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Application of the Ecological Model to School Social Work in Ruzomberok, Slovakia

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Abbreviations

NASW.....National Association of Social Workers

IEP.....Individualize Education Plans

Abstract

This research attempts to explore the roles, challenges and practical strategies for enhancing the effectiveness of school social workers in Ruzomberok, Slovakia. This exploration is grounded by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and investigates how micro-, meso-, and macro-level stressors influence social workers' ability to support at-risk students. This research used a qualitative approach; data were collected via semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with experienced school social workers and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings highlight three critical themes: (1) the multifaceted roles of school social workers, including counselling, advocacy, and bridging schools, families, and communities; (2) practical obstacles they face, encompassing unstable funding, high caseloads, burnout, lack of specialized tools, and societal stigma surrounding social work; and (3) practical strategies to address these barriers, including strengthening community engagement, implementing policy reforms, and adopting evidence-based practices from countries like Germany and Finland. This research emphasises the urgent need for stable fund allocation, professional development programs, and community-based networks to lessen workloads and enhance social workers' effectiveness. Moreover, it advocates for the creation of a dedicated community collaboration roles and the development of culturally responsive intervention tools to address students' needs. This study contributes to the sparse literature on school social work in Ruzomberok, Slovakia. It proposes practical recommendations for policymakers, school administrators, and practitioners to improve student's well-being, create inclusive educational environments, and enhance the status of social work within the Slovak educational system. The findings have broader implications for other post-socialist contexts facing similar socio-economic and structural challenges.

Keywords: School social work, multifaceted roles, communing engagement, culturally responsive interventions, inclusive education

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Application of the Ecological Model to School Social Work in Ruzomberok, Slovakia

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Background

School social work plays a fundamental role in student support systems worldwide, providing a wide range of essential services that go beyond academics. Social workers in educational settings are tasked with fostering the holistic development of students by addressing their social, emotional, and psychological needs. This is particularly true in Slovakia, where school social work is shaped by a unique combination of cultural norms, policy frameworks, and resource allocations. Although these factors influence the practice, the overarching mission of school social workers remains consistent: to create nurturing environments that promote academic, social, and emotional well-being for students (Csók & Pusztai, 2022).

The development of school social work in Slovakia has been shaped by the country's educational reforms and evolving societal priorities. In early 2000s, it has been formally integrated into the educational system, following the adoption of legislative frameworks such as the Slovak Education Act of 2008. Since then, school social work has emerged as a vital component of student support (Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sports of the Slovak Republic, 2008). The integration of school social work reflects Slovakia's commitment to addressing evolving student needs, particularly in the context of socio-economic disparities and the inclusion of marginalised groups, such as the Roma community. Societal norms and cultural attitudes toward mental health and social support, historically stigmatized, have gradually shifted, creating opportunities for social workers to play a more prominent role. These contextual factors underscore the importance of social workers in fostering inclusive school environments that support all students' well-being (Šebová, 2019).

In Slovakia, school social workers are vital in supporting children and adolescents in a holistic manner. They perform ambiguous, yet multifaceted role. Their role includes a variety of functions, encompassing individual counselling, crisis intervention, and collaboration with the community. School social workers are important figures in addressing the complex challenges students face, such as academic pressures, social conflicts, and mental health issues (Huxtable, 2022). As an

integrated component of the Slovak education system, school social workers serve as pillars of support; assisting students navigate the complexities of interpersonal relationships, societal expectations, and personal growth (Budayová et al., 2022).

This study focuses on Ruzomberok, a mid-sized city in northern Slovakia. Ruzomberok presents a unique case study because it has a mix of urban and rural demographics. However, it faces challenges such as economic disparities, ethnic diversity (including a notable Roma population), and shifting migration patterns that impact educational outcomes. These elements beg the need for school social worker to address issues like absenteeism, intergenerational poverty, and cultural integration. Nevertheless, their roles remain ambiguously defined, often misunderstood with those of psychologists or counsellors, despite their distinct mandate to bridge school, family, and community systems (Budayová et al., 2022).

Recently, schools in Slovakia have faced growing challenges that beg the critical need for school social workers. High rates of adolescent mental health issues, driven by performance-oriented academic pressures and pervasive usage of social media, have placed enormous demands on educational institutions. Socio-economic instabilities, particularly in rural areas and among marginalised groups like the Roma community, intensify students' emotional and behavioural difficulties, often fuelled by familial challenges such as parental unemployment or domestic instability. These issues, then, limit access to external support services, leaving schools as primary intervention sites. School social workers are uniquely positioned to bridge these gaps, serving as mediators between students, families, and community resources to foster resilience and mitigate barriers to academic and personal development.

1.2 Problem Statement and Significance

While school social work is widely acknowledged as an essential component of student support systems, the specific roles and responsibilities of social workers within Slovakian schools have not been thoroughly examined. Existing literature highlights the general functions of school social workers, but there is a notable lack of focused research on how these practices are implemented in Slovakian educational settings. Moreover, the challenges that social workers encounter in their roles and the tangible impacts of their efforts on students' well-being and academic success remain largely uncharted. This gap in understanding is significant, as social workers play a pivotal role in addressing the multifaceted needs of students, including emotional, social, and behavioral issues

that can impede their educational journeys.

The significance of this study lies in its aim to fill the existing knowledge gap regarding the practice of school social work in Slovakia. By conducting a comprehensive analysis of the roles, experiences, and challenges faced by school social workers, this research intends to uncover the complexities surrounding their work. A thorough investigation into these aspects will provide valuable insights into how social workers contribute to the overall development and well-being of students within the Slovakian educational context. This exploration is crucial for establishing a clearer understanding of the function of school social workers, which, in turn, can lead to more informed discussions about their roles in schools.

Understanding the nuances of school social work in Slovakia is not only important for academic purposes but also for informing policy decisions at various levels. As the landscape of education continues to evolve, there is a pressing need for evidence-based practices that can enhance the effectiveness of school social work interventions. By shedding light on the specific contributions of social workers, this study aims to provide actionable recommendations that can improve the integration of social work practices within schools. Ultimately, this research has the potential to inform educational policymakers and practitioners about the best approaches to support students facing diverse challenges.

This study seeks to address the critical need for a deeper understanding of school social work in Slovakia. By exploring the roles and experiences of social workers within the educational system, the research will contribute to the growing body of literature on the subject. The findings will not only enhance academic knowledge but also provide practical insights that can help optimize the contributions of social workers, leading to improved support for students. This endeavor is essential for fostering a more comprehensive and effective educational environment that addresses the diverse needs of all students.

1.3 The objectives of the study are:

- **Identify the Primary Tasks and Responsibilities of School Social Workers in Ružomberok Schools:** The primary objective of this study is to examine the specific roles and duties that school social workers undertake to support students' academic, social, and emotional needs within Ružomberok's school settings. This involves

understanding how these responsibilities contribute to a supportive educational environment and student well-being.

- **Analyze the Challenges Faced by School Social Workers in Supporting Students in Ružomberok:** This objective aims to investigate the unique challenges encountered by school social workers in Ružomberok, such as resource constraints, collaboration issues, and local contextual factors. By exploring these experiences, the research will provide understandings into the practical obstacles school social workers face and their impact on students' academic and emotional development.
- **Develop Practical Recommendations to Enhance the Effectiveness of School Social Work in Ružomberok Schools:** Based on findings related to social workers' responsibilities and challenges, this objective aims to propose actionable improvements that can strengthen school social work practices and outcomes in Ružomberok. These recommendations will seek to foster an environment where students can thrive both academically and emotionally.

1.4 Research Questions:

1. **What are the key roles and responsibilities of school social workers within the school system in Ružomberok?**

- This question seeks to identify the specific functions and tasks that school social workers perform, as well as how they contribute to students' academic, social, and emotional well-being in Ružomberok.

2. **What challenges do school social workers face in addressing the needs of students in Ružomberok schools?**

- This question aims to uncover the obstacles and barriers that may limit school social workers' effectiveness, including any local, systemic, or resource-related challenges.

3. **What strategies and resources could enhance the effectiveness of school social work practices in Ružomberok?**

- This question looks for potential solutions or improvements that could support school social workers in overcoming identified challenges and maximizing their impact on student well-being.

These objectives of the study align with the research questions, focusing on the role, challenges, and effectiveness of social workers in schools. Additionally, this research intends to offer hands-on understandings for improving the effectiveness of school social work in Ružomberok schools. By identifying the responsibilities and challenges social workers face and exploring strategies to address these obstacles, this study seeks to highlight ways to enhance school social work practices (Hepworth, Rooney, & Rooney, 2017).

Chapter 2 Literature Review:

2.1 Introduction to School Social Work

The overall development and academic success of students are shaped not only by their individual experiences but by the complex interplay of environmental systems that surround them. This interconnectedness is central to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), which argues that human development is influenced by multiple systems: the micro system (immediate environments like school and family), meso system (interaction between micro systems), exosystem (external settings indirectly affecting the individual), macro system (cultural norms, laws), and chronosystem (sociohistorical changes over time). This study is firmly based on this framework, and it emphasise the necessity of addressing students' challenges through a holistic lens, recognizing how factors at the individual, familial, institutional, and societal levels collectively shape educational outcomes (Chen & Border, 2017).

