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Social worker in schools in the Republic of Serbia – the missing link?

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The Republic of Serbia is located in Southeastern Europe in the central part of the Balkan Peninsula. With a population of about 7 million, one result of Serbia's complex history is that a diverse group of around 37 ethnic groups live alongside the Serbian majority. All citizens have the same rights and responsibilities and enjoy full national equality. Yet the legacy of political unrest, regional conflicts and the break-up of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia resulted in growing economic difficulty and the rise of nationalism, discrimination and intolerance. It is not surprising that we feel the consequences still today when you consider the devastating fact that over 130,000 people were killed and many internally displaced as refugees during wars in territory of the former SFRY.



Considering the present-day situation, the biggest current challenges faced by the education system in the Republic of Serbia are the issues of *poverty, quality inclusion of Roma children* and the inclusion of *children with disabilities*.

According to the results of the 2011 *Census of Population, Households and Dwellings*, there are 147,604 Roma living in the Republic of Serbia, accounting for 2.05% of the total population. However, other estimates are much higher, and some Roma leaders have the opinion that the number reaches one million. UNICEF data indicates that 15% of Roma children are completely out of primary education, while 64% are out of secondary education. Lack of readiness for primary school, lack of progress in school, girls dropping out to get married, discrimination and avoidance by the general population are just some of the issues for Roma children.

It is also difficult to determine the number of children with intellectual disabilities in the Republic of Serbia, primarily due to the discrepancy of definitions of disability in different laws, as well as due to the lack of well-developed assessment instruments that would be in accordance with *the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. The Republic of Serbia has 48 special schools (primary and secondary education) for children with disabilities. According to official data, it is established that children with disabilities make up 0.7% of children under 15 in the Republic of Serbia, however these data should be considered with reservation, because the assessment

methodology used is not adequate, and according to unofficial data there are significantly more children with disabilities. What can not be disputed is that the position of persons with intellectual disabilities has been invisible for a long time in the education system of the Republic of Serbia, which has made it difficult to perceive systematically the situation of these persons. In recent years, Serbia has extensively reformed laws, public policies and schools in areas relevant to the rights of children with disabilities, including changes in education, health care, social care, etc. Yet various indicators show the unsustainability of these laws and policies, and exposure of these children to different types of discrimination. From the above, we can conclude that the education system in the Republic of Serbia needs strong support of professionals from different fields, especially the support of school social workers.

The attempts to introduce social workers in schools in the Republic of Serbia date back to the 1980s. However, despite some examples of good and successful practice, wider employment of social workers in primary and secondary schools remains inconsistent and sporadic. One of the reasons for the discontinuous and inconsistent employment of social workers in schools is the frequent changes in legal regulations, in which social workers are largely excluded as a category of professionals in schools. Meanwhile, the increasing level of poverty, social inequalities, divorce, domestic violence, health problems and other social problems are challenges that often have negative implications for school attendance and school success. Unfortunately, the education system in the Republic of Serbia does not sufficiently recognize the role of social worker in public primary and secondary schools, which is confirmed by the fact that there are only 78 social workers known to be employed in schools.

In 2019 the pilot project "Social Worker at School" was in its development phase, with the aim to link more effectively the *social care system* and the *education system* through the involvement of social workers. However, the duration of the project was only three months and it covered only one municipality out of the existing 194, only four primary schools. The project was set up with the support of local self-government and the initiative of the Center for Social Work of Stara Pazova Municipality, and the results were presented after the end of the project at the conference "*Social Worker at School - Project Outcomes and Development Opportunity*".

The project was designed to monitor and analyze the social conditions and needs of the students in order to take appropriate measures to overcome them. In addition, the social worker provided psychosocial support to students and their parents through group and individual counseling work, empowered and represented them, visited families, participated in the planning and coordination of educational work, and cooperated with professional institutions, teachers, parents and the like. Despite the positive outcomes of the project and the satisfaction of the social workers involved, there is no relevant information on the future and continuation of this project.

Extensive empirical research has been completed in the Republic of Serbia on the needs for social workers in primary and secondary schools. Research indicates that currently the biggest problems arise from *high levels of poverty*, *domestic violence*, and a *high proportion of national minorities* in the education system who, despite various efforts, do not have the same chances in the education system as the general population. The results have shown that the introduction of social workers at school would result in greater support for students and their families, effective cooperation between the school, the family and the community, and that social workers are a missing link in our educational system.

This research is a valuable initial step in shedding light on the importance and role of the school social worker, and leaves room for various changes and reconstructions of existing educational and social policies towards a holistic view of human need. It remains for research and early initiatives to produce change in the social protection system to address the social, emotional and behavioural problems and the external factors that affect the quality of a student's education.