

## SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK IN HUNGARY AND GREAT BRITAIN

## ŠKOLNÍ SOCIÁLNÍ PRÁCE V MAĎARSKU A VELKÉ BRITÁNII

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to present and compare school social work in Hungary and Great Britain. The goal of the research is to gain a more detailed and accurate understanding of the activities carried out in the two countries, highlighting the similarities and differences in practice. The research questions highlight the circumstances of Hungarian and British school social work, the cooperation of social workers with educational institutions and the activities carried out there. As a research method, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 social workers who have close ties to schools and who are specifically school social workers. The operation of mental health teams organised in educational institutions not only serves to protect children, but the creation and coordination of such a professional team can also increase the acceptance and influence of school social workers within the institution.

Keywords: social assistance in kindergartens and schools, child protection, school social worker services

### **Abstrakt**

Cílem této studie je představit a porovnat školní sociální práci v Maďarsku a Velké Británii. Cílem výzkumu je získat podrobnější a přesnější přehled o činnostech prováděných v obou zemích a zdůraznit podobnosti a rozdíly v praxi. Výzkumné otázky se zaměřují na podmínky maďarské a britské školní sociální práce, spolupráci sociálních pracovníků se vzdělávacími institucemi a činnosti, které tam provádějí. Jako výzkumnou metodu jsme použili polostrukturované rozhovory s 14 sociálními pracovníky, kteří mají úzké vazby na školy a kteří jsou konkrétně školními sociálními pracovníky. Činnost týmů pro duševní zdraví organizovaných ve vzdělávacích institucích slouží nejen k ochraně dětí, ale vytvoření a koordinace takového profesionálního týmu může také zvýšit přijetí a vliv školních sociálních pracovníků v rámci instituce.

Klíčová slova: sociální pomoc v mateřských školách a školách, ochrana dětí, služby školních sociálních pracovníků

## **School social work in Hungary**

From the 2018/2019 academic year, kindergarten and school social support activities were introduced in all public education institutions in Hungary. In order to support the upbringing of children in their families and to prevent them from becoming vulnerable, kindergarten and school social workers organise individual and group services and programmes, which are provided on a mandatory basis by the district Family and Child Welfare Centres as part of their special services. (Rákó, 2016; Herczeg, 2024)

The legal basis for the performance of these tasks is provided by Act XXXI of 1997 on the protection of children and guardianship administration, as well as Decree 15/1998. (IV.30.) NM on the professional tasks and operating conditions of child welfare and child protection institutions providing personal care and professional personnel.

Prevention and intervention activities take place on several levels, affecting families, schools and the wider community. The ecological perspective views educational institutions as a social system and considers it important how school social workers perceive the school climate and factors influencing the environment. (Soliman, 2017)

School social workers form a „bridge“ between the family and the school, and between the community and the school, thereby strengthening the role of educational institutions in society and influencing people’s opinions about schools and teachers. (Herczeg, 2023)

Decision-makers considered the introduction of the ecological model to be justified, as it helps to develop children’s social skills and places great emphasis on the ability of public education institutions to respond adequately to children’s needs. (Bunyevác z et al., 2018)

In addition to the ecological approach, the development and changes in models used in practice are also of great importance in school social work. The emergence of different models testifies to different approaches.

In terms of school social work practice, three main trends emerged in Hungary in the 2000s. These were „internal“ school social work or the so-called traditional model, „external“ school social work or the Ferencváros model, and the Pécs model. When comparing these models, similarities can be observed, but sharp differences can also be found. While in the traditional model the social worker is employed by the school, in the external model they belong to an institution independent of the school, the family and child welfare service. The Pécs model is even more independent, as the employer is a service provider that is independent of both the school and the child welfare services (churches, civil organisations, local government associations, public foundations). A significant difference is that in the internal and Pécs models, one social worker is assigned to one educational institution and spends most of their working time at that school, meaning that they are easily accessible to teachers, children

and their parents, whereas in the Ferencváros model, one social worker may be responsible for 4-5 institutions and spends only a small part of their time at the school, making them less accessible to teachers, students and parents. In both the external and Pécs models, professional support for social workers is provided, as they are guaranteed participation in case discussion groups, individual professional consultations or supervision sessions, but in the internal model, in a significant number of cases, the helper does not have this opportunity. (Máté, 2018, Gergál-Máté, 2018)