This study is firmly anchored in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which serves as a foundational framework for analyzing the intricate interactions between school social workers and the multifaceted systems within educational settings. This theoretical lens describes the various levels of interaction that influence student outcomes, starting with the microsystem, which encompasses the immediate school environment. Within this context, school social workers actively engage with individual students, addressing their unique needs while also considering the dynamics of peer interactions and the prevailing classroom culture (Chen &Border, 2017). Through this approach, school social workers can identify and address factors directly impacting students' social and emotional well-being, tailoring interventions that foster positive relationships and enhance learning environments.

Extending beyond the microsystem, the mesosystem underscores the collaborative efforts of educators, administrators, and parents, highlighting the critical interplay among these stakeholders in promoting students' overall well-being (Levine, 2020). As noted by Miller et al. (2022), effective collaboration among these various parties can significantly bolster the support network available to students, facilitating their social, emotional, and academic development. The exosystem encompasses broader societal influences, including cultural norms and policies that shape the operational framework of school social work (Hutchinson, 2019). Effective collaboration within

the mesosystem strengthens the support network around students, fostering a more cohesive approach to their social, emotional, and academic growth. The exosystem, in turn, includes broader societal influences such as cultural norms and policies, which establish the foundational structures within which school social work operates.

Significantly, the macrosystem's influence is particularly apparent in Slovakia's multi-ethnic communities. In Ruzomberok, school social workers often navigate cultural tensions between the majority population and marginalized groups, such as the Roma, who face systemic exclusion (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020). Roma students, for instance, are unevenly affected by absenteeism and segregation, issues exacerbated by societal prejudices and institutional hurdles (Kusa et al., 2019). In this context, Bronfenbrenner's chronosystem becomes salient: historical marginalisation and shifting migration patterns shape how school social workers mediate conflicts and advocate for inclusive policies. This aligns with Kelly et al's (2010) emphasis on culturally responsive practices, which require social workers to adapt interventions to the macrosystemic realities of their communities.

School social work is a specialized field that integrates social work principles and practices within educational settings. In *School Social Work: An Evidence-Informed Framework for Practice*, Kelly et al. (2010) provide a comprehensive framework that emphasizes evidence-based approaches within school social work, underscoring the critical role of social workers in supporting students' mental health, academic success, and social integration. The primary aim of school social work is to enhance students' academic success and overall well-being by addressing the social, emotional, and environmental factors that can hinder their educational experience. Globally, the practices and implementations of school social work vary significantly, shaped by cultural contexts, legal frameworks, and educational policies. According to Huxtable (2021), these variations influence how school social workers engage with students and collaborate with educators. Despite these differences, several common goals and innovative strategies can be identified across countries, including supporting marginalized students and enhancing educational outcomes. Huxtable (2021) highlights that, in the face of diverse educational challenges, school social workers play a critical role in creating supportive educational environments, adapting their methods to meet the specific needs of their communities.

School social work, in Slovakia, emerged as a formalised profession on the backdrop of legislative

reforms in the early 2000s, including amendments to the Education Act (2008) that mandated psychosocial support in schools (Huxtable, 2021). However, its implementation remains disproportionate, particularly in regions like Ruzomberok, where resource limitations and cultural stigma surrounding mental health persist.

2.2 Common Goals of School Social Work

Despite the variations in practices, the overarching goals of school social work remain consistent worldwide. One primary objective is to support student well-being. This encompasses mental health support, conflict resolution, and the development of social skills, ensuring that students are equipped to face personal and academic challenges. Globally, school social workers are essential in bridging academic support with mental health resources, thereby enhancing students' engagement and creating inclusive educational environments (Allen-Meares, 2022). Additionally, school social work aims to foster a positive school environment where students feel safe, respected, and engaged in their learning.

Another significant goal is to enhance academic performance by addressing external factors that may impact students' ability to succeed in school. School social workers strive to mitigate issues such as family dysfunction, socio-economic hardships, and community violence, which can adversely affect a student's educational journey. By intervening early and providing support, school social workers play a crucial role in promoting educational equity and improving outcomes for all students.

2.3 Multifaceted Role of School Social Workers

2.3.1 Supporting Students' Academic Needs

School social workers play a vital role in academic support, especially for students facing learning challenges, socio-economic disadvantages, or behavioral issues. They work collaboratively with teachers, special educators, and administrators to identify students in need of assistance and to implement supportive strategies. This may involve developing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for students with special needs or offering targeted interventions for students experiencing academic difficulties. By coordinating with teachers and parents, school social workers ensure that each student receives the necessary resources and encouragement to succeed academically. Studies have shown that when school social workers actively engage in academic planning, students

benefit from a more tailored and supportive learning experience (Horner et al., 2018). Their involvement in academic planning helps create a supportive learning environment where students receive individualized resources and guidance, promoting their academic success and overall well-being.

2.3.2 Addressing Emotional Needs

The emotional well-being of students is another critical focus for school social workers. They provide counselling services and develop intervention strategies for students dealing with issues like anxiety, depression, trauma, or behavioral disorders. In situations of crisis, such as a family tragedy or a traumatic event at school, social workers act as first responders, offering immediate support and connecting families with additional resources. School social workers help students integrate into peer group or involve them in other interactions. Individual and group counselling sessions help students express their feelings, develop coping mechanisms, and navigate personal challenges. By providing these services, school social workers contribute to a school environment that prioritizes students' emotional health, a foundation for their overall development (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2021). School social workers play a pivotal role in fostering a supportive school environment by offering counselling services and interventions that help students manage personal challenges and build resilience.

2.3.3 Supporting Social Development and Peer Relationships

School social workers also foster social skills and positive peer relationships among students. They run programs focused on teaching conflict resolution, empathy, and effective communication, which are essential for healthy peer interactions. Group counselling sessions, often organized by social workers, provide students with a safe space to discuss common challenges and learn from one another. Social workers work to mitigate bullying and foster inclusivity, helping students feel accepted and valued within their school communities. Programs that support social skill development are shown to improve student engagement and reduce disciplinary issues, promoting a more supportive school environment (Seddon & Dodd, 2020). By promoting social skill development and inclusivity, school social workers help create a supportive atmosphere where students feel valued and connected to their peers, enhancing overall school engagement and reducing behavioural issues.

2.4 Schools as Environments for Child Development

2.4.1 Academic Skills Development

Schools are essential environments for developing academic skills and cognitive abilities. School social workers advocate for equitable access to educational resources, ensuring that socio-economic or personal hardships do not hinder students' academic progress. They identify barriers to learning, such as lack of parental support, language difficulties, or financial issues, and work to remove or mitigate these obstacles. Through tutoring programs, mentorship initiatives, and resource provision, school social workers enable students to make the most of their academic experiences. By addressing students' unique challenges, social workers play a vital role in creating an equitable educational environment where each child can succeed (Pratham, 2020). School social workers play a crucial role in creating an equitable learning environment by addressing individual challenges that may impede a student's academic growth. By providing access to tutoring, mentorship, and essential resources, they ensure that all students have the support needed to reach their full potential in school.

2.4.2 Emotional and Social Skills Development

Beyond academics, schools serve as pivotal spaces for students to develop emotional regulation and social skills. School social workers facilitate this by offering structured support to help students manage their emotions and build resilience. Programs designed by social workers promote skills such as empathy, patience, and cooperation, equipping students to navigate social dynamics both inside and outside of school. The collaborative efforts of social workers, teachers, and parents help reinforce positive behavior and emotional growth in children, preparing them to manage future challenges constructively. These skills are essential for lifelong social success and personal well-being (NASW, 2018). School social workers play a key role in helping students develop emotional regulation and resilience through structured support and guidance. By designing programs that foster empathy, patience, and cooperation, social workers equip students with essential skills for handling social interactions and challenges in varied environments. Working collaboratively with teachers and parents, they reinforce positive behaviors and emotional growth, laying a foundation for students' long-term social success and well-being.

2.4.3 Building Resilience and Life Skills

In addition to academic and emotional skills, school social workers help students cultivate life skills critical for future independence and resilience. Through resilience-building activities and workshops on practical skills, such as problem-solving and decision-making, social workers prepare students for life beyond school. Activities centred on building resilience encourage students to view challenges as opportunities for growth, fostering a mindset that equips them to handle adversity with confidence. Life skills and resilience contribute significantly to students' mental health, personal relationships, and overall life satisfaction, underscoring the importance of school social work in holistic child development (Ministry of Education, 2020). School social workers are instrumental in helping students develop essential life skills that foster independence and resilience. By guiding students in problem-solving and decision-making, social workers enable them to approach challenges with confidence, building a foundation for success beyond the school environment.

2.5 Contribution to Inclusive Educational Environments

2.5.1 Fostering Inclusivity and Diversity

School social workers advocate for inclusive practices within educational environments, ensuring that every student feels valued and respected. They implement anti-bullying programs, conduct diversity training, and promote cultural awareness among students and staff. These efforts create a more welcoming atmosphere for students from various backgrounds, helping them feel safe and included. For students from minority or marginalized groups, this support is particularly valuable in enhancing their school experience and reducing feelings of isolation. An inclusive school environment promotes greater acceptance and understanding, allowing students to thrive academically and socially (Horner et al., 2018). By advocating for inclusive practices and implementing programs that promote diversity and cultural awareness, school social workers create a welcoming atmosphere that enhances the educational experience for all students, particularly those from minority or marginalized groups.

