

Research article

The role of social pedagogy in Slovakia during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

This article aims to describe the role of social pedagogy in Slovakia, and in particular to answer the following questions: What are the social challenges that children and their families, schools and social pedagogues are facing during the COVID-19 pandemic? How do social pedagogues in Slovakia perceive the present situation and what can they do to help their students face these challenges? The article first describes the unfolding and the current state of the pandemic as well as the role of social pedagogues in Slovakia. It then analyses the reflections of 31 Slovak social pedagogues on current educational problems and the role of social pedagogy during the pandemic. In doing so, the article answers the question: In what sense does social pedagogy bring hope for various needy communities? The analysis presents some of the challenges social pedagogues are facing amid the chaos of social relations due to social distancing and pandemic lockdowns.

Keywords social pedagogues; Slovakia; COVID-19 pandemic; social challenges; educational problems; lockdowns

Introduction: a brief overview of the state of the COVID-19 pandemic in Slovakia

The COVID-19 pandemic, which started in 2019, has had an impact on education systems around the world. In Slovakia, the first COVID-19 case was confirmed on 6 March 2020, after which the Slovak government issued a set of regulations and restriction measures on various school activities, such as school competitions, excursions and trips, and school sporting events, as well as within school facilities. Gradually, children's playgrounds, outdoor and indoor sports amenities, children's corners and leisure facilities where children could meet and interact were closing down. By 16 March 2020, educational institutions were completely closed. The Ministry of Education ordered the suspension of in-person full-time study and replaced it with distance learning, which affected the education of more than 988,000 pupils and students in Slovakia.

With a relatively low number of infections in the first wave, the general closure of schools in Slovakia lasted until the end of May 2020. Until 25 May 2020, almost 1 million pupils and students, that is, around one-fifth of the country's population, were being educated through distance learning. With much larger numbers of infected people, the second wave of the pandemic rose dramatically in the Slovak Republic from October 2020. Gradually, lower and higher secondary education institutions and universities were closing. Primary schools remained more or less open until December 2020. All schools were closed during the second lockdown in January–March 2021. According to *Our World Data* (Johns Hopkins University, 2021), Slovakia had the highest number of deaths from COVID-19 per million inhabitants worldwide in the last week of February 2021. By the beginning of June 2021, more than 12,300 people had died out of a national population of 5.45 million (Slovak Government Statistics, 2021).

During the third pandemic wave that struck Slovakia in the autumn of 2021, schools remained open or were closed on a case-by-case basis, depending on outbreaks in individual classes, school buildings or districts. In suspected or actual cases of the disease, affected classes of students remained in quarantine on the basis of the so-called pandemic traffic light. The Minister of Education subsequently ordered an extension to the winter holidays from the second half of December 2021. Schools eventually reopened after the third lockdown, on 10 January 2022.

The Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sports of the Slovak Republic has attempted to control the situation in schools since the beginning of the pandemic. Gradually, they tried to compensate for missed classes in various ways (for example, via several new TV programmes), but their efforts were of limited use as they depended on the willingness and abilities of teachers and school principals. Various non-profit organisations (NGOs) also tried to provide assistance to students independently or in cooperation with the Ministry of Education. These have focused mainly on the impact of the pandemic measures, not only on cognitive educational outcomes, but also on the overall development of all children in different living conditions. In cooperation with the schools, these NGOs found out that most classroom teachers considered distance learning to be less effective than full-time education on the school campus. They struggled to involve students in distance learning due to various problems concerning the processes and quality of online teaching. According to the estimates of school principals and class teachers, some 52,000 primary and secondary school pupils (7.5 per cent of the student population) were not involved in distance education during lockdowns. Almost 128,000 pupils (18.5 per cent of the student population) did not learn via the internet; most of them were, at best, educated through other forms of distance learning, for example by teachers sending them printed worksheets (Ostertágová and Čokyna, 2020). The most prominent group that did not participate in distance education were the socially disadvantaged children and youths. Up to 23.4 per cent of socially disadvantaged children from the lower grades (1–4) and 35.2 per cent students from the upper grades (5–9) did not participate in distance education. Pupils who did not regularly attend distance learning lagged behind the majority of students, which administrators and teachers discovered in the post-adaptation period after these children returned to mainstream schooling (TASR, 2021).