The new task assignment introduced is most similar to the „external“ model among the previous models, as social workers are employed by child welfare centres. Therefore, they do not receive their tasks from the head of the public education institution, but from their immediate superior, the head of the family and child welfare centre. The high level of professionalism and the stability provided by operating within a network are definitely advantages of the model, but the limited number of hours spent in each institution by the social worker may also affect the quality of the service. (Máté, 2018)

With the introduction of the service, a new term has also come into use, as the extension to kindergartens has transformed the previously used term ‘school social work’ and the legislation now refers to it as ‘kindergarten and school social support activities’. According to the law, one kindergarten and school social support worker may be employed for every 1,000 children registered in public education institutions, working 40 hours per week. (Herczeg and Héderné Berta, 2023) It is often the case that one support worker is responsible for as many as 5-8 institutions. The head of the family and child welfare centre determines the work schedule, but the assistant spends one working day a week at the centre, performing administrative tasks or participating in case discussions and supervision.

According to the definition in the Child Protection Act, „In order to prevent children from being at risk, the kindergarten and school social support service provides support to children attending public education institutions, their families and the teachers of public education institutions using the tools of social support work. Kindergarten and school social workers perform individual, group and community social work, as well as child and youth protection tasks.“ (2/2018. (I. 18.) EMMI decree. 25. § (1) – (2))

According to the decree, school social workers must have a higher education degree. However, this position is not exclusively reserved for professionals with a degree in social work; it can also be filled by teachers, nursery school teachers, special education teachers or theologians who have studied child and youth protection, for example. Within two years of starting employment, however, they must complete training as a nursery and school social worker, unless they already have an equivalent degree or further training. (Kopasz et al., 2025)

## **School social work in Great Britain**

There is no uniform system for school social work in the United Kingdom, and very few local authorities employ social workers in this capacity. The prevalence of this type of service varies from region to region and even from county to county.

One reason for this may be that the officials employed did not have the appropriate qualifications for the job, which led to significant differences in the quality of services within the country. There were areas where they were able to provide a wide range of services to children and their families, meaning that 'education welfare' was able to reach the level of genuine social work, as in Canada or the United States, but there were parts of the country where this remained completely undeveloped. (Huxtable, 1998).

At the beginning of the 2000s, significant changes took place in Great Britain's child protection policy with the amendment of the 1989 Child Protection Act and the launch of the Every Child Matters national child protection programme. This new child protection policy extended state responsibility to all children. It also required much closer cooperation between the various sectors involved in child welfare (health, education, child protection). Local authorities were required to set up multidisciplinary teams and introduce the case manager system, which was created to make it easier to determine responsibility and provide multilateral support. For school-age children, the centre of primary care became the educational institution, because this is where pupils spend most of their time, where their problems can be detected earliest and where it is easiest to influence them. For this reason, many have made it possible to employ professionals who support the physical and mental health and academic progress of children and provide primary treatment for social problems. (Varga et al., 2010) School social workers can also join this professional team performing these tasks upon their arrival at the institution and can even coordinate its operation.

Similar to the practice in Hungary, the tasks of school social workers can be diverse. An important task is to support children and their families who have difficulties attending school. Special attention is paid to supporting children in the social care system, those living with foster parents or in children's homes, and those requiring special education at school. They maintain regular contact with school teachers and professionals who support teaching work, assisting them on an individual or group basis and participating in community life. (Westlake et al., 2020)

## **Research methodology**

During the research, we examined school social work in Hungary and the United Kingdom, so we chose interviews as a qualitative method to learn about it. The advantage of semi-

structured interviews is that they allow the researcher to engage in informal conversation, and by asking follow-up questions, there is a greater chance of getting to know the interviewees and thus gaining a comprehensive picture of how the activity works in the two countries. (Babbie, 2008)

I conducted the interviews with social workers working in Hungary and Great Britain (7-7 people) who have close ties to schools, and specifically with school social workers. I selected the interviewees using access-based sampling. Six of the British interviewees work in the East Midlands region and one in the North West region. Three of the Hungarian interviewees work in districts in eastern Hungary, three in Budapest and one in a town in the Transdanubia region.