2.5.2 Addressing Socio-Economic Inequality

A significant focus for school social workers is supporting students affected by socio- economic challenges. They work to ensure that financial hardship does not interfere with a student's

education by connecting families with community resources, organizing school supplies drives, or providing access to school meal programs. By addressing the socio- economic inequalities that impact educational attainment, school social workers help level the playing field for all students. This advocacy work is crucial in breaking the cycle of poverty and ensuring that every child has a fair opportunity to succeed academically (NASW, 2018). School social workers play a vital role in supporting students facing socio-economic challenges by connecting families with community resources and organizing initiatives to provide essential school supplies and meals. By addressing these inequalities, they help create a more equitable educational environment, ensuring that every child can succeed academically and break the cycle of poverty.

2.5.3 Enhancing School Safety and Mental Health Awareness

Finally, school social workers play a central role in promoting mental health awareness and school safety. They organize mental health workshops, offer resources for students dealing with mental health issues, and educate students on the importance of seeking help. By reducing stigma and fostering open dialogue, social workers make mental health resources more accessible to students in need. Their collaborative efforts with teachers, parents, and external mental health professionals create a safer and healthier school environment. Emphasizing mental health in schools has been linked to improved student behavior, higher academic achievement, and reduced rates of absenteeism (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2021). School social workers are pivotal in fostering mental health awareness and safety within schools by organizing workshops and resources, reducing stigma, and collaborating with educators and mental health professionals to create a supportive environment that enhances student well-being and academic achievement.

2.6 Variability of Global Practices in School Social Work

School social work practices differ widely across the globe, influenced by each country's unique socio-political landscape, educational policies, and cultural norms. In the United States, school social workers are often involved in crisis intervention, counselling, and advocacy, working closely with students, families, and educational staff to address various issues, including bullying, mental health, and family problems. Their role includes developing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for students with special needs and providing group therapy sessions to enhance peer relationships and emotional resilience (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2018). The United States operates on a unique model of school social work, often framed around the Multi-Tiered

System of Support (MTSS). This framework emphasizes a proactive and preventative approach, ensuring that all students receive varying levels of support based on their individual needs. MTSS incorporates three tiers: universal interventions for all students, targeted interventions for those who need more support, and intensive interventions for a small group of students facing significant challenges (Horner et al., 2018). This model encourages collaboration among educators, mental health professionals, and families to provide comprehensive support.

In Australia, school social work is recognized for its preventive approach, focusing on building resilience among students and fostering strong connections between schools and the community. Australian school social workers often implement programs that promote mental health awareness and social-emotional learning, utilizing frameworks like the Australian Curriculum that emphasize the importance of well-being in educational settings (Seddon & Dodd, 2020). These programs are designed to create a safe and supportive environment where students can develop essential life skills, fostering resilience and promoting positive mental health throughout the school community.

Scandinavian countries, such as Sweden and Norway, adopt a holistic model of school social work, emphasizing collaboration among various stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and community organizations. School social workers in these countries often engage in preventive measures, implementing programs that support students' social integration and mental health. For example, Sweden's School Health Services provide a comprehensive approach that combines educational and health-related services, aiming to create a supportive environment for all students (Skolverket, 2021). This integrated model ensures that students receive not only academic support but also access to mental health resources, promoting overall well-being and facilitating better learning outcomes.

In contrast, in some developing countries, such as India and parts of Africa, school social work is still in its nascent stages. The focus here tends to be on addressing basic needs, such as food security, sanitation, and access to education. Initiatives often involve community- based approaches that aim to empower families and improve school attendance rates. For instance, organizations like Pratham in India implement programs that provide educational support and resources to underprivileged children, integrating social work practices to address the barriers to education (Pratham, 2020). Organizations like Pratham in India provide essential educational resources to underprivileged children. Similarly, the Dosti Welfare Organization in Pakistan

focuses on addressing the educational needs of out-of-school children through its Dosti One Room Schools (DoORS) initiative. This program emphasizes community involvement and provides non-formal education to improve literacy rates. Dosti has established over 8,185 schools and assisted approximately 465,925 students. Additionally, 65,000+ students have received Dosti Starter Kits, significantly reducing the number of out-of-school youth in underserved areas. By tackling these fundamental issues, such initiatives not only improve children's access to education but also foster a sense of community and resilience, ultimately laying the groundwork for long-term educational and social development.

2.7 Effective Strategies and Innovative Approaches

Across different countries, various effective strategies and innovative approaches have been implemented to enhance school social work practices. In the United States, one notable approach is the use of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), which provides a framework for identifying students' needs and delivering appropriate interventions at different levels. This model emphasizes collaboration among educators, social workers, and mental health professionals to create a comprehensive support system for students (Horner et al., 2018). This approach not only addresses immediate challenges but also fosters a more inclusive and supportive school culture.

In New Zealand, the PB4L (Positive Behaviour for Learning) initiative focuses on promoting positive behavior and improving student outcomes through proactive support strategies. This approach encourages school communities to adopt shared values and expectations, creating an inclusive and respectful environment (Ministry of Education, 2020). Such a framework often sees improvements in student behavior and engagement, creating a more conducive atmosphere for learning.

Moreover, some countries have harnessed technology to enhance school social work practices. For instance, in Canada, school social workers have adopted telehealth platforms to provide mental health services remotely, ensuring that students in rural or underserved areas can access support. This innovative approach has proven effective in breaking down barriers to access and increasing the reach of mental health services (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2021). The use of telehealth platforms by school social workers in Canada is a commendable initiative that effectively addresses accessibility issues in mental health services, particularly for students in rural areas. By leveraging technology, they are not only expanding their reach but also ensuring that

every student receives the support they need, regardless of their location.

In conclusion, while school social work practices vary across the globe, the fundamental goals of promoting student well-being and fostering positive school environments remain universal. By employing diverse strategies and innovative approaches, school social workers can effectively address the unique needs of students, contributing to their academic success and overall development.

Through the application of this ecological systems framework, this research seeks to provide nuanced insights into the introduction, implementation, and integration of social work practices within Slovakian schools. By examining the dynamic interplay of factors that impact school social work, this study aims to foster a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in this field, ultimately guiding interventions that promote a holistic approach to student support. In doing so, the research aspires to contribute to the evolution of effective school social work practices, ensuring that students receive tailored and comprehensive support that reflects their individual needs and the broader educational and societal context (Ulutaş et al., 2022). This approach aspires to advance effective school social work practices, ensuring students receive personalized support that accounts for both their individual needs and the larger educational and societal environment.

School social workers are essential in bridging the educational environment with mental health and social support systems to help students succeed academically, socially, and emotionally. Over the years, the role of school social work has evolved to address a wide range of student needs, from academic support and crisis intervention to fostering social skills and promoting inclusivity. Today's school social workers serve as advocates, facilitators, and mentors, working closely with teachers, families, and community agencies to support each student holistically. The following analysis examines the multifaceted role of school social workers, the importance of schools as development environments, and how school social work practices foster inclusivity and support.

2.8 History of School Social Work in Slovakia

School social work in Slovakia has undergone significant transformation since its inception, evolving from an informal and unrecognized role within the educational system to a formalized profession integral to supporting student well-being and academic success. This evolution reflects broader societal changes, including the shift from a socialist regime to a democratic society, where

individual rights and the complexities of social issues gained prominence. The establishment of various legislative frameworks throughout the years has further solidified the role of social workers in schools, addressing the diverse needs of students facing challenges related to mental health, family dynamics, and social inclusion. As the educational landscape continues to evolve, school social work remains a critical component in fostering supportive environments conducive to learning and personal development for all students in Slovakia.

2.9 Early Developments (Pre-1990s)

Before the 1990s, social work in Slovakia, like in many Eastern European countries, was primarily influenced by socialist ideology. The focus was on the collective welfare of society, often at the expense of individual needs, including those of children in educational settings. The concept of social work was limited, and there were few formal roles dedicated to addressing the unique challenges faced by students. Teachers often played dual roles, providing both education and informal social support, but without the specialized training or resources that are recognized today (Hudecová, 2017). This lack of specialized support not only hindered the ability to address students' complex emotional and social needs effectively but also placed additional burdens on teachers, limiting their capacity to focus on academic instruction and overall student development.

2.9.1 Post-Communist Transition (1990s)

With the fall of communism in 1989, Slovakia underwent significant political, social, and economic changes that reshaped its education system. The transition brought about increased recognition of individual rights and the complexities of social issues affecting children. This period marked the beginning of a gradual acknowledgment of the need for professional social services in schools. Increased migration, economic hardship, and rising social issues such as domestic violence and child neglect highlighted the necessity for specialized support services (Tomášková, 2019). As the complexities of social issues became more pronounced during this transitional period, the demand for trained social workers in educational settings grew, emphasizing the crucial role these professionals play in addressing the diverse needs of students and fostering a supportive school environment.

During this time, pilot programs began to emerge, introducing the role of social workers into schools, albeit in an informal capacity. These programs aimed to address issues like youth

delinquency, family dysfunction, and mental health challenges, which were becoming more visible in educational environments (Juráni, 2020). These pilot programs not only provided a framework for the integration of social work into schools but also revealed the pressing need for specialized interventions, underscoring the role of social workers in promoting student well-being and addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by at-risk youth.

2.9.2 Institutionalization of School Social Work (2000s)

The formal establishment of school social work as a distinct field began in the early 2000s, with the Ministry of Education initiating pilot projects that integrated social workers into schools across Slovakia. This development coincided with the introduction of new laws and policies aimed at improving child welfare and education.