The overall reduction in children's level of educational achievement was influenced by at least three significant factors:

- 1) *Internet and smartphone availability*: The absence of an internet connection was an obstacle to education for 23,000–32,000 students – 60 per cent of whom were from Roma households, 45 per cent from poor households and 5 per cent from average-income households. Another problem

was the absence of a smartphone device: 40 per cent of children from poor households do not own a smartphone.

- 2) *Economic situation*: Due to the deteriorating economic situation, there was an increase in the number of socially disadvantaged children (by 110,000 children).
- 3) *Educational environment and conditions for studying*:
 - o unsuitable conditions for distance education – due to crowded households and the absence of private space for study (increase of 44 per cent for children aged 6 to 11)
 - o inadequate reflection of pandemic education by the state. The Slovak Chamber of Teachers pointed to the fact that schools were closed for too long a period of time. The Slovak Chamber of Teachers also highlighted the difficulties of reestablishing appropriate learning conditions when schools reopened. It also noted the chaos in setting conditions for the reopening of schools (Dráľová, 2020)
 - o failure to adapt the form of teaching to distance learning.

In Slovakia, conditions for distance education were similar to those abroad. According to a recent article, for many students, distance learning during COVID-19 did not include any of the beneficial features of online learning. Instead, students were required simply to connect at a set time to listen to teachers' lectures via Zoom or other platforms (Weir, 2021).

The current purpose and role of social pedagogy in Slovakia

Regardless of the spread of COVID-19, in Slovakia the role of, and need for, social pedagogues are both intensifying. Since the Act on Upbringing and Education in 2008 (Zákon č. 245/2008), the role of social pedagogue became an officially recognised educational profession within the list of professions in Slovakia. Social pedagogy in Slovakia is a study field which participates in the transformation of people and society through education. It is a process of upbringing and educational care and protection leading to an integrated and stable personality.

Bakošová (2008) describes the new paradigm of social pedagogy as progression from needing someone else's help to being able to help oneself become educated and socially, personally and prosocially developed and, finally, to being able to lead others so that they can succeed in life. Therefore, the meaning of social pedagogy is to empower people to help themselves and to restore their human agency. Social pedagogues in Slovakia are being prepared to intervene positively in the socialisation process of children, youths and adults. Their main task is to prevent, solve and eliminate social problems and undesirable social phenomena in society, to strengthen positive social and educational influences and to create optimal living conditions and harmony between the individual as a biopsychosocial being and the social environment. They have to find optimal ways to help people in their careers in various environments, to create educationally valuable stimuli in the social environment and to compensate for shortcomings in various environments (Niklová, 2021).

Currently, the most urgent role of social pedagogy in Slovakia is to promote the prevention of socio-pathological phenomena in children and adolescents, and to focus on aggressive behaviours in particular. According to the Slovak social pedagogy expert, Határ (2007, 2009, 2010), the essence of socio-pedagogical prevention lies in the stimulation of positive social and educational influences and the elimination of negative influences (see also Határ, Szíjjártóová and Hupková, 2007).

Besides prevention, social pedagogues carry out intervention and counselling, especially for children and pupils at risk of various socio-pathological phenomena and socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Social pedagogues consider it their role to accompany marginalised children and youth struggling with overcoming life's obstacles and problems to acquire stability, to facilitate the development of their prosocial behaviour and to share pedagogical optimism about their character development.

Since September 2019, the activities of social pedagogues in schools and educational facilities have been regulated by the new Act on Pedagogical Employees and Supportive Professional Staff No. 138/2019 (Zákon č. 138/2019). According to this Act, a social pedagogue 'performs preventive activities, provides counselling to legal representatives, pedagogical staff and professional staff, performs socio-pedagogical diagnostics of the environment and relationships, educational activities and other activities in the field of social education' (Zákon č. 138/2019, 27/3).

From 1 January 2022, an amendment to the above-mentioned Act came into force. According to this amendment, the role and functions of social pedagogues in the current situation in Slovakia are as follows:

- to carry out activities aimed at preventing and eliminating risky behaviour of children and pupils and at preventing and eliminating socio-pathological phenomena
- to provide counselling and intervention aimed at children and pupils with risky behaviour, who are at risk of socio-pathological phenomena, and at children and pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds
- to provide counseling and consultations to children's legal representatives (e.g. parents, foster parents, etc.), pedagogical staff and professional staff
- to perform socio-pedagogical diagnostics of the environment and relationships, educational activities, and other activities in the social and educational sphere
- to support the cooperation of pedagogical staff and supportive professional staff with legal representatives, and employees of social and legal protection facilities for children.

