

PROFESSIONAL ROLE, STATUS AND IDENTITY OF THE SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST IN SERBIA¹²

Slavica Maksić

The Institute for Educational Research, Belgrade

smaksic@ipi.ac.rs

Abstract

School psychologists have been present in Serbian primary and secondary schools for more than half a century, but the latest educational guidelines announce restrictions in their numbers. The question raised is who and where would psychologically treat students and other participants of the educational process regarding the increasing needs for that type of intervention. In this paper, the professional role, status and identity of psychologists employed in schools are considered in order to gain deeper understanding of the obstacles they are facing in their work, and to create an environment for their more efficient work in the future. For these purposes, education policy, experiences from school practice, and findings of relevant research studies were analyzed. According to the education policy, a school psychologist has to participate in the improvement of the educational process using the results of his/her investigations on the students' psychological characteristics and teaching and learning problems. Research findings showed that psychologists were seen as the experts who were needed in schools and who were expected to practice clinical approach. Also, it was found that psychologists had the same expectations from themselves. Perspectives of the development of the psychologist professional identity in the context of contemporary changes in the Serbian society and changes in the educational system are discussed. The conclusions of the study have broader implications due to the fact that school psychologists are in a similar way present in schools in other Balkan countries.

Keywords: school psychologist, professional role, status, identity, Serbia.

INTRODUCTION

School psychologists have been present in primary and secondary schools in Serbia and other parts of Yugoslavia since the 1960s. The start of school year 2015-16 in Serbia was marked by the announcement about school workforce reduction which was perceived as a risk to performing jobs from the scope of work of a school psychologist. A question is raised about who will complete all the tasks of primary psychological care of students and other participants in education process bearing in mind an increase in need for that kind of intervention. The paper examines the professional role, status and identity of psychologists working in schools, in order to gain a deeper understanding of obstacles they are facing in their work, and to create an environment for their more efficient work in the future. For this

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purpose, education policy, experiences from school practice and findings of relevant research studies have been analyzed.

PROFESSIONAL ROLE OF A SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST

Employment of school psychologists in schools has been followed by creating programs for their operative, instructional and research work with students, teachers and parents (Đorđević, 1967; Genc & Jovanović, 1985). According to program tasks of school counseling service (Programski zadaci pedagoško-psihološke službe u školama, 1970), school psychologists participated in improving school education by means of using results of their research of psychological characteristics of students and other issues encountered in education process. A school psychologist investigates psychological foundations of instruction and learning; researches into causes of poor academic performance and factors for objective grading; participates in school professional orientation process by examining abilities and interests of students; informs teachers about the results of his/her research; suggests how to form classes based on examinations of abilities and knowledge, and participates in student enrolment process.

Actual goals of a school psychologist work are similar to those from previous time (Pravilnik o programu svih oblika rada stručnih saradnika, 2012). A school psychologist participates in creating optimal conditions for student development and realization of education process; monitors and encourages student development; develops cooperation with student's families and helps parents in strengthening their education competences; participates in monitoring and evaluation of education process; cooperates with relevant institutions and works on his/her-own professional development. A school psychologist supports strengthening teacher competences and their professional development and participates in monitoring and evaluation of realization of general and special student achievement standards and suggests measures for their improvement, as well as supports openness of school towards educational innovations.

It is expected from school psychologist to initiate various types of research in order to improve education process and realize all his/her tasks in a school (Pravilnik o programu svih oblika rada stručnih saradnika, 2012). A school psychologist has to implement theoretical and practical knowledge in psychology in his/her work. A school psychologist participates in research conducted within school self-assessment process (by creating assessment instruments, defining the sample and qualitative analysis of the obtained results) and experiments; he/she participates in the work of teachers' council by informing teachers about the results of conducted research relevant for education process and developing teacher competences; documents conducted analyses, psychological tests, activities that is visited classes etc. Finally, school psychologist can decide what topic he/she will investigate in particular time.