The Education Act (No. 245/2008 Coll.), enacted in 2008, was a landmark legislation that officially recognized the role of social work within the educational framework. It mandated that schools provide psychological and social support to students, laying the foundation for the integration of social workers into educational institutions. Social workers in schools are thus mandated to focus on inclusive practices and support vulnerable or marginalized students, ensuring they receive necessary services (Education Act, 2008). Establishing schools to provide psychological and social support, the Education Act not only formalized the role of social workers but also signalled a shift towards a more holistic approach to education, recognizing that academic success is intrinsically linked to students' emotional and social well-being. Furthermore, this legislation has facilitated the development of targeted interventions that cater to the diverse needs of students, ultimately fostering an inclusive educational environment where all children can thrive, regardless of their socio-economic background or personal challenges.

In conjunction with this, the Social Services Act (No. 448/2008 Coll.) was also established a framework for delivering social services, including those targeted at children and adolescents. While not limited to educational settings, this Act allows social workers to provide support for students with specific social needs, such as those experiencing socio-economic difficulties or family-related issues that impact their education. This framework encourages cooperation between schools and social service agencies, creating a support network essential for holistic student care (Social Services Act, 2008). Facilitating social workers to support students facing socio-economic hardships and family-related issues, the Social Services Act not only broadens the scope of

assistance available to children but also recognizes the interconnectedness of social challenges and educational outcomes, which is crucial for fostering student success.

2.9.3 Expansion and Professionalization (2010s)

Throughout the 2010s, school social work continued to expand and professionalize in Slovakia. The introduction of specialized training programs for social workers focused on the educational context, fostering a new generation of professionals equipped to address the unique challenges faced by students. Schools began to see the benefits of having dedicated social workers who could provide counselling, crisis intervention, and support for students dealing with various personal and social issues (Poláková & Bianchi, 2021). The expansion of specialized training programs for school social workers during the 2010s ensured that these professionals were not only knowledgeable about educational policies but also adept at employing evidence-based practices tailored to the unique challenges students face, ultimately leading to more effective support interventions.

Additionally, the Protection of Children and Social Guardianship Act (No. 305/2005 Coll.) The Act introduced in 2005, focuses on safeguarding children's welfare and well-being across Slovakia. It mandates intervention when a child's physical, psychological, or social welfare is at risk. School social workers, under this law, are obligated to identify and report cases where students may be at risk, involving authorities when necessary. It emphasizes the importance of maintaining confidentiality, respecting children's rights, and facilitating safe environments in schools. This Act is crucial for addressing cases of abuse, neglect, or bullying, directly impacting social work interventions in schools (Protection of Children and Social Guardianship, 2005). This Act not only clarifies the responsibilities of school social workers in safeguarding children's welfare but also reinforces the collaborative relationship between educational institutions and child protection agencies, ensuring a more comprehensive approach to student care.

2.9.4 Contemporary Issues and Future Directions (2020s)

In recent years, school social work in Slovakia has faced new challenges, including the increasing impact of digital technology on student behavior and mental health. Issues such as cyberbullying and the need for mental health support have become paramount, leading to the development of targeted policies aimed at enhancing student well-being. The Public Health Act (No. 355/2007 Coll.) This Act addresses health services within educational institutions, including psychological

services. The Public Health Act obligates schools to promote mental health and wellness, addressing emotional and psychological aspects alongside academic support. The Act's mandates facilitate the development of programs focused on mental health awareness, stress management, and prevention of mental health issues among students. School social workers engage directly in such programs, coordinating with psychologists and health professionals to provide comprehensive support for students' mental well-being (Public Health Act, 2007). By addressing issues such as cyberbullying and promoting mental health awareness through the frameworks established by the Public Health Act, school social workers are essential in mitigating the adverse effects of digital technology on students, ultimately fostering a healthier school climate. Their proactive engagement in mental health initiatives not only provides immediate support for affected students but also contributes to the long-term development of coping strategies and resilience among the broader student population.

In recent years, the Slovakian Ministry of Education has introduced policies aimed explicitly at enhancing mental health support in schools. For example, programs focused on anti- bullying, stress management, and emotional resilience have been initiated to address common issues faced by students. These policies align with the European Union's recommendations on promoting mental health and reducing stigmatization around seeking support. Social workers in schools are trained to apply these policies through counselling, workshops, and resilience-building activities, creating a supportive environment where students feel empowered to seek help (Ministry of Education, 2023). The policies introduced by the Slovakian Ministry of Education not only aim to address current mental health challenges among students but also foster a preventive approach, empowering school social workers to implement early intervention strategies that enhance overall student well-being and academic performance.

Furthermore, the future of school social work in Slovakia holds promising opportunities for innovation and growth. Embracing emerging trends such as technology integration and community partnerships can significantly expand the reach and impact of school social work services. For instance, leveraging teletherapy platforms could enhance access to mental health support for students in remote or underserved areas, ensuring that more students receive the help they need regardless of their location (Huxtable, 2022). Additionally, collaboration with community organizations and local agencies can enrich the resources available to school social workers, fostering a more holistic approach to supporting students and their families. These partnerships

can provide additional avenues for addressing student well-being, beyond the confines of the school setting.

Also, there is a clear need for continued investment in research and policy development to scale up the field of school social work in Slovakia. By exploring the effectiveness of different intervention approaches and evaluating the impact of school social work programs on student outcomes, policymakers and practitioners can better inform evidence-based decisions (Budayová et al., 2022). Additionally, enhancing collaboration between schools, government agencies, and a wide range of stakeholders can help develop comprehensive and coordinated support systems for students. By embracing innovation, building partnerships, and prioritizing research and policy development, Slovakia can move toward a future where school social work plays an even more integral role in supporting student well-being and fostering inclusive, nurturing school environments (Csók & Pusztai, 2022). Investing in research and policy development is crucial for identifying best practices in school social work, enabling practitioners to adopt evidence-based interventions that effectively address the diverse needs of students. Strengthening partnerships between educational institutions, social service agencies, and community organizations can enhance resource sharing and create comprehensive support networks, ultimately leading to improved student outcomes and a more resilient educational system.

2.10 Implications for School Social Work Practice in Slovakia

These laws and policies collectively shape the practice of school social work in Slovakia. They not only mandate support services but also promote cooperation among educational, social, and health institutions. Social workers are responsible for identifying students at risk, offering psychological support, and providing necessary referrals, enhancing the overall school environment. The framework enables social workers to contribute effectively to students' academic and social success, addressing mental health needs through a legally supported, structured approach (Zemanová, 2022). The integration of laws and policies into school social work in Slovakia is crucial for establishing a comprehensive support system for students. By fostering collaboration among educational, social, and health institutions, these frameworks not only enhance the effectiveness of social workers but also ensure that students receive holistic care tailored to their needs. The proactive approach of identifying at-risk students and providing psychological support reflects a commitment to fostering a safe and nurturing school environment. This legally supported

structure is essential for addressing mental health challenges, ultimately contributing to the academic and social success of students.

2.11 Application of the Ecological Model to School Social Work in Slovakia

The ecological model provides a valuable framework for addressing the multifaceted needs of students in Slovakian schools, recognizing the complex interplay between individual, family, school, and community influences. Applying this model to school social work in Slovakia involves understanding how these layers interact in a specific cultural and social context, enabling school social workers to deliver tailored, comprehensive support.

In Slovakian schools, the individual student remains central to the ecological model's application, with social workers identifying and addressing personal and situational factors that impact student well-being. Students in Slovakia may encounter challenges such as academic pressure, language barriers (especially in regions with diverse ethnic communities), and mental health issues. School social workers, applying the ecological model, can better understand and respond to these needs by assessing each student's unique experiences and working with relevant stakeholders to offer support (Zemanová, 2022). For example, in regions where students come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, social workers can advocate for additional resources, such as financial aid programs or free meal initiatives, to reduce economic pressures that might impact learning.

The family environment is another critical layer in the ecological model, as it shapes students' emotional well-being and engagement with school. In Slovakia, where traditional family structures are highly valued, school social workers can work closely with families to encourage a supportive home environment conducive to learning. By creating open channels of communication with parents or guardians, social workers can address family-related issues such as parental employment instability, family conflicts, or health concerns that might hinder a student's performance. This engagement helps build trust and allows social workers to provide families with resources or counselling referrals that align with the students' and family's cultural and social needs (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Engaging families in the educational process not only strengthens the support system for students but also empowers parents to take an active role in their children's academic journey, ultimately enhancing student outcomes.

School-level factors play a crucial role in the ecological model, as the policies and culture within each school shape the extent and effectiveness of social work support. Slovakian schools differ in terms of resources, administration, and approaches to student support. Schools with supportive leadership are more likely to foster collaborative environments, encouraging teachers, counsellors, and social workers to work together on behalf of students. Social workers in Slovakia can also collaborate with teachers and administrators to implement school-wide programs on bullying prevention, social inclusion, and mental health awareness, ensuring these initiatives are integrated into the school's culture (Healy, 2014). For example, schools with high rates of bullying may benefit from anti-bullying programs developed by social workers in collaboration with teachers, creating safer learning environments that encourage positive peer interactions.