In recent years, the founder of the Banskobystricka School of Social Pedagogy, Hroncová (2014) has emphasised the importance of continuing in these established trends of social pedagogy because social pedagogy gives hope to Slovak society. Before the pandemic started, Hroncová (2014, p. 125) expressed her dream of further development of social pedagogy through an eloquent metaphor:

I would consider it a real miracle in social pedagogy if we finally moved from the position of 'social firefighter' and 'emergency pedagogy', which were typical for social pedagogy of the 19th and 20th centuries, to the position of 'pro-active' social pedagogy, able to prevent social and educational problems in children and youth, and helpful in their holistic development.

What we want to emphasise in this article is that the legitimate role and meaning of the work of a social educator in the creation of social welfare has rapidly intensified because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The second and third waves significantly affected the education and healthy development of the young population as, in total, the children could not enter their schools for 41 weeks during the pandemic (UNESCO, 2020). The problem was exacerbated by the fact that instead of social educators being able to deal with the consequences of the situation, they were severely restricted from performing their work by the pandemic itself. Social pedagogues could not meet the children and youth and work with them face to face. In March 2021, children had to return to school. One primary school social pedagogue said:

After the second wave, many children were returning to school with great concern about how they would manage after spending more than 8 months at home. Not all of them had good online learning facilities in their families. They have been emotionally and socially deprived. Thus, the span of the problems that we, as social educators, have to deal with has expanded considerably. Is it possible for the children to return to normality after hearing so much horrible news?

This and other explicitly formulated worries expressed by social educators led us to the decision to conduct deeper research into the current needs of social pedagogues in Slovakia and into their views on the role of social pedagogy in schools.

Quantitative survey

The aim of the empirical research was to identify and analyse the problems of social pedagogues during the COVID-19 pandemic in schools and educational and preventive counselling facilities. We chose a self-designed questionnaire as the main research method, which was produced for social pedagogues working in schools and school facilities. The questionnaire consisted of 20 items. At the beginning of the questionnaire, we aimed to find out basic demographic information as well as to identify the specifics of methods and forms of work and the problems social pedagogues encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic. The questionnaire was sent via email and social networks to all registered social pedagogues in Slovakia; 31 (15 per cent) of them responded and became actively involved in the questionnaire research. The closed items of the questionnaire were evaluated using descriptive statistics. The open items were evaluated via qualitative content analysis with partial subsequent comparison (social pedagogues working in schools and social pedagogues working in school facilities).

Research questions

To what extent has the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the focus and working methods of Slovak social pedagogues? What has been their role in the currently challenging times?

Method and sample

In April 2021, after the greatest pressure during the second wave of the pandemic in Slovakia had subsided and schools had reopened, all in-service social pedagogues in Slovakia were sent an anonymous electronic survey with open and closed questions. Thirty-one completed questionnaires were returned. The respondents, aged 28 to 56, worked at primary schools and centres of pedagogical–psychological counselling and prevention. Their longevity in the profession ranged from 1 to 24 years.

Results

During the pandemic, social pedagogues had to focus predominantly on the following categories of children and youth: those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (18 per cent of their working hours); those missing online lessons for various reasons (15 per cent); those breaking school rules (13 per cent); those with a tendency towards violent behaviour and victims of violence at school (10 per cent); those smoking, using alcohol and other drugs (10 per cent); children stealing or causing vandalism (8 per cent); gifted and talented children (8 per cent); the remaining 18 per cent of their time was spent in preventive and counselling activities for all children at school.

The most common problems social pedagogues had to deal with were as follows: family issues; group dynamics and communication (working with the whole class); problems of children whose parents were key workers; problems of physically and mentally disabled but also stressed and frustrated children and their family members. The respondents described some of the problems in more detail:

- *Deteriorating psychological state of the children and youth:* mental and personality problems, especially anxiety, depression, lack of motivation, shutting down, decreased or exaggerated self-esteem, fear, stress, hopelessness, apathy, frustration and loss of self-worth, social skills and interest in social interaction
- *Problems with learning:* inability to focus, concentrate, loss of learning habits (children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds encountered challenges to learning because their families did not have any internet access)
- *Problematic behaviour at school:* increased aggressive behaviour, ignoring teachers and disregarding their instructions (non-fulfilment of homework assignments, refusal to undertake activities and tasks), ridiculing classmates and teachers, non-compliance with rules in the classroom, late arrival at school, lying and finding excuses to avoid distance learning (due to bad internet connection, lying about problems with technology, cheating), inconsistency in daily routine and hygiene (Roma children needed additional pandemic hygiene training such as wearing masks, washing hands, using disinfectants, and so on)
- *Problematic behaviour at home:* frequent computer and mobile games play time, excessive amounts of time on social media, making recordings or videos where family members drank alcohol and self-harmed.

