

## THE STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONALITY OF PROFESSIONAL SERVICES IN CORRELATION WITH CONTEMPORARY NEEDS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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(Original scientific paper)

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### **Abstract**

*The professional services in primary schools are increasingly taking the primacy of the professional basis which should and must be in function of securing a stimulating school environment for holistic growth of every student and for building a modern school. In conditions of constant change in teaching, introduction of innovations, new ways of learning and teaching, implementation of "rapid" and sometimes "radical" reforms, the occurrence of widespread fluctuations in teaching staff, insufficient education of newly hired teachers, introduction of total inclusion of students with special educational needs and a number of other circumstances in a great degree complicate the job of the professional services, but at the same time they raise the need of them to be put in the focus as a very important unifying professional element between students, teachers, parents and the wider societal community. With our research we want to find out if and to what degree can the professional services in elementary schools in our country answer these very serious challenges. The primary goal of the overall research effort is to perform a complex "scanning" of the normative and professional documents which address this problem, as well as the existing equipment of the professional services in primary schools in our country. Through analysis of the most important indicators we will need to agree whether and if so to what extent, depending on the structure of the professional services in primary schools, the existing professional services can realize the defined scope of work and thus fulfil their function in creating an encouraging environment which will enable holistic growth of the student, but also a supportive environment for a more efficient and functional implementation of innovations to improve the quality of teaching in primary schools.*

**Key Words:** *research, structure of professional services in primary schools, legal framework and professional documents for professional services in primary schools, study programs for professional associates*

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### **Introduction**

The education of the population, all over the world, is increasingly becoming a dominant sector and a prerequisite for the democratic and socio-economic development of any country or region. This is especially emphasized by the Lisbon Declaration and subsequent documents of the European Union, where investing in human potential through education is one of the key ways to achieve the Lisbon goal - for the European Union to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more job opportunities and greater social cohesion.

The primary education is a key segment in the educational process, since for the majority of children in Macedonia (over 85%) it represents the first significant social context outside the family, where responsibility, work habits and attitude towards learning and education are acquired, and where social competences and social values are created, which is especially important in a multi-ethnic context. The establishment and implementation of such primary education that will meet the European standards while respecting the principles of decentralization, equal educational opportunities for all, quality, transparency, integration and civic responsibility, will provide quality primary education and education in a stimulating environment. This type of school will develop a commitment to learning, inspired by quality teaching that builds on and develops individual potentials and talents and prepares children for taking part in lifelong learning. At the same time, primary education strives for such nurture that builds self-confidence, tolerance, moral and ethical values. The principles on which the educational work in primary schools in Macedonia

is based are: democracy, non-discrimination, respect for individual differences, holistic development of the student, best interest for the child, active participation of students in school life, quality education, preparation of students for lifelong learning, multiculturalism, physical safety and health, autonomy, competence and responsibility, partnership between the school, parents and the local environment. Professional services in schools are essential in the realization of the principles of the educational work.

### **Material & methods**

In a global framework, there is a growing tendency for peer violence in schools, so the need for prevention, education and sanction for this behavior in schools is primarily a duty of the professional services. The professional services, as a crucial factor in ensuring a safe and encouraging school environment, should function efficiently and effectively to respond to these significant challenges. Our research should answer two questions: whether there is an appropriate normative framework for the work of professional services in schools, as well as whether higher education institutions in Macedonia have accredited study programs that train professional associates according to the law categorization; and secondly, to show the current representation in terms of number and profile structure of professional associates in primary schools in our country, compared to the total number of students in schools. Through a detailed analysis of the most significant indicators, we will have to work out if and to what extent, depending on the structure of the professional services in primary schools, the existing professional services can accomplish the defined scope of work and thus fulfill their function of creating a safe and positive-stimulating school environment, which will enable the holistic development of the student, but also provide a supportive environment for a more efficient and functional implementation of innovations to improve the quality of teaching in primary schools. Considering the exploratory nature of the research, the research hypotheses are of a differential type, consistently based on the structure of the measuring instrument - a survey questionnaire for professional services in primary schools, administered within the framework of the research project and on the planned intersections of the obtained data. The research is intended to cover 10%, that is, 34 primary schools around the state, while the representation of schools where teaching is carried out in different languages and schools from urban and rural environments will be taken into account.