Community-level resources further enhance the ecological approach by connecting Slovakian schools with external organizations. In Slovakia, community-based organizations, such as mental health services, NGOs, and local government agencies, offer valuable support for students and families. School social workers can partner with these organizations to expand the scope of support, providing students with access to specialized services that may not be available within the school. For instance, Slovakian school social workers can coordinate with local mental health clinics to provide counselling services, particularly in rural or underserved areas where access to mental health care is limited. By fostering these community partnerships, school social workers ensure that students and families benefit from a broader support network that extends beyond the school environment (Juráni, 2020). The collaboration between school social workers and community-based organizations in Slovakia is vital for addressing the diverse needs of students, particularly those facing socio-economic challenges that can impact their educational experiences and by leveraging external resources and expertise, school social workers can provide targeted interventions that not only enhance individual student support but also promote a more resilient and interconnected community, thereby fostering an environment where all students have the opportunity to thrive academically and socially.

Applying the ecological model in Slovakian schools is particularly beneficial for this research study as it provides a structured framework for examining the complex interplay between individual, familial, school, and community factors that influence student well-being. This model facilitates a deeper understanding of how social workers can effectively tailor interventions to address the unique challenges faced by students, thereby enhancing educational outcomes and

fostering a supportive environment that promotes overall holistic development within the educational system.

Chapter 3 Methodology

3.1 Sample procedure

3.1.1 Participants

This study employs a qualitative approach to explore the role and integration of social work within schools in Ružomberok, Slovakia, where 7 primary schools included with only six social workers across these institutions. Qualitative research is particularly effective in understanding complex social phenomena and capturing the nuanced experiences of participants (Smith & Osborn, 2021).

3.1.2 Sampling Method

A purpose sampling approach will be used to select participants who are directly involved in school social work and can provide rich, relevant data based on their professional experiences This study will primarily gather data through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with the school social workers available in this context. The goal is to collect detailed narratives that reflect their experiences, roles, and challenges. Through this exploration, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the status of school social work in Ružomberok and identify areas for potential improvement.

3.2 Data Collection Methods

3.2.1 In-Depth Interviews

The primary data collection method for this study is semi-structured interviews with the available school social workers in Ružomberok. Semi-structured interviews are preferred for their flexibility, allowing both the interviewer and participants to delve into relevant topics, and are effective for generating rich qualitative data (Cohen & Crabtree, 2022). These interviews will likely occur at selected schools, structured interviews are preferred for their flexibility, allowing both the interviewer and participants to delve into relevant topics. This approach ensures rich, qualitative data that captures the diverse experiences and perspectives of the participants.

The interviews will be guided by pre-determined open-ended questions but will also allow for flexibility to explore emerging themes in more detail. The interviews will focus on several key areas: the roles and responsibilities of school social workers, their interactions with students,

teachers, and parents, and the challenges they face in their daily work. Additionally, participants will be encouraged to reflect on the broader context of social work within the educational system in Slovakia, including systemic issues or potential areas for improvement. The target sample size for these interviews is approximately 6 school social workers, as this reflects the limited number available, allowing for an in-depth exploration of their unique experiences.

3.2.2 Focus Group Discussions

In addition to individual interviews, focus group discussions will also be conducted with the available social workers. These discussions will provide a platform for them to engage in dialogue and exchange ideas with their peers. Focus groups are particularly useful for exploring common themes and challenges, fostering collective reflection, and generating new insights through peer dialogue (Kitzinger, 2022).

The focus group discussions will be structured using a discussion guide with key topics and prompts designed to encourage interaction and the sharing of diverse perspectives. The discussion will cover a range of topics relevant to school social work, including the integration of social work within the school environment, strategies for addressing student needs, and the impact of social work interventions on educational outcomes. The collaborative nature of focus groups is expected to foster a deeper exploration of these themes, highlighting shared experiences and identifying potential solutions to common challenges.

3.3 Data Analysis

The qualitative data obtained from both interviews and focus group discussions will be analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that allows researchers to systematically identify and interpret patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This method involves systematically identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. Thematic analysis is particularly well-suited for qualitative research as it provides a structured yet flexible approach to analyzing complex narrative data.

The analysis process will start with familiarization, where the researcher will read the data multiple times to fully understand it. Next, initial codes will be created to highlight important parts of the data. These codes will be grouped into possible themes, which will then be reviewed and adjusted to ensure they accurately represent the data. Finally, the themes will be clearly defined and named,

providing a comprehensive understanding of the data.

Throughout the analysis, the researcher will adopt a reflexive approach, maintaining a research journal to document personal biases, assumptions, and decisions made during the analysis process, ensuring that the findings reflect the participants' perspectives. Direct quotes from participants will be used to enhance the credibility and authenticity of the analysis, highlighting key themes and providing clear examples of the experiences of school social workers in Ružomberok.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

This study will adhere to strict ethical guidelines to safeguard the rights and well-being of all participants. Each participant will provide informed consent, meaning they will fully understand the research goals, process, and any potential risks involved. Participants will also be assured that they can withdraw from the study at any point without facing any consequences.

Confidentiality will be strictly maintained throughout the study. All data will be anonymized and securely stored, accessible only to the research team. Findings will be reported in a manner that protects participants' identities. Emotional support will be provided to participants if needed, and ethical approval will be obtained to ensure compliance with ethical standards.

3.5 Contribution to Knowledge

This research aims to enhance the understanding of the role and impact of social work within Slovakian schools, specifically in Ružomberok. By providing a detailed narrative of school social workers' experiences and challenges, the study will offer valuable insights into the effectiveness of current practices and identify areas for improvement. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of more effective and impactful social work interventions in schools, ultimately benefiting students, teachers, and the broader educational community.

Chapter 4 Discussion and Analysis

Based on the data collected for this research study, this section outlines key themes and sub-themes in Slovakian educational setting. Following are the primary themes derived through thematic analysis.

4.1 The Multifaceted role of School Social Workers

School social workers play a pivotal role in student support system and provide a holistic support that operates within three inter-related domains: (1) individualized psychosocial intervention, (2) systemic collaboration, (3) and designing preventive strategies. Empirical data collected for this study illustrate that their work go beyond traditional counselling paradigms, as demonstrated by their mediation of conflict, trust-building through informal interactions, and advocacy for systemic reforms. This theme and the subsequent sub-themes directly address the research question about the roles and responsibilities of school social workers in Ruzomberok, Slovakia. This theme also highlights how school social workers in Slovakia operate within resource constraints to balance individual, systemic, and preventive interventions.

4.1.1 Counsellors and Mediators: Addressing Emotional and Social Needs

This theme directly answers the research question that school social workers in Ruzomberok, Slovakia act as frontline responders to students` emotional and psychological crises. They perform their work by employing non-directive, trust-building techniques to create psychologically safe spaces for marginalized students.

For instance, Respondent 1 emphasized:

'My role involves the first contact with the child in need, creating a safe and trusting environment so they can share their experiences, needs, and problems. I take a non-directive and friendly approach.' (Respondent 1)

This quote shows the relational foundation of social work practices in Ruzomberok, Slovakia. This relational foundation is further demonstrated by another respondent who described using "*casual conversations in less formal settings*" and "*art therapy or mindfulness practices*" to assist students feel heard. Such a tailored intervention perfectly aligns with Bronfenbrenner`s ecological theory. According to this theory, social workers mediate between micro-level

stressors (e.g. familial conflict) and meso-level challenges (classroom dynamics). For instance, one social worker`s recalled supporting a withdrawn 13-year-old boy through "*sports and leisure groups*" after his parents` separation illustrates how disruptions in the family system reverberate in school environments. These systems (familial, school, community) were bridged by school social workers to facilitate peer relationships and emotional stability.

Systemic collaboration is also vital to social workers` role. As one participant noted:

"I act as a bridge between students, teachers, parents, and external services to ensure holistic well-being."

This quote illustrates the primary role of school social workers in Ruzomberok, Slovakia. Their primary role is to bridge different systems through interdisciplinary teamwork, such as coordinating with special educators and psychologists to address behavioural issues or advocating for students` needs in policy discussions.

Likewise, preventive strategies are of equal importance to school social workers. One social worker detailed structured programs to address classroom dynamics:

"*We have intervention and prevention programs. For broken relationships in classrooms, we use activities like role-playing and group sessions to teach empathy. The 5th meeting always includes parents to address root causes."*

This quote mentions how social workers proactively tackle issues like broken relationship and bullying using creative techniques such as role-play and group sessions to foster empathy and parental involvement.

To summarize, this theme emphasizes how school social workers navigate their complex and multifaceted role by providing immediate emotional support with systemic mediation. They use empathy and informal interactions to foster trust and bridge individual with a resource (in this case, it may be school, psychologist or mental health expert).

4.1.2 Collaborators and advocates: Bridging Schools, Families, and Systems

One repetitive theme across the interviews is the role of school social workers as a collaborator and advocate. School social workers act as critical intermediaries, bridging gaps between schools, families, and external support systems. Empirical data for this study highlighted that their work often transcends individual student support, requiring interdisciplinary collaboration and systemic

advocacy to tackle Slovakia`s evolving psychosocial challenges. This sub-theme fulfils the objective of this study in that it illustrates how school social workers operate in a resource constraint and institutional hierarchies to ensure holistic support for students. Their role as collaborators and advocates put them in a central position in holistic child support systems. One respondent with extensive experience in multidisciplinary collaboration emphasized:

'We work in multidisciplinary teams with psychologists, special educators, and teachers...my role is to identify children from broken families or those facing social disadvantages and connects them to resources' (R2)

This quote states their 'gatekeeper function,' which is to identify vulnerability and mobilization of school-based and external resources (e.g. addiction support, mental health clinics). Similarly, another respondent described collaborating with community organizations for long-term therapy:

"Community services provide specialized care we can`t offer alone. If a student needs intensive support, I connect them to external therapists or welfare programs."