The most problematic behaviours at school during the pandemic were the lack of discipline (14.5 per cent), disrespectful and provocative behaviours (13 per cent), intentional violation of school regulations (11 per cent), then truancy (13 per cent), lying (12 per cent), cyber-bullying (10.5 per cent), aggression towards teachers (9 per cent), gambling (6 per cent), sexting (6 per cent) and stealing (5 per cent).

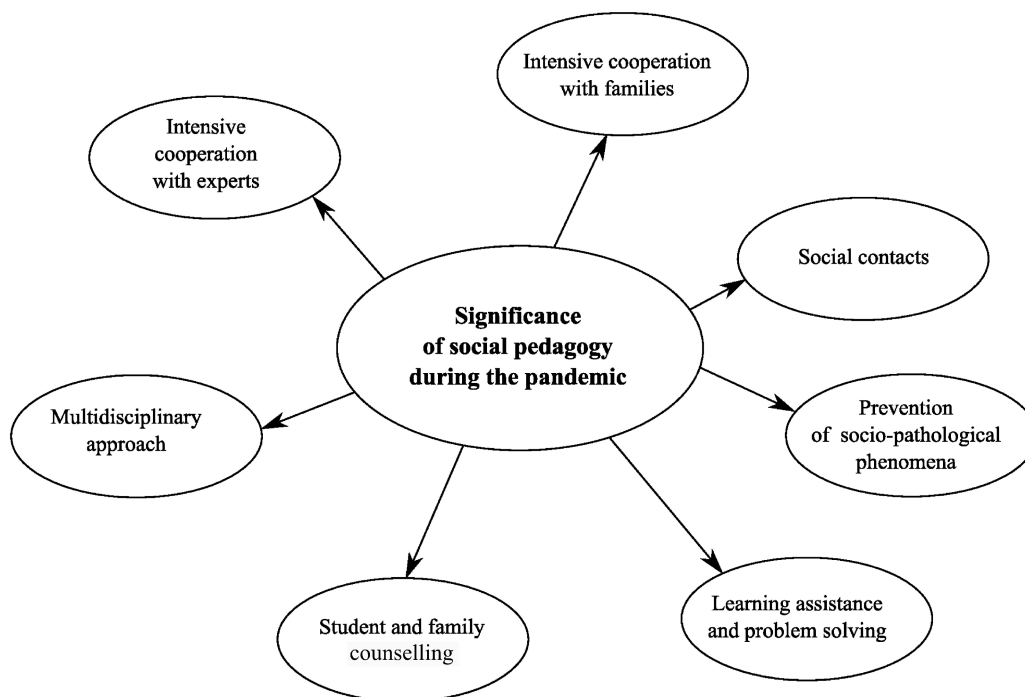
In their preventive activities, the respondents focused on many socio-pathological phenomena, such as bullying (21 per cent) and cyber-bullying (18 per cent), truancy (18 per cent), addiction (17 per cent), criminality (13 per cent) and theft (13 per cent). In their interactions with children, social pedagogues had to develop their social skills and prosocial behaviour, their knowledge about social media and its pitfalls (cyber-grooming, online gaming, cyber-bullying); mental health (dealing with loneliness, quarrels with parents, lack of motivation to study, responsibility, coping with difficulties, eating disorders); pandemic hygiene and healthy lifestyle, sexuality and early pregnancy; time management; critical thinking skills; consequences of truancy, violence, non-fulfilment of school duties,

aggression, racism, discrimination, addictions, stress and inappropriate classroom behaviour. The social pedagogues realised much more intensely the need for the personal development of children, not just teaching them. In their counselling activities, they had to pay more attention to not only grief situations, children's apathy and depression, but also practicalities such as providing technology to disadvantaged children and big families, arranging hygiene kits and masks and delivering worksheets and so on. The majority of these activities could only be done online.

The number of children in need of acute care rose sharply. The learning conditions of children with educational needs deteriorated and they required the increased attention of social pedagogues. The number of addicted children, abusing alcohol and cigarettes, increased too. The level of segregation of children from Roma settlements deepened; other children from dysfunctional families also found themselves 'trapped' in pathological environments. Some social pedagogues had to deal with completely new professional situations, such as new kinds of family problems or providing online training for parents on helping children with their homework and daily routine.