In sum, the job of school psychologist has been supported by appropriate education policy which provides a solid basis for his/her work in a school. The initial differentiation of jobs of a school psychologist and a school pedagogist has changed over time, so that there are many activities that they can do interchangeably. During the 1990s, there was a recommendation according to which a school psychologist should be more oriented towards the process related to students, while a school pedagogists should be more oriented towards a process related to teachers (Pravilnik o program rada stručnih saradnika u srednjoj školi, 1993). According to the current education policy, a school psychologist is one of or the only counselor that the

school has chosen, since it needs a counselor that is qualified to perform tasks from the scope of a psychologist professional role.

A school psychologist as a counselor is required to have a university degree with at least 30 ECTS credits and 6 credits for practice in the institution (Zakon o osnovama sistema obrazovanja i vaspitanja, 2009). A school counselor works with students and other participants of education process during $\frac{3}{4}$ of working hours. He/she is a member of the education council, teachers' council, pedagogical council (in a school with a dorm), and professional team for school development planning and professional team for development of school program. A school counselor of any proficiency should fulfill the following tasks: taking care about ensuring improvement of education work; monitoring realization of education process; taking care about realization of achievement goals and standards; evaluating all results; undertaking measures for a coordinated work with both students and adults.

PROFESSIONAL STATUS OF A SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST

Current educational policy said that a school can hire a school psychologist based on the evaluation of its needs and based on the number of classes (Pravilnik o kriterijumima i standardima za finansiranje ustanove koja obavlja delatnost osnovnog obrazovanja i vaspitanje, 2015; Pravilnik o kriterijumima i standardima za finansiranje ustanove koja obavlja delatnost srednjeg obrazovanja i vaspitanje, 2015). A primary or secondary school that has between 16 and 24 classes has a right to hire either one psychologist or one pedagogist. In addition to that, most primary and secondary schools have a school psychologist or a school pedagogist, and there are more school pedagogists than school psychologists. In some schools, school psychologists work part-time as teachers and part-time as school psychologists.

Experiences from school practice showed that school psychologists completed tasks envisioned by program documents (Čordašić, 1980; Živković, 1980; Karović & Korica-Tošović, 1980; Marković, 1997; Tisinović, 1990). School psychologists participated in planning school activities, curriculum content for regular, remedial and extracurricular classes, and special educational support for some students; student work evaluation, out-of-door activities, community work, and choice of vocational education. A school psychologist also tested students at the beginning of the first grade, as well as during regular classes; identified the students who could attend additional classes and extracurricular activities; examined causes of poor academic performance of students who attended remedial classes; examined aptitudes and interests of students when it came to their choice of a secondary school and professional orientation.

However, the findings of research studies showed that a majority of school psychologists mainly was occupied with operational and instructional work, and very little with analytical work (Genc & Jovanović, 1985). The interviewed psychologists and head teachers estimated that teachers frequently showed the lack of knowledge and interest regarding the work of a school psychologist. A conclusion has been reached that school psychologists were mainly "clinically" oriented instead of being "pedagogically" oriented, that they encountered a lack of understanding and that they rarely published results of their work. The findings of another research study of teachers' and school counselors' attitudes showed that the introduction of school psychologists and school pedagogists in schools basically justified expectations and that both school counselors had a significant role in internal reform, by supporting professional development of teachers (Radoš, 1989).

The analysis of duties and competences of school psychologists has a purpose of establishing their professional role regarding their working environment, such as in a music school (Bogunović, 2006). The role of a school psychologist in a music school is specific because he/she is a mediator between a child, who is talented for music, parents, who are interested in music education and career of their child and teachers, who encourage development of musical talent. Special competences of a school psychologist who works in a music school refer to preparation of students for public performance and overcoming stage fright. Apart from that, it is often necessary to help students to adjust their music and regular school activities. Probably the most important role of a school psychologist is to help students make a decision regarding a professional career in music.

In general, the task of a school psychologist is to encourage child development and help overcome stagnation in learning and other aspects of individual development. The usual practice is to refer a child to a school psychologist, who is expected to solve the problem. Children reluctantly visit a school psychologist, because that is visible in their micro environment, and it testifies that the child needs a help and that “something is wrong with him/her”. An insight into the situation in the field discovers that school psychologists do not always have necessary resources for their work. The schools which do not have a school psychologist are in lack of that kind of service at all. The situation when a person works in several schools or when he/she works in the same school as a psychology teacher and part-time as a school psychologist, also, makes their work more difficult.