Such collaborative efforts align with Bronfenbrenner`s ecological model, which emphasized the interconnectedness of systems (schools, family, community) and its role in shaping student outcomes. Social workers act as a mediator in this context. One respondent recalled adjusting academic expectation for an anxious student:

"We reduced her homework after she cried daily from pressure. Her teachers agreed to prioritize well-being over rigid deadlines."

This intervention reveals adaptive advocacy, modifying institutional practices to align with student needs. This is like the United States Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS).

4.1.3 Advocacy for Systemic Change

In Ruzomberok, Slovakia, social workers advocate for structural reforms to address systemic challenges and provide holistic care for students` needs. one respondent highlight policy gaps in Slovakia`s education system:

"Schools focus on academics, not mental health. I push for policies that prioritize well-being, but we need more funding and trained staff."

Likewise, respondent 5 critiqued bureaucratic hurdles in child protection:

"The system prioritizes keeping families' together, even dysfunctional ones. We couldn't help a boy with drug-addicted parents for a year – it`s heartbreaking."

These quotes highlight tensions between policy ideals (family preservation) and student safety, underscoring the need for social workers to lobby for flexible, child-oriented policies.

4.1.4 Challenges in Collaboration

Despite the bridging role of school social workers, empirical data revealed that they continuously face systemic barriers. One respondent noted:

"Teachers lack training to identify student struggles. I educate them, but systemic change is needed."

Another responded added:

"Parents overwhelmed by addiction or poverty often can`t engage. We work around it, but it limits our impact."

These quotes illustrate the fragmented nature in Slovakia`s support systems. Social workers operate often without these support systems. They compensate for gaps in teacher training often without institutional backing.

4.1.5 Navigators of external systems

The multifaceted roles of school social workers position them as critical navigators of external systems. They bridge gaps between schools and community resources such as mental health services, addiction counselling, and child protection agencies. However, data suggests that systemic inefficiencies, including bureaucratic delays, underfunding, and fragmented policies severely constrain their ability to secure timely support for vulnerable students.

One respondent, who had experience in referring students to external support, emphasized:

"I connect students to long-term therapy, financial aid, and crisis shelters. But even when I escalate cases, the waitlists are endless."

This quote indicates their role as gatekeepers to external resources. Similarly, respondent 2 described coordinating with addiction specialists for a student whose parents struggled with substance abuse:

"We arranged counselling, but the nearest clinic was 50 km away. The family couldn't afford transportation, so the child kept missing sessions."

These challenges pose serious threat to social workers` ability to intervene timely and effectively. Nevertheless, it also reveals the geographic and economic inequities entrenched in Slovakia`s support systems, forcing social workers to navigate rather than resolve structural gaps.

4.1.6 Systemic limitations: Bureaucracy and Underfunding

A social worker recalled child protection failures and expressed:

"We reported (a boy living with drug-addicted parents) many times, but nothing happened for months. He was still there, seeing blood on the floor from fights. The system prioritizes keeping families together, even when it`s unsafe."

This quote reveal policy-practice dissonance: Slovakia`s family preservation ethos often overrides child safety due to underfunding (e.g. lack of foster placement). Another respondent echoed this, criticizing "rigid policies" that delay timely interventions:

"Social services wait for 'proof' of harm, but by then, trauma is deep. We need preventive authority, not reactive checks."

These systemic challenges echo with street-level bureaucracy theory given by Michael Lipsky, where frontline workers (social workers) face tension between institutional rules and urgent client needs.

4.1.7 Consequences for students

Due to the presence of systemic challenges, compounded by underfunding, social workers find it difficult to intervene timely to ensure students` holistic well-being. These challenges lead to delays which have dire consequences for students. As one respondent shared:

"A girl with suicidal thoughts waited 6 months for a psychiatrist. By then, she`d dropped out. We lost her trust."

Cases like these shows how bureaucratic hurdles delays support and compound student vulnerability. It leads to erosion of trust on both schools and social services. Another respondent added:

"Teachers see us as powerless when systems ignore our referrals. It demoralizes everyone."

4.1.8 Parental engagement through empathy

One primary task of social workers in Ruzomberok is paving way for parental engagement. They do so by using non-judgemental, strength-based approach to engage, framing challenges as "*unmet needs*" rather than "*failures*." This practice aligns with global social work practices such as the U.S. family partnership model. One participant described reframing behavioural issues to avoid parental defensiveness:

"I told her, your child doesn't need more discipline, he needs more time with you, not screens. That way she didn't feel attacked. We focus on the child`s unmet emotional needs, not blaming the parents."

This quote demonstrates how social workers reframed the child`s behaviour as a need for parental connection rather than a disciplinary issue. This reflects strength-based practice in social work which focuses on identifying and building upon strengths and resources of families or individuals. The phrase "*unmet needs*" shift the focus from parental shortcomings to a shared goal of supporting the child, mirroring with strength-based principles that emphasize familial resistance (Saleebey, 2006). For instance, respondent 5 highlighted collaborative goal setting with parents:

"We ask what small changes could help your child feel safer? Instead of listing what`s wrong. Parents respond better when they are part of the solution."

Such techniques are very useful and culturally sound. Families offer help when social workers focus on the strengths of their families and what can they offer to help their children. Another social worker emphasized partnership and explained:

"We acknowledge parenting is hard. I say, 'we all make mistakes. Let's find what works for your family."

Despite using empathetic language for engagement, systemic and cultural hurdles persist. One respondent highlighted resistance from family's dependent on drugs:

"Parents overwhelmed by their own struggles (like alcoholism or poverty), can't prioritize their child. We work around it, but it's like building a house on sand."

Similarly, another respondent highlighted stigma around mental health:

"Some parents refuse counselling, fearing neighbours will label their child crazy. We slowly

educate them, but it take years to shift attitudes."

These hurdles show structural gaps in Slovakia`s support systems. For instance, one respondent critiqued the lack of parenting programs:

"We have no state-funded workshops to teach positive parenting. Everything falls on us to model empathy during crises."

On global comparison, social workers` empathy-driven approach aligns with the U.S. family partnership model and Scandinavia holistic welfare systems where they put families at the centre and consider them partners, ensuring holistic well-being of children. However, these frameworks might not be suitable for Slovakia. One respondent cautioned against importing western frameworks:

"Scandinavia model won't work here. Our parents survived communism by distrusting authorities. We build trust through small, consistent acts like home visits or helping them access food banks."

This quote emphasizes that Slovakia needs its own culturally specific models to provide holistic support to students` emotional and psychological well-being.

To summarize this theme, it sheds light on the diverse and complex role social worker play in Ruzomberok, Slovakia. School social workers act as frontline responders to students` needs and imply techniques like counselling and mediation to foster trust and address students` emotional and psychological needs. As counsellors and mediators, social workers start by offering individual support and collaborate across systems to tackle students` emotional and behavioural challenges. These techniques help students better manage anxiety, trauma, and stress.

Another major sub-theme is social workers` role as collaborators and advocates. They play a pivotal role by building trust between individual students, families, and external support. They assist in bridging different systems such as mental health services, child protection agencies and social services. Nevertheless, their work is hampered by bureaucratic procedures, hindering timely intervention and often delaying in student support systems. Another crucial role that school social workers play is that they approach family with respect. They engage families with empathy using non-blaming language to promote collaboration. In this context, this role follows social work practices in the United States where social worker takes families as partners and adopts strength-based practices.

Such social work practices can be observed in other countries such as the Scandinavian countries and the United Kingdom. In these countries, school social workers are expected to combine emotional support, advocacy, and family engagement. But the Slovak context present unique challenges such as familial stigma around mental health and limited systemic support. Their role ambiguity and unique challenges affect the impact of their work.

4.2 Challenges faced by School Social Workers in Ruzomberok

This theme demonstrates practical obstacles that social workers face while performing their duties to support student`s psychological and emotional health. These challenges take various forms such as resource constraints, systemic barriers and collaboration, socio-cultural and familial challenges, and evolving student needs and contextual factors. This theme is further elaborated in the following paragraphs.

4.2.1 Resource Constraints

Resource constraints emerged as a recurrent theme in empirical data, significantly hindering social workers ability to deliver proactive and effective interventions. These challenges manifest in various forms, including staffing and time shortage, and inadequate funding.

4.2.2 Staffing and Time Limitations

Lack of sufficient numbers of school social workers combined with time limitations, driven by performance-oriented educational system, limits their ability to offer individualized socio-emotional support to students and engage effectively with families and communities. Staff shortages and time constrain severely limit the core responsibility of social workers in Ruzomberok, Slovakia, marginalizing students' well-being in favour of academic outcomes. A social worker with 4 years' experience at a school and served about 500 students, highlighted the challenges of managing high caseload:

"The school system is heavily performance-driven, leaving little room to focus on listening to children and addressing their needs. I have over 50 students needing regular check-ins, but I am lucky to see each once a month."

This quote shows the consequences of staff shortage and time limitation on social workers` capacity to fulfil their role. The statement *'heavily performance-driven'* illustrate how systemic

priorities (standardized test scores) dominate the school agenda, undermining socio-emotional support. This finding confirms the study of Kelly (2010) on resource constraint, which states that understaffed schools often prioritize measurable academic outcomes over holistic well-being of students.