The main questions of the interview can be divided into three main groups. In the first section, I examined the main objectives of social workers and the conditions of their work. In the second section, I presented their presence in schools and their cooperation with teachers, followed by a description of the specific activities of social workers and the methods they use in their work.

, I formulated the following assumptions in my research:

1. The basis for effective work by school social workers lies in establishing relationships.
2. The majority of teachers are not aware of the exact competences of school social workers in their practical work.
3. The activities performed by school social workers in educational institutions are almost identical in both countries.

In order to preserve anonymity, interviewees are identified by numbers. However, I consider it important to indicate the country in which the social worker who provided the quote works, so I have added the abbreviation GB before the numbers if the interviewee is British, and H if they are Hungarian.

## **Presentation of results**

Based on the answers to the questions, I examined the working conditions of social workers, their presence in schools and their activities. The study can be considered novel due to its subject matter and international perspective, but it is important to note that due to the small sample size, it is not suitable for drawing conclusions about the entire institutional system in Hungary and the United Kingdom.

We asked social workers what they consider to be their most important objectives in their work. Five of the Hungarian respondents referred to themselves as acting as a kind

of „bridge“, functioning as a link between educational institutions, students, parents, social institutions and institutions and professionals involved with children. Here, it is not only important to ensure the transfer and uninterrupted flow of information, but also to create and maintain an environment in which the actors participating in the system are effective, trust-based, supportive and put the interests of the child first. As can be seen from the following response, the need to support teachers with social work tools was emphasised: *“Teachers are overworked these days. With all the new knowledge they have to impart, discipline and endless documentation, they don’t really have time to deal with students’ problems, and let’s face it, they often don’t have the tools to do so.” (Interviewee H-7)*

In the UK, professionals have a similar view of the most important tasks of school social workers. Here, too, many emphasised the role of liaison and professional support for teachers. At the same time, the responses placed greater emphasis on helping children in basic or specialist care (i.e. if the court has ordered the child to be taken into care, or the local authority’s child care department has cared for the child for more than 24 hours) to integrate into school, building their personalities and preventing them from dropping out. The responses show that promoting the importance of school attendance among both children and parents is considered to be of paramount importance: *„I feel it is important to promote school learning among children and to remind teachers that children are not deliberately bad, but because they are struggling with some kind of problem.“ (GB-1 interviewee)*

*„I consider my main task to be supporting young students in school who have become disengaged from education for some reason.“ (GB-2 interviewee)*

An important aspect of school social work is the availability of physical conditions for carrying out the work. In Hungary, this issue is regulated by a cooperation agreement between the educational institution and the family and child welfare centre. A key issue is the provision of a separate room for individual counselling sessions.

Unfortunately, the lack of such a room or the organisational difficulties involved in providing one were mentioned in five interviews in Hungary. Only two professionals reported having a permanent, always available room. The others mostly mentioned the medical room, the storeroom, a less frequented part of the library or the courtyard as places for individual conversations. Before using these facilities, it is necessary to consult with teachers, the head of the institution and the school doctor in order to successfully coordinate the individual support conversations with the daily running of the school. In many cases, this requires the parties to make various compromises. Based on the feedback, it can be concluded that the support person is not always able to carry out their individual activities under ideal conditions: *„In several of my institutions, it is a big problem that there is no ideal place for individual meetings. In some cases, we can sit down and talk in a secluded part of the library.“ (Interviewee H-3)*

*“Our school is struggling with a shortage of rooms anyway. For individual consultations, we go wherever there is free space, be it a classroom, a storage room or even the medical room.” (Interviewee H-6)*

The problem of finding suitable accommodation was also raised by respondents in Great Britain, three of whom had already encountered similar problems. However, I find it interesting to mention the attitude of social workers towards this situation. While the Hungarian interviewees mostly experienced this as a problem that hinders their work, their colleagues in the UK were less concerned about it. The focus was more on finding a place for the conversation (even outside the school building) where the child feels comfortable and can talk about their problems calmly.

