес новое измерение в область психологии в отношении прямого «представления» психологии и психологов в профессии преподавателя. Закон ввел требование о умственной способности учителей – в качестве предварительного условия для выполнения их работы – и обратился к их необходимости

обращаться за помощью в решении определенных проблем в форме психологического консультирования. В настоящем документе обсуждаются фактические возможности, в основном ограничения и парадоксы, связанные с реализацией психологического вмешательства для учителей в образовательной практике. Настоящий документ был поддержан Словацким агентством исследований и разработок (SRDA) на основе соглашения № APVV-16 0573.

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