Many respondents put emphasis on systemic priorities reflects a broader structural issue in Slovakia`s education system, where historical underfunding and a post-communist focus on academic competitiveness limit investment in student welfare. Similarly, time limitations also limit student support and also risk escalating student challenges.

4.2.3 Reliance on Unstable Funding

The above issue is further compounded by unstable funding. In the context of Ruzomberok, unstable funding significantly undermines the ability of school social workers to provide support services. School social workers, in Ruzomberok, often rely on temporary EU-funded projects rather than permanent government budgets, leading to gaps in service delivery. One respondent highlighted this challenge:

"We can't plan long-term because our funding comes from the EU projects that last two years at most. Last year, we lost a multidisciplinary team member when the project ended, and now students have no access to that support."

This quote shows that reliance on short-term project funding leads to dis-continuity of multi-disciplinary teams. Lack of permanent funding negatively impacts the continuity and often the loss of a team member. The loss of team members due to funding shortages directly reduces the school`s capacity to provide holistic support, leaving social workers to stretch within limited resources. This issue was again repeated by a pair of respondents who observed that project-based funding creates uncertainty in staffing and program planning.

Broader systemic issues, described as "*fragmented*" and "*project-dependent*" is evident in schools of Ruzomberok, Slovakia. Similar challenges have been documented in other European countries. These challenges demonstrate that EU-funded projects often yield short-term gains but fail to establish sustainable infrastructure, leaving social workers and schools ill-equipped for long-term challenges.

4.2.4 Lack of Specialized tools

Another repetitive theme that emerged is that school social workers lack access to specialized training and resources to address complex issues such as intergenerational trauma or addiction dependency. Lack of access to resources combined with lack of training severely hinder school social workers` effectiveness. One respondent expressed this frustration:

"We don't have access to trauma-informed training or programs to support children from dysfunctional families. I am using basic counselling techniques, but they are not enough for cases like addiction in the family."

This frustration mirrors Bywaters et al. (2016) findings, which states that the lack of trauma-informed programs and mental health resources perpetuates cycles of neglect in child welfare systems. Another participant also stressed that they are ill-equipped to tackle severe cases due to the unavailability of specialized training. As a result, students with complex issues experience prolonged distress, with long-term implications for their emotional well-being and academic performance. The systemic "*block*" reflects broader barriers in Slovakia`s social service sector, where limited investment in specialized care forces social workers to rely on inadequate, one-size-fits all approaches.

To summarize this theme, resource limitation is a major obstacle that hinders school social work practices in schools of Ruzomberok. Empirical data suggests that reliance on project-based funding and over-emphasis on academic performance extend cycles of inequities, especially for students belonging to marginalized populations. Moreover, school social workers lack access to specialized tools neither have they had trainings to address complex issues of students. This frequently renders social workers inefficient. To address these challenges, Slovakia requires structural reforms such as hiring staff, allocation of permanent fund system, and building partnerships with mental health organizations to address students` needs.

4.3 Collaboration and Systemic Challenges

Empirical data shows that school social workers face enormous challenges when it comes to collaboration mainly due to exhausting bureaucratic procedures, fragmented teamwork and strict institutional structures. These obstacles hamper school social work practices to effectively navigate collaboration across different stakeholders. This theme directly addresses the research question on

the challenges faced by school social workers in doing their daily work.

4.3.1 Bureaucratic hurdles

In Ruzomberok, strict consent protocols continuously hinder school social workers ability to collaborate effectively with different stakeholders to ensure effective intervention. Such hurdles delay early intervention, compromising child protection. For instance, one participant observed:

'Schools need parental consent for intervention...even when a child is suffering (R4).'

This quote highlights how Ruzomberok's strict parental consent requirement prevent children from obtaining support. It leaves children with no choice but to live in a drug-dependent household. The same concern was repeated by another participant that '*paperwork often take weeks, delaying action*.' Such bureaucratic hurdles not only undermine child protection mandates but also restrict collaboration with teachers and external agencies.

This theme aligns with findings of Franklin and Streeter`s (1995) in the United States, which showed how rigid bureaucratic structures often prioritize procedural compliance over urgent child welfare needs. These hurdles, in Ruzomberok, make social workers less effective by limiting their ability to initiate early interventions or coordinate with varying stakeholders.

4.3.2 Fragmented teamwork

Coordination among varying stakeholders is vital for effective child protection services. However, in Ruzomberok, fragmented teamwork creates hurdles in social services. Lack of coordination among teachers, parents, and social workers leads to fragmented support system, undermining early and effective interventions.

One participant noted:

'*There is a lack of communication between teacher, parents and social services.... Teachers don't always share what they see in class...they think it's not their job.'*

Lack of information severely restricts social workers to offer support. It leaves social workers unaware of critical behavioural observations, delaying support for students. Similarly, another participant added, '*Parents don't want to talk about mental health; they see it as shameful*,' reflecting cultural stigma that restrict parental engagement.

This observation confirms Bronstein`s findings (2003) where social workers have no clear

guidelines to guide their interdisciplinary work. In her work, she advocates for a model that guides school social workers to navigate complex environment and collaborate to offer students emotional and psychological assistance. There is also a lack of interdisciplinary training which further leads to inefficiency and miscommunication between teachers, parents and social workers.

4.3.3 School System Rigidity

In Ruzomberok, Slovakia, education system prioritizes academic outcome neglecting socio-emotional well-being of students, marginalizing support structures for students. This strictness is also evident in other regional countries. School system rigidity often leads to misidentification of emotional trauma as behavioural issue, exacerbating academic disengagement. One participant noted:

'Standardized testing leaves little room for mental health needs.'

Similarly, another participant observed, '*The school only cares about grades...No one asks why a kid is acting out.'* These quotes illustrate how high-stake testing pressures teachers to focus on academic outcomes, marginalizing emotional support.

These findings reflect David Berliner`s analysis (2011), according to which students` grades and scores are of vital importance for teachers and administrators. In Ruzomberok, Slovakia, this rigidity limits social workers` ability to collaborate with teachers, who may lack training to recognize early mental health symptoms, and parents, who may not prioritize emotional well-being of children. As a result, untreated issues may intensify, increasing risks of dropout or mental health crises. Integrating mandatory health screenings into school protocols and allocating time for socio-emotional learning is essential to address this challenge.

4.4 Socio-Cultural and Familial Challenges

Another significant challenge that school social workers face during their daily practice is rooted in social and cultural structures. Students and families, in Ruzomberok, frequently shy away from accessing support due to cultural stigma and familial complexities. These challenges are deeply embedded in socio-cultural norms, economic insecurity, and intergenerational crises like poverty. As a result, student's emotional and academic well-being is negatively impacted by these challenges. These challenges further complicate the work of social workers in Slovakia to provide

tailored and equitable support to students.

4.4.1 Family Dysfunction

One of the main challenges that school social workers face in Ruzomberok is family dysfunction. Family dysfunction often emerges from parental challenges such as substance dependency, economic vulnerabilities, and unstable relationships. These challenges severely undermine school social workers to address their children`s emotional and psychological needs. One social worker explained:

'Parents struggling with addiction, financial struggles, and broken relationships...unresolved anger...can't prioritize their children (R2).'

Similarly, another participant noted:

'*Some parents are dealing with so much alcohol, debt, fighting...that they don't even show up for meetings about their kids.'*

These quotes reveal how family dysfunction could force children into assuming premature adult roles such as caring or managing households. One participant described about a student, '*basically raising her little brother'* due to unstable home conditions, highlighting emotional neglect and intergenerational trauma that perpetuate cycles of dysfunction.

This finding confirms Baker`s et al (2009) study on role reversals in families affected by substance misuse. In such a family, children often assume adult responsibilities which lead to emotional and developmental strain. Such instabilities severely undermine social workers` attempts, in Ruzomberok, to foster collaboration and intervene timely. Students coming from such families often exhibit behavioural issues and academic disengagement. To tackle this challenge, schools could introduce targeted family support programs with the help of government funding. These targeted supports could be in the form of addiction counselling or economic assistance in order to stabilize home environments and foster parental engagement.

4.4.2 Stigma around Mental Health

Like other regional countries, cultural stigma surrounding mental health in Ruzomberok discourages students and families from accessing support services, further intensifying emotional distress. One participant highlighted:

'*Families fear judgement.... they don't understand our role,'*

This quote shows how misconceptions about social workers` roles and fear of social judgement deter parental engagement and collaboration. Likewise, another participant observed:

'Parents don't want to talk about mental health. They see it as shameful.'

This excerpt reveals widespread tendency to view emotional trauma as a personal failing rather than clinically addressable issue. In Poland, mental health care faces similar cultural resistance as demonstrated by the study of Gajda and Gawlik (2018). Societal attitudes, in Ruzomberok, towards mental health severely limit social worker efforts to foster family cooperation. This often leads to escalated issues like school dropout or social exclusion. For instance, untreated anxiety may exhibit as behavioural problems, hence further alienating students from support. To address this challenge, schools in Ruzomberok should implement community awareness workshops and mental health awareness programs to normalize seeking help and clarify social workers` roles.

4.4.3 Social Inclusion Barriers in Student Support system

School social workers role is to create inclusive environments for students; however systemic barriers, cultural stigma, and resource-constraints hinder their efforts. These challenges restrict equitable access to educational and support systems, critically undermining social workers ability to integrate students from marginalized populations.