### **Results**

The structuring of a system framework in relation to the defined professional competencies of the professional associates shows a great progress in the modernization of teaching in primary and secondary schools. For many years, the work of the professional associates in schools could not be objectively measured due to the lack of standards and defined scope of work. At the same time, the existing motivation for self-improvement was low, due to the fact there was no possibility for professional and career progress. With the systemic solution: 'The Law on Teachers and Professional Associates in Primary and Secondary Schools' (Official Gazette of RSM, No. 161 of 05.08.2019 and 'Regulations on the Basic Professional Competencies of Teachers in Primary and Secondary Schools by Area', this profile of employees in schools is given a solid framework for raising the quality of their work and their valorization within the framework of schools and the wider community. The law on teachers and professional associates in primary and secondary schools defines the following professional associates: teacher, psychologist, sociologist, social worker, librarian and special educator and rehabilitator. All defined competencies of professional associates are generally divided into: common competencies (which apply to all profiles of professional associates) and specific competencies for individual profiles of professional associates. The core competences of professional associates are organized in seven areas: work with students, work with teachers, work with parents, cooperation with the community, professional development and professional cooperation, school structure, organization and atmosphere; and each area consists of several subareas. The specific competencies for each of the profiles of professional associates are further defined through the seven areas.

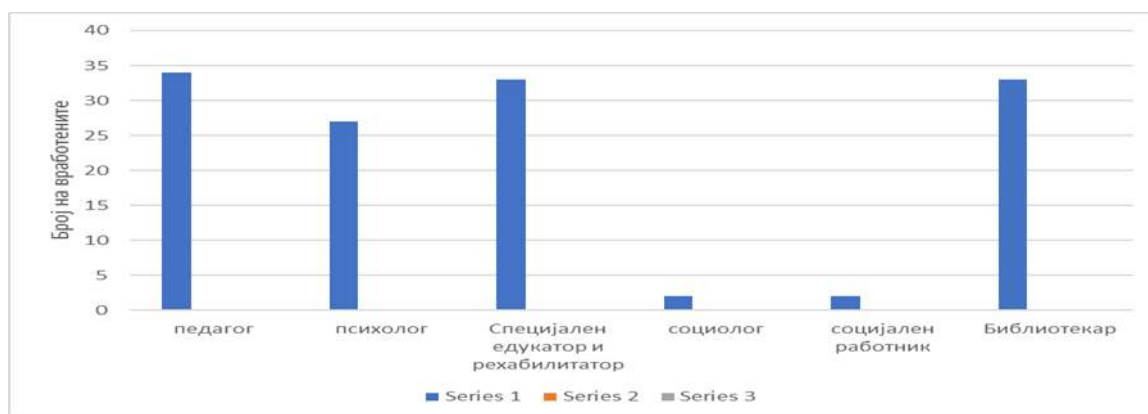
From the analysis of the accredited study programs for the first cycle of studies in both state and private higher education institutions in Macedonia, we conclude that appropriate education is offered for all profiles of professional associates.

The study of future professional associates is made possible in different regions of the country, in both Macedonian and Albanian languages. At the University St. Cyril and Methodius in Skopje at the Faculty of Education St. Kliment Ohridski, there is an accredited study program for librarianship; at the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje, there are accredited programs that train staff in various educational fields: a pedagogue, a psychologist, a sociologist and a social worker, as well as a specialist educator and a rehabilitator. At the Goce Delchev University in Shtip, at the Faculty of Educational Sciences, there is a

pedagogy program; at the University St. Kliment Ohridski in Bitola, at the Faculty of Education, there is a program for special and rehabilitation pedagogy; at the State University in Tetovo, at the Faculty of Philosophy, there are programs for: professional pedagogy, social education and rehabilitation, psychology and sociology; At the International Slavic University Gavriilo Romanovich Derzhavin in St. Nikole at the Faculty of Psychology, there is a psychology program.