*„We often go out for a walk in the city or sit down in the park. The main thing is to go to a place where the child feels safe. Last time, we were in the skate park with one of the children, where he was able to calm down and talk about his problems.” (GB-4 interviewee)*

*“There is usually a place at school where we can retreat to; if nothing else, we go out to the courtyard and sit on a bench.” (GB-7 interviewee)*

A key issue in school social work is how much time the professional spends at each educational institution. With the exception of one professional, all of the Hungarian respondents work at several locations, which usually means three or four primary or secondary schools, but some reported working at seven or eight locations: *“I carry out my duties in twelve institutions in six municipalities. I can’t get to every municipality every week, so we have divided the visits into A and B weeks so that I can get to pretty much everywhere.” (H-2 interviewee)*

With one exception, the majority spend four days in educational institutions and one day a week at the district child welfare centre. They spend 1-2 days a week in more problematic institutions, but there were also respondents who spend no more than 2-3 hours a week in each institution. *“I have four municipalities with eight institutions, so that’s two institutions per municipality per day. I think this is manageable, although there are schools where I could spend three times as much time. (Interviewee H-7)*

The British social workers interviewed also provide services in several institutions. They can also manage their working hours flexibly depending on the cases they are dealing with. In schools where there are more children in the social care system and more problems arise, the number of hours spent there also increases. *„The amount of time spent at school depends on how many institutions you have. I can spend at least one day at each school, and sometimes more. For example, I spend one day at primary schools and two days at secondary schools.” (GB-4 interviewee)*

At the beginning of the collaboration, the duration of the stay at the school is clarified in advance between the heads of the educational and social institutions. The vast majority of professionals consider it extremely important that a support worker be able to spend as many days as possible at an institution each week: *“The more time we can spend with the children and teachers, the more effective our work at the institution will be.”* (GB-2 interviewee)

In educational institutions where the support worker’s time is more predictable and they can spend more time there, they are better able to integrate into school life because they are more visible and accessible to teachers and students. (Westlake et al., 2020)

Working conditions are greatly influenced by the problems that social workers performing tasks in schools most frequently encounter in the institution, which are the difficulties that require intervention at an individual or community level. The answers to these questions were essentially the same among professionals in both countries.

In Hungary, they all highlighted the high number of students struggling with behavioural and learning problems. They also typically added that the number of cases stemming from such difficulties is constantly increasing in their area of care. As expressed in the following responses: *„I see that the problems are absolutely dependent on the locality, but it can be said that in most places there is a huge problem with children’s behaviour“* (H-3 interviewee).

*“Children come to me with a variety of problems, but perhaps most often there are problems with their behaviour, both in and out of class. Unfortunately, this has not decreased over the years”* (H-7 interviewee).

The answer can be found in dysfunctional families, poor social conditions, and physical and emotional neglect. It is typical for students that problems brought from home are even more evident at school, which unfortunately can often cause conflicts in teacher-student or student-student relationships. Based on what has been said, unfortunately, all the professionals interviewed were able to report incidents of school bullying.

Five of the British professionals mentioned the high number of unexcused absences from school as an important problem. It is an important task of the designated child protection officer to pay special attention to absences from school. Some schools employ a staff member specifically for this job, called a School Attendance Officer. If parents do not cooperate with the professional in this matter or are unable to change their child’s school attendance habits, they may be fined or, after court proceedings, even sentenced to imprisonment. (Section 444 Education Act, 1996)

The support staff see it as their job to promote regular school attendance in order to reduce absenteeism, saying: „*We also have to help parents so that together we can make their children fit for school and get them to attend school regularly.*“ (GB-3 interviewee)

„*Today’s schoolchildren face many different problems, and we try to help them with these. In addition to bullying and social problems, we also have to deal with truancy.*“ (GB-6 interviewee)

## **The relationship between school social workers and teachers**

During the interviews, without exception, all respondents referred to the fact that one of the fundamental tools and weapons of a social worker in their work is their personality. This is in line with Budai’s observation that „the personality of the social worker has a very strong influence on the relationship and cooperation between service users and social (and other) professionals.“ (Budai, Puli, 2015:37.) Effective work requires the development of a trusting and honest relationship between the parties involved in the service. In my research, I also examined the relationship between social professionals and educators.