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY OF A SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST

Unfavorable working conditions for a school psychologist were noticed in a research study that was conducted three decades ago, when there were demands to increase support to school psychologists in some schools (Genc & Jovanović, 1985). Since then, significant social changes have occurred and they led to aggravation of living conditions in the country as well as education conditions within national education system (Максич & Павлович, 2013). School psychologists together with other school counselors were seen as professionals who could be of key importance for changing and harmonizing needs of all interest groups, from students to education authorities at the beginning of education reform (Đurišić-Bojanović, 2001). However, despite all changes made in education since 2001, it cannot be said that negative trends have been overcome (Maksić, 2015).

How school psychologists can contribute to overcoming current issues in education considering their professional role and the status they have? Research findings showed that psychologists were seen as the experts who were needed in schools and who were expected to practice clinical approach. Also, it was found that psychologists had the same expectations from themselves (Petrović & Dimitrijević, 2013). The findings of the research study of school psychologists' beliefs about their work showed that school psychologists emphasized individual and group counseling as a very significant task. As exclusively psychological tasks, school psychologists highlighted psychological evaluation, individual and group counseling as well as consultative services. It was concluded that the findings about school psychologist tasks are in accordance with tasks stipulated by educational policy.

The school is an educational institution where difficulties in individual development are an exception and not a rule, and a school psychologist is not supposed to cope only with them. Above all, the school requires support in learning and positive development of students starting with what a child knows and focusing on what it can achieve. Positive development is aimed at human strengths and virtues in order to ameliorate optimal functioning of the

individual (Benson, Scales, Hamilton & Sesma, 2007). A school psychologist should show in school practice that his/her work differ from a work of a clinical psychologist, although clinical knowledge is useful and required for working in a school. Unrealistic expectations from a school psychologist can lead to deterioration of his/her status, therefore it is very important to clarify that a school psychologist cannot solve all problems that appear in a school. A school psychologist is not a judge, but one of the team members who work on solving a certain problem.

A school psychologist should have a recognizable scope of work which would not be only symptomatic reactions to a current problem in a school but also providing support in realizing better mutual understanding among participants in education process and individual development of a child, as well as professional development of teachers. Research work was planned since school psychologists were introduced in schools, but the lack of it is evident (Mioč, 1962; Ničković, 1967). Development of a research approach could provide continuity in dealing with certain topics, creating individual student portfolios, generalization of experiences about a certain problem, envisioning how the situation will develop, and giving recommendations for overcoming certain problems (Maksić & Đerić, in press). In the meantime, school psychologists are required to maintain awareness of their environment for their work results and competences as well.

Development of a school psychologist professional identity requires school psychologists to constantly review their beliefs about individual development, education limits and influence of social context to school education (Gutvajn & Ševkušić, 2013). There is a need for a special professional development of school psychologists and their deeper involvement with vocational associations (Pravilnik o stalnom stručnom usavršavanju i sticanju znanja nastavnika, vaspitača i stručnih saradnika, 2012). Vocational associations of school psychologists should become institutions that more intensively support professional development of their members. A possibility for improvement of school psychologist work is in implementation of positive psychology principles, which promote health and wellbeing for all participants of education process and the school itself as an institution (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005).

CONCLUSION

The analysis of education policy and the results of research studies into work of school psychologists in Serbian schools indicated different obstacles they encounter. Creating conditions for their more efficient work in the future requires changes of environment as well as school psychologists themselves. Activities that will improve the status of a school psychologist in a school and education system in general refer to a greater contribution towards achieving goals of education focused on positive development of an individual. The proactive role of school psychologists implies their activities in preparing applicable action plans, more intensive promotion of results achieved by school psychologists both in a school and in wider environment, as well as better cooperation with colleagues from other schools at local, regional and national level. There is no doubt that schools need a great number of school psychologists instead of reducing their number. The conclusions of the study have broader implications due to the fact that school psychologists are in a similar way present in schools in other Balkan countries.

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