The significance of social pedagogy, and thus also of social pedagogues during the pandemic, was seen by the study's respondents in the areas shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The significance of social pedagogues in Slovakia during the pandemic (Source: Authors).



According to social pedagogues in the survey, their school principals and teachers gave very positive evaluations of the social pedagogues' work during the pandemic, noting that they supported students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, helping them to participate in school activities, providing them with lunches, distributing homework, worksheets and so on. Due to the length of the pandemic, the schools were especially challenged to prevent problem behaviour at a distance. During the second wave, new problems arose for the students, which were the result of long-term isolation, and it was important to start solving them. Psychiatric problems (self-harm, depression, suicidal tendencies) began to increase in pupils, which was related to social isolation during the pandemic. For many students, there was an absence of daily habits and missing the school regime, which had the knock-on effect of a loss of motivation to study and the neglect of their school duties. Many teachers and parents pointed to a worsening of students' behaviour. Social pedagogues provided not only parents and teachers with telephone or online counselling but also diagnostics and solutions to problem behaviours. It was necessary for social pedagogues to develop prosocial and empathic behaviour in students, and to teach them to manage and overcome stressful situations. It was also crucial to address the issues of a

healthy lifestyle and psychohygiene, for both students and teachers alike. It was necessary to implement many preventive activities with students, especially related to the extensive use of the internet and social networks. But the respondents – social pedagogues – highlighted the fact that not all preventive activities could be implemented online because of the limitations of their own tools or the characteristics of the online environment itself.

How did the social pedagogues' professional activities change in relation to parents? Most of the social pedagogues who participated in our study confirmed that they had lost contact with the majority of parents. If they still had consultations, these took place totally online. Some had next to no personal contact with parents when solving problems or addressing situations. In several cases, though, they had more frequent contact regarding the fulfilment of school duties and changes that took place when students returned to school. Some social pedagogues offered counselling to parents on how to motivate their children to learn, how to involve them in homework, how to determine and monitor compliance with the rules in the family, daily routine and so on. This being the case, they needed to focus on deeper interpersonal relationships.

Survey participants noted several priorities as students returned to school. During the pandemic and after the return of students to the school environment, it was crucial to help students in the process of adaptation, to work on the renewal and development of their social skills and to try to understand their emotional experience. Furthermore, it was important to work with students, either individually or in groups, and to provide them with some form of guidance. What students – but also their parents – needed was counselling in managing the isolation and fulfilment of school tasks and support for relaxation and positive thinking. In group counselling, social pedagogues consider it essential to work with the whole class and to maintain and promote good relationships between students. In schools, it is key that social pedagogues ensure and support close cooperation with the pupils' parents and, in the event of a problem, contact experts from other institutions (social services, field social workers, community centres, prevention and counselling centres).

Discussion

The statements by the responding social pedagogues in Slovakia showed that during the first and second pandemic waves their task was to communicate – mainly online – and provide multidimensional care for children and their parents. Prevention came to the fore. New technologies enabled innovative ways of developing relationships and 'a growth in empathy between parents and schools' (Breslin, 2021, p. 28). There has been an evident positive shift in teachers' relationships with social pedagogues and their professional roles during the pandemic.

According to the social pedagogues (in April 2021), their role was to ensure that transition to school after the lockdown ended was smooth, that students should feel safe, valued and listened to. Social pedagogues tried to create opportunities for open discussions with pupils, to listen to their stories, and to try to understand them. After their students' return, rather acute problems had to be solved, which emerged during the pandemic. The lesson from this experience is that the role of social pedagogues during pandemic times should be on 'simply being there', 'slowing down and connecting with individual students as well as whole classes', 'listening to them and showing them empathy and kindness', 'opening up honest discussions that matter to students' and 'tailoring preventative projects to their particular needs'.

The pandemic has affected many families, but children have been suffering the most because they are much more vulnerable to various societal changes. Many families (especially large families or those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds who were at greater risk) did not have adequate technical equipment for distance education and did not have access to online education, either because they did not have an internet connection at home or did not own or have access to a computer at home). In addition to the lack of material possessions and access to technology, these families faced other obstacles, including a non-supportive educational environment or various kinds of increased pressures at home. Many children have been at increased risk of domestic violence or other forms of abuse or online bullying by other children. A significant number of parents were left without a steady income during the pandemic due to job loss, which caused an increase in poverty. According to Nikopoloulou and Maltezou (2021), many children have been facing repeated school closures related to new coronavirus

variants. Consequences of continuous school closures include loss of learning skills, mental disorders and an increased risk of early school leaving.