All Hungarian respondents attribute the personal acceptance of social workers in the institution largely to their own adaptability, personality and, in particular, the attitude of the institution’s manager, i.e. the director can play a key role in their integration: „*If you win over the director, you’ve won over most of the teaching staff and you’re good to go.*“ (Interviewee H-5)

It is important for the headteacher to have a clear understanding of the social worker’s potential tasks and areas of competence and to see where they can really help in day-to-day work, as well as to provide opportunities for the support worker to meet and communicate as much as possible with the teachers, who can then clarify their role and responsibilities. As one support worker put it: „*It was difficult to fit in until the headteacher understood what my exact role was here and saw my clear intention to help. Once that happened, the teaching staff also began to open up to me.*“ (Interviewee H-6)

All of the respondents have institutions where the teachers welcomed the new service, quickly took a liking to the support staff and are happy to turn to them for help. However, all of them pointed out that in many cases (despite previous discussions and information sessions) their actual limits of competence in the institutions are still not entirely clear, and they receive many requests from teachers that do not fall within their remit.

One respondent mentioned an institution where, after several years, he still encounters resistance from teachers, has not really been able to „integrate“ into school life and continues to feel like an outsider.

Several support workers find it difficult to relate to teachers, as they put it: *„I feel that my presence disturbs the whole atmosphere. Even if they do mention a problematic case, they usually do so at the last minute, when the problem is already really serious.“* (Interviewee H-1)

*“I had a colleague who was put in the basement, in a windowless room. We managed to get her out of there, but the teachers didn’t seek her out or engage with her. We were promised that she would be able to work with groups of children, but nothing came of it. My colleague felt so bad there that she had to be removed from the institution.”* (Interviewee H-2)

In order for the helper to achieve the set goals, they must be able to establish relationships based on trust, with the parties cooperating to achieve the overarching goal instead of playing zero-sum games. (Budai, 2015)

There were differences in the opinions of the British professionals interviewed, but they all agreed that the personality, attitude and perseverance of the helper are key to cooperation with the teaching staff. They highlighted two reasons for the difficulties in cooperation. One is the generally poor reputation of social workers in child protection in the country, and the other is the different approaches of teachers and social workers, as expressed by one interviewee: *„The school and the social worker think differently about how to help the child. In problematic situations at school, we are on the children’s side... I think teachers would be happier if we didn’t go there anymore.“* (GB-5 interviewee)

British studies show that at the beginning of the millennium, social workers were viewed negatively by society, and their goals and activities were poorly understood. Although this image has changed for the better over the years, this kind of negative identification can still be observed. (Ausqith - Clark – Waterhouse, 2008)

However, five of the respondents reported having a positive relationship with teachers. In their opinion, the teaching staff are aware of why they are in the institutions and how they can help them in their work. They know that the approach they represent is useful when working with children, and many consider their presence to be a relief: *„I think teachers are very familiar with the intervention and support of social workers, but parents and students still see them as an uncomfortable threat“* (GB-2 interviewee).

This may be due to the aforementioned „Every Child Matters“ programme, which has led to the introduction of professionals in schools to deal with social problems, and to the legislation entitled „Keeping children safe in education“. The regulations clearly define the school’s child protection tasks, obligations and responsibilities. All educational institutions are required to appoint a Designated Safeguarding Lead and a deputy. These tasks may also be performed by teachers, but only after they have undergone appropriate professional training in child protection, and this knowledge must be refreshed every two years through further training. (I1)

## Individual activity

All of the research participants, including the British respondents, carry out various individual activities. Based on the feedback, providing information, counselling and consultation are the most common tasks in both countries, and they also typically act as mediators, helping children or their families access various services. These individual activities are provided to children, parents and teachers.