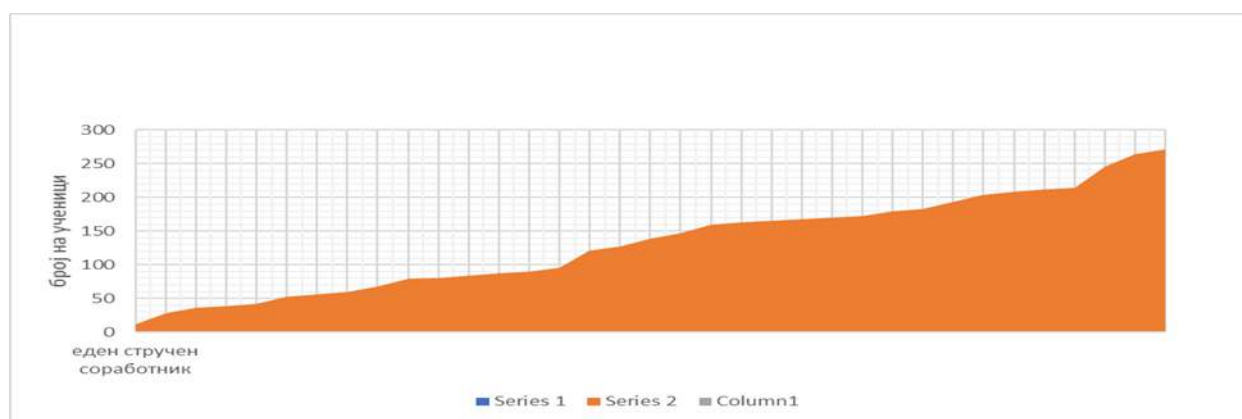
Given the results from the sample, of the representation of professional services by structure of the primary schools, we can notice that there is a disproportionate representation of professional workers, that is, the percentage of representation of social workers and sociologists is much lower compared to the other professional associates provided by the Law and Regulations. Taking into account that the rulebook describes common and specific competencies and scope of work for each of the individual profiles of professional associates, we conclude from the research that in most of the primary schools there is incomplete staffing of the professional services.

Table 1. Representation of professional services by structure in a primary school from the sample



Regarding the results of the comparison of the number of students with the number of employees in the professional services per school, it can be concluded that in more than half of the primary schools, one employee in the professional service has to attend to more than 100 students (and parents, if necessary), and there are schools in which the number of students "entrusted" to one professional associate is over 200.

Table 2: Frequency of students given to one professional associate in a primary school from the sample



### Discussion and conclusions

The creator of the educational policies has provided a comprehensive educational, normative and professional framework for professional associates in primary and secondary schools in Macedonia. At the universities, there are adequate accredited study programs that train appropriate personnel (in terms of language and geographical regions). The legislator has determined the competencies, scope of work, professional and career progress and advancement of employees in professional services. There are professional protocols prescribed for the work of the professional services. There are also programs for

accreditation of training topics for the professional development of employees in the professional services. Based on the results of the actual situation with the number and staffing of professional services in primary schools, we cannot be sure that they can work effectively and efficiently in terms of the prevention, education and sanctioning of peer violence in the school; that they manage to prompt the improvement of the quality of teachers' work; that they can effectively and efficiently improve the cooperation between: the teacher, the student and the parent; that they are able to effectively and efficiently support teachers in their professional development. Additionally, from the results of our research, we realize that it is necessary to standardize the number and structure of employees in the professional services to align with the number of students in the primary school. We accept that the principle of categorizing schools according to size (number of students, number of classes) should also be applied in proportioning of professional services. We also recommend new research or expansion of the existing one, in order to determine the adequacy of the education of the employees in the professional services according to the rules for the standard of employees, especially concerning the librarian position.

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