Some experts, such as Wang et al. (2020), Lades et al. (2020) and Tomšík et al. (2020), draw attention to the psychological effects of the closure of educational institutions and the subsequent measures that have resulted in the social isolation of children and young people. These individuals had to cope not only with the loss of personal contact with loved ones and peers, but also with the reduction of communication with teachers. Negative emotions, frustration, boredom, a lack of personal space and a loss of routine were also noted. Among pupils, there has also been an increase in the number of experiences of anxiety and uncertainty about school, the teaching process, the fear of assessment and the fear of mastering new ways of teaching.

The interruption of physical school attendance for such a long time reduced the ability of children to adapt back to the social environment they had previously known. The school is not only an educational institution for children, but also an opportunity to create social competencies without the presence of parents. The school allows students to communicate with peers, make new friends or resolve disputes. The deficit of development opportunities cannot be restored overnight, as human behaviour has a tendency towards inertia. From a social point of view, social isolation represents an irreversibly lost period, which will affect not only pupils' performance and behaviour at school, but also their ability to fit in and live in the same environment as their peers (Gardoňová and Rybanská, 2020).

Bieleszová and Koreňová (2021) point to the fact that the long-term loss of social contact during the pandemic caused some students to feel ambivalent, which can be a discrepancy – a contradiction between currently experienced emotional states. Ambivalent feelings can, however, also connect to ambivalent behaviour – the inability to decide to act in accordance with current feelings, because those feelings are always changing. Students often experience anxiety and fear, both of which affect their ability to concentrate. In response, they tend to avoid schooling or even going outside the home; they need more reassurance. This is where the support of teachers and professionals, including social pedagogues, is extremely important. In this case, the social pedagogues can teach students to exercise their feelings through examples from stories. It is also necessary to involve pupils gradually in school classroom activities. It is essential for social pedagogues to reassure children that they are there for them when they need them.

In September 2021, the third wave of the pandemic began to intensify. New problems were emerging of which social pedagogues had no prior experience. In particular, there arose a significant polarisation within society due to the issues surrounding vaccination, even at the level of school classes. Children had started to judge, criticise and refuse to enter into relationships with classmates who were or were not vaccinated. This posed a further threat, leading to unhealthy social development of the young generation, and the 2021/22 school year is once more posing an unpredictable challenge for social pedagogues as well as for entire school teams.

So, where does the key for meaningful social pedagogy lie today? According to one survey participant:

The heart of social pedagogy in Slovakia is in having healthy relationships, which start with conversations, trust, empathy, skills, and social contacts. Social pedagogy is role-modelling to students how this could happen, even within their families. Social pedagogues are motivated by the hope that they can give children an example of how to manage their own needs and difficulties, by offering them more frequent supervision, by learning from the pedagogues, by being open and more mindful of others, respecting them. The vision of social pedagogy, as hope for education and the nation, is to bring this positive culture to each educational institution in Slovakia, and not only that, but also to organize or participate in international conferences in order to learn from others and implement their good practice into Slovak social and educational life.

Conclusion

Social pedagogy in Slovakia is defined to be a positive pedagogy (Bakošová, 2008), the aim of which is the transformation of people and society through education. It is a process of educational care leading to the integration and stabilisation of society. The most urgent role of social pedagogues has been to carry out prevention of socio-pathological phenomena among children and youth and to provide support

in educating students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, especially students from marginalised Roma communities (Niklová, 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the problematic behaviour of pupils in school environments and school facilities increased. Teachers delivering lessons online on a daily basis have minimal capacity to diagnose the educational and developmental problems of individual students, or to intervene in or seek solutions to the situations of the students and families of concern. It is in this area that social pedagogues should work and offer assistance to many negatively affected children. For this reason, strengthening the position of social pedagogues in schools and school facilities should be considered, especially in terms of prevention and solution of these phenomena.

Although social pedagogues in Slovakia during the current pandemic are continuing to carry out all their professional activities, the research showed that when schools are closed they do not have as much capacity to deal with students compared to when they are open. That is why it is necessary during the time of pandemic – the end date of which we cannot yet estimate – to call for an increase in the number of social pedagogues able to work on an individual basis with more students than is currently possible.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

No specific consent was required for this study due to the fact that the questionnaires were anonymous.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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