The problem is usually reported to the school social worker by the head of the institution or the class teacher, who investigates the case and, if necessary, initiates an individual support conversation with them. Some respondents said that family support workers or case managers most often inform them about problems. They are the first to encounter the problem and ask for the help of the school social worker. Teachers only notify the support worker if the problem has escalated and they cannot find a solution themselves. The kindergarten and school social workers interviewed described this as follows: *„There are institutions where the class teachers, or rather the school as a whole, try to solve the problems themselves and do not involve us until the problem has become serious and they have to report it.“* (Interviewee H-3)

*„The school doesn't really come to me with problems. My family support colleagues come to me and ask me to keep an eye on the child because there is a problem with them at school. But at school, they very rarely tell me about it, I'm usually the last to know.“* (Interviewee H-1)

I mentioned earlier that the school needs to provide a room for individual activities where they can talk to the students in a calm and undisturbed manner. In Hungary, this is regulated by a cooperation agreement between educational and social institutions. We have already seen from the feedback that there are shortcomings in this area, and not all schools are able to provide this fully and smoothly. Respondents in both countries confirmed that teachers allow children to leave class for these occasions so that they can have conversations during school hours. Before selecting the lesson, they naturally take into account the child's academic performance in the subject in question. Experience shows that they are more likely to be excused from practical subjects: *„Teachers are generally open to talking to problem children individually. However, we try to avoid taking them out of maths or other more serious lessons, because it is more difficult for them to catch up on those subjects.“* (Interviewee H-5)

A total of six respondents from both countries emphasised that school administrators prefer individual activities to take place during longer breaks or after school rather than during class time.

Consultations with teachers also typically take place during school hours, between lessons or after the teacher's last lesson in both countries. As one respondent put it: *„Teachers are open to individual consultations, which we can conduct at school. After lessons, there is time to*

*discuss problematic cases and possible interventions. (GB-6 interviewee)*

Here, they most often discuss the current behaviour and academic performance of individual students, identify any problems that may arise, and seek advice from the social worker regarding the students' education at school.

### **Group activity**

Taking all the responses into account, regardless of the country, it can be concluded that there are several types of group work available to professionals. There is preventive group work with educational objectives, preventive activities aimed at improving physical and mental health, preventing the development of addictions, and preventing abuse, including bullying at school. In addition to these, the sessions also aimed to organise groups to support students' academic progress and further education.

All fourteen helpers emphasised that they consider it very important to integrate these programmes into the educational framework, as it is very helpful in bringing them closer to the students and, not to be overlooked, it is also a great help to teachers and children. „The group provides an opportunity for group members to use the group as a training ground in a protected environment for their learning and development processes and to receive quick, helpful, immediate feedback. The group provides greater publicity and control over the processes taking place within the group, including the influence of the leader.“ (Pataki, 2010, 25-26.)

Among the Hungarian interviewees, there is one case where group sessions are not held in educational institutions, but such efforts will be launched once the pandemic is over. For all of the other colleagues, these sessions are part of their service portfolio. These are usually 45-minute activities held for study groups or class communities, within the framework of lessons.

In terms of how students are grouped, these are universal, quasi-compulsory groups. „The programme is generally didactic, with a faster pace, and the tools and tasks used are more structured. The composition of the group is influenced by the given class, with the composition of the class having the greatest impact on heterogeneity in terms of both age and gender.“ (Máté, Gergál, 2020:165.)

The sessions aim to respond to problems that arise at school, and the topics are tailored to this. One respondent put it this way: „I have the opportunity to organise a lot of group sessions in the institutions. This brings up issues in the class that don't come up at other times, but this way we can talk about them. Class teachers usually like these sessions and provide opportunities for them, for example during their class teacher lessons.“ (Interviewee H-3)

Five respondents identified the scheduling of activities as a problem, as it often causes difficulties in terms of time and space. The institutions consider these activities to be very useful, but it is often difficult to find a suitable time for them. In many cases, they are held during form teacher lessons or skill-based subjects. However, there are cases where 45 minutes is not enough for a lesson, but due to the school's tight schedule, it is not always easy to free up double lessons: *„Groups are popular with me. Organising them requires some effort to find a suitable time and place. Sometimes we manage to get a double lesson, but it's more difficult to arrange.“ (Interviewee H-2)*

Based on the responses from the UK, I did not get such a uniform picture of group activities. One respondent regularly conducts group sessions for students and finds this form of activity extremely useful: *„I think that organising group sessions gives us a very important tool. This makes it easier for us to 'reach' both the children and the teachers. Both target groups are open to these activities, which also contributes to my acceptance within the institution.“ (GB-4 interviewee)*

These workshops are usually organised around personality and community building. Similar to Hungarian practice, they are usually held in 45-minute intervals. Non-formal pedagogical tools are also frequently used. First-year students often participate in team-building activities and workshops that facilitate the formation of friendships (e.g. icebreaker or team-building games). The professional emphasised that they also organise group activities for the teaching community, with topics chosen according to the needs of the teaching staff. The response revealed that the choice of topics is diverse in support institutions: *„Social workers can provide workshops and group work that focus on many things, such as mental health issues. (GB-2 interviewee)*

Respondents in both countries emphasised that group sessions are selected by teachers or the head of the institution from among the options provided by social workers. At the same time, several responses mentioned the initiation of group sessions in the class community or in smaller groups of students as a response to problems that arose during individual activities. One of the professionals interviewed put it this way: *„There was a case where a child was sent to me because of his steadily declining academic performance. During our conversations, it turned out that after school, his classmates were bullying him through online chat rooms. I reported this to the class teacher, and shortly afterwards we managed to start a group organised around the theme of school bullying and ostracism. The intervention was successful and the problem was resolved.“ (Interviewee H-7)*

In terms of the topics covered in the group sessions, there are no significant differences between the two countries; similar problems are addressed with similar types of activities. Presumably due to differences in school organisational structure, British social workers work more closely with educational support professionals (Pastoral Care Officers, Educational

Welfare Officers, etc.) in group activities at school and involve non-governmental organisations independent of the school in their work.

### **Community activities**

In both countries, the most frequently mentioned community activities include participation in school-organised events and assistance in organising leisure programmes and camps. At school events, they are most often asked to help with celebrations or various themed days. The responses reveal that support professionals are most often able to join programmes organised by educational institutions: *„There aren't really any community programmes that I specifically organise . But as a station, we regularly participate in school programmes. For example, we took part in health days, family days and sports days.“ (Interviewee H-2)*

*“They usually invite us to school celebrations. I have helped with the organisation of carnival and Christmas celebrations.” (Interviewee H-4)*

Among the responses from Hungarian assistants, involvement in the summer Erzsébet camps or day camps was also popular. Here, they are usually asked to help with the organisation and coordination of programme elements, but there were some who highlighted child supervision as their main task. In two cases, I received responses that they organised their own summer camps, which were carried out in cooperation with other social workers from kindergartens and schools in the district or with the family and child welfare service. These were usually day camps organised for school-age children living in the city, mainly for children from disadvantaged families.

One of the respondents working in Hungary stated that they were not usually involved in school events and were not asked to help organise community programmes. All of the respondents working in the island country were able to name a community activity organised by the school in which they had been involved. Less than half of the Hungarian respondents reported participating in community programmes not organised by the school, while none of the British respondents reported similar experiences. Three of the respondents noted that they regularly participate with school social workers in their district in organising camps organised by the family and child welfare centre, which are also open to students from the educational institutions they serve.

In the early 2000s, changes to child protection legislation in the UK meant that new legal guidelines required professionals to form a team around children in order to implement child protection plans and meet the needs of the most vulnerable children. (Hood, Gillespie, Davies, 2016) Among the community activities, the responses of professionals working in the United Kingdom also highlight the frequency of working in interprofessional teams in

educational institutions. Everyone agreed that this is a very important part of the school social worker's role. They coordinate, assist and, in most cases, direct the work of this team, maintaining regular contact with each other and developing strategies for effective work. In addition to the school social worker, the team members most often include the Education Welfare Officer, the Pastoral Care Officer, the Special Education Needs Coordinator, the school nurse and the school doctor, if the school has staff in these positions.

Although professional recommendations for kindergarten and school social workers provide opportunities for teamwork, such as establishing a school mental health working group within the institution, none of the Hungarian interviewees mentioned this type of interprofessional collaboration. They maintain regular contact with professionals working in schools and strive to develop effective cooperation, but this cannot yet be considered a fully-fledged interprofessional activity. In appropriate cooperation, participants „jointly set goals and plan their joint work, decide on their further individual and joint activities. They decide how they will keep in touch with each other in the future, how they will meet regularly, how they will evaluate events again and again, analyse each other's experiences , make new decisions, and thus develop and operate a mutually supportive system.“ (Budai, 2019)

When it came to community activities, a common response from colleagues in both countries was that they had the opportunity to attend parent-teacher meetings, which they considered to be a very useful form of communication and information sharing. It makes their work much easier if they can meet everyone at such events: *“At the beginning of the year and at the end of the semester, I attend parent-teacher meetings whenever I can. I can't get to every class, but I try to go to a few in every town. It's a good opportunity to introduce myself or remind them that I'm at the institution.”* (Interviewee H-6)

Two of the Hungarian staff mentioned the opportunity to participate in teaching staff meetings and emphasised its usefulness. The British professionals did not report any such activities.

## **Summary**

In light of the results obtained during the study, we can make the following statements regarding our previously stated research hypotheses.

The first hypothesis, that the basis for effective work by school social workers lies in relationship building, is valid, as school social workers in both countries identified the importance of relationship building as a key element. Social workers need to have good relationships with children, their parents, public education professionals and other professionals who support their work (school psychologists, school nurses, crime prevention counsellors,

developmental and special education teachers), as well as social work professionals (school social workers, family support workers, child protection professionals) is essential, and as a social professional, they have a special responsibility in this regard.

The second hypothesis, namely that the majority of teachers are not aware of the exact competences of school social workers, is only partially true in practice. This statement was confirmed by the Hungarian professionals, as everyone was able to name an educational institution among those they serve where teachers are still not fully aware of their actual competences in the institutions, and they receive many requests from teachers that do not fall within their remit. In contrast, according to the British interviewees, the teaching staff are aware of why they are in the institutions and how they can help them in their work. This may be due to the introduction of the „Every Child Matters“ programme in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the arrival of professionals in schools to provide primary support for social problems, and the legislation entitled „Keeping children safe in education“. This has brought educational institutions into closer contact with social workers.

When examining the relationship between social workers in the two countries and their target groups, interesting differences in practice can be observed. In Hungary, the majority still feel that their role in their institutions is not entirely clear to teachers and that they are not always aware of their limits of competence. In the UK, the practice of the has become more established and there is a greater awareness of the role of support professionals in the institution. I see the new child protection regulations introduced in recent decades, which have also had an impact on the functioning of schools, as a possible reason for this difference. In schools in the United Kingdom, a variety of roles have been created to promote the protection and undisturbed physical and mental development of children. Although these roles are often filled by people without a social work background, they are required to participate in necessary social/child protection-focused training and usually work with social work tools. This gave them time to become more familiar with this approach, enabling teachers to better place their social workers within their own system and become aware of the services provided by professionals, which also facilitates their easier integration into schools.

Our third statement, that the activities carried out by school social workers in educational institutions are almost identical in both countries, was confirmed by the research, as the respondents' answers about the activities carried out showed clear similarities. Based on the feedback, the most common individual activities in both countries were providing information, counselling and consultation, as well as acting as mediators to help children or their families access various services. There are no significant differences in the need to integrate group activities into educational institutions or in terms of topics; similar problems are addressed with similar types of activities.

There is a noticeable difference between British and Hungarian practices in terms of the community activities of school social workers. The research highlighted that the formation and operation of mental health teams, as recommended in professional guidelines and recommendations governing the work of social workers in nurseries and schools, is not yet in practice at the educational institutions concerned. Contact is maintained regularly with other professionals at the school, but there is no regulated, planned strategy or professional team with clear, coordinated, common goals. In contrast, in the UK, the involvement of social workers in such professional teams and their coordination is much more evident. There may be a great need for mental health teams in schools, which not only serve to protect children, but the creation and coordination of such a professional team can also increase the acceptance and influence of school social workers within the institution.

We examined practical operations in both countries on the basis of three dimensions. The research highlighted the circumstances of Hungarian and British school social work, the cooperation of social workers with educational institutions and the activities carried out there. Overall, it can be concluded that there are many similarities in practical operation between the countries studied, but there are also marked differences in certain areas.

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