Cultural stigma surrounding mental health and lack of institutional support creates attitudinal resistance among families, discouraging them from engaging with social workers. Families shy away from accessing support due to fear of social censure and misconceptions. This significantly deters help-seeking, leaving social workers struggling to foster inclusive education.

Similarly, as mentioned earlier, one participant observed, '*Parents don't want to talk about mental health; they see it as shameful*,' another participant highlighted, '*A kid was struggling, but the family said it's just him being weak, not a real problem.*'

Like other regional countries, these quotes show cultural tendency to mislabel mental health issues as personal failings in Ruzomberok. It prevents student with anxiety or depression from seeking support. Such attitudes stem from a preference for self-reliance. One participant stated, '*families here don't trust outsiders, so getting them to work with us is hard.*' This distrust further complicates social workers ability to build collaborative structures, delaying interventions and exacerbating

student disengagement.

The presence of systemic hurdles such as strict school testing protocols that prioritize academic well-being further obstruct inclusive education. The issue is further complicated by temporary funding models for social work programs leading to untrained staff and lack of specialized resources. This leaves social workers to manage high caseloads with minimal support. This finding mirrors the UNESCO (2009) report on *Social Inclusion in Education*, which points to cultural and systemic barriers as key impediments to equitable education globally. These barriers manifest, in Ruzomberok, in families` reluctance to engage with support systems, confirming patterns observed in neighbouring countries like Poland where mental health stigma similarly delays care (Gajda & Gawlik, 2018).

These challenges have enormous impacts; it contributes to social exclusion, academic underachievement, and increased dropout risk for marginalized populations. To address this, Slovakia must initiate a reform agenda that promote inclusive education. In addition, community-based awareness campaigns, co-designed with schools and mental health experts, could normalize mental health support. Similarly, increased funding for school social work programs and policy changes prioritizing student well-being over academic grades would empower social workers to meet students` evolving and complex needs. Following Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, social workers can help build partnerships between schools, community organizations, and government agencies to foster a structured framework to dismantle cultural and systemic barriers, ensuring equitable access to education and support for all students.

4.4.4 Peer Dynamics and Social Exclusion

This study revealed that negative peer relationships pose significant challenges such as limiting social workers to foster inclusive environment that support students` emotional and academic well-being. Social hierarchies, bullying, and exclusionary behaviours create hostile learning environments, especially for marginalized students. These dynamics perpetuate cycles of social exclusion, leading to emotional trauma, academic underperformance, and increased dropout risk.

One participant highlighted, '*Negative peer norms...make students feel anxious or excluded*,' illustrating how peer interactions create isolation and insecurity. Similarly, another social worker noted, '*some kids get picked on because they are poor or different, and it makes them stop coming to school*.' another described, '*kids form groups, and if you are not in, you are out. It`s hard to help*

when they are so cruel to each other.'

These insights reveal how bullying, whether verbal taunts, social ostracism or targeted discrimination, isolates vulnerable students and exacerbate absenteeism and emotional withdrawal.

This finding mirrors finding of Olewus (1993), which link peer victimization to academic withdrawal and psychological harm, especially in under-privileged students. Negative peer norms, in Ruzomberok, also undermine social workers` efforts to integrate students and provide emotional and psychological support. This mirrors trends in neighbouring countries, where peer victimization among Roma communities correlates with high dropout rates (UNICEF, 2011).

To address this challenge, targeted interventions are required in order to disrupt cycles of exclusion. Similarly, school-wide anti-bullying campaigns could promote positive peer norms through structured activities and teacher training. Schools in Ruzomberok could also implement peer mentorship program to connect marginalized students with supportive classmates, while increased funding would enable social workers to intervene proactively in counselling and mediation.

4.4.5 Cyber bullying and Regulatory Gaps in School Social Work

Empirical data revealed that school social workers, in Ruzomberok, are facing the rising tide of cyber bullying, primarily fuelled by the widespread use of social networking sites like Instagram and TikTok. Cyber bullying, unlike traditional bullying, occurs online, often anonymously, via these networking sites and extends after-school hours. Social workers are facing enormous number of cases due to cyber bullying which further intensify psychological harm. One participant noted:

'*Social media pressures...schools don't know how to help*,'

This quote reveals lack of proper channels and legal frameworks to address this digital-era challenge. School social workers repeatedly highlighted lack of systemic support in this regard.

Another participant observed, '*Kids get mean messages online, and it follows them home. We can`t do much about it*,' while another social worker recalled, '*A girl was targeted on TikTok and she stopped coming to school. Parents didn't even know*'.

These observations highlight how relentless online harassment (through derogatory comments,

public shaming and viral videos) leads to anxiety, depression, and academic withdrawal among students.

This finding confirms Livingstone et al.`s (2016) study, *EU Kids Online*, which associate cyber bullying across Europe to increased absenteeism and suicidal ideation. School social workers, in Ruzomberok, are ill-equipped to intervene due to lack of legal regulations to criminalize cyber bullying, unlike countries like Germany, which have enforced targeted online harassment laws. This study found out that current school policies rely on anti-bullying measures, such as classroom discussions, which fail to address this delicate issue. Limited training on digital literacy plus inadequate resources severely constrains social workers, who struggle to monitor online activity or support victims effectively.

This study revealed a clear regulatory gap that reflect broader policy shortcomings, as noted in UNESCO`s (2017) *School Violence and Bullying: Global Status Report*, which acknowledges cyber bullying`s rise but offers few actionable strategies. Due to absence of clear legal frameworks, students in Ruzomberok face disproportionate online targeting. To address this challenge, legal frameworks must be enacted to criminalize cyber bullying, including provisions for anonymous harassment. Additionally, digital literacy boot camps should be implemented to educate students and parents about online safety, drawing on models like the *EU`s Safer Internet Programme*. Moreover, funds should be allocated for training social workers in cyber bullying intervention, leading to proactive responses such as counselling and mediation.

This study advocates building partnerships with tech platforms and community organizations in Ruzomberok, to create safer digital and physical environment, empowering social workers to tackle psychological and academic toll of cyber bullying.

4.4.6 Emotional and Professional Burnout

In Ruzomberok, emotional and professional burnout is driven by high caseloads and complex student needs. High caseloads arise due to insufficient number of school social workers in Slovakia. One respondent noted:

'*Flexibility, societal changes, evolving children`s needs...overwhelming number of clients*,'

This highlights the nature of complexity of students` needs in schools of Ruzomberok. Similarly, one social worker argued:

‘We *are stretched thin – too many kids, not enough time to help... ‘It`s exhausting dealing with kids` crises every day, especially when families don’t cooperate.’*

This quote illustrates increased number of cases involving emotional and psychological crises and insufficient number of social workers. This condition is further intensified when families are not willing to cooperate, literally shying away from taking help.

This finding aligns with Maslach and Leiter`s (1997) framework in *The Truth About Burnout,* which highlights high workloads and lack of institutional support as key drivers of professional exhaustion. Likewise, school social workers in Ruzomberok face enormous systemic barriers, including staff shortages, unstable funding, and inadequate supervision which further intensify emotional strain.

UNESCO`s (2017) *School Violence and Bullying: Global Status Report* emphasizes staff well-being as essential for inclusive education, yet Slovakia provides no structured support, such as wellness programs or peer supervision, for social workers.

The impacts of professional burnout are profound. It reduces social workers` effectiveness and intensifying inequities for students with urgent needs. To address this challenge, Slovakia must allocate sufficient funds to schools for staff hiring to reduce caseloads to manageable levels. To bolster resilience, mandatory wellness programs, including stress management training and regular debriefing sessions should be implemented. Additionally, establishing clear institutional protocols for crisis intervention could streamline workloads, enabling social workers to deliver consistent, high-quality support to students in schools of Ruzomberok.

4.4.7 Lack of Community Support Networks

Robust community networks are essential in collaboration for supporting at-risk students, however in Ruzomberok the lack of structured community support networks restrict school social workers` ability to address complex crises. One participant emphasized:

‘*Community support is vital...but parents are overwhelmed by their own problems,*’

This quote shows that families have their own problems to solve and usually don’t trust outsiders for support. Complicated families are overwhelmed by their own problems which hamper participation. Similarly, another social worker noted:

'*We try to get parents involved, but they are too caught up with their own struggles like poverty, drinking...some parents are dealing with so much ...alcohol...debt....that they don't even show up for meetings about their kids.*'

This quote draws attention to the prevalent conditions of families and shows how factors like addiction, economic instability, and cultural stigma deter families from engaging with school initiatives, such as counselling sessions or parent-teacher meetings. It leaves social workers to manage crises single-handedly.

This isolation aligns with Epstein`s (2011) framework on *School, Family, and Community Partnerhsips*, which emphasizes that collaborative networks enhance student outcomes by addressing holistic needs. Lack of partnerships, in Ruzomberok, with NGOs and mental health clinics render social workers to handle complex issues like trauma or familial challenge alone, thus increasing workloads and reducing intervention effectiveness. Cultural stigma and institutional distrust further deter families from participating, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage.

The consequences are profound: social workers face burnout from overburdened responsibilities, and students` unmet needs intensify into chronic issues like absenteeism or emotional distress. To address this, formal community partnerships must be established, host parenting workshops to reduce stigma and build trust. Similarly, creating community liaison roles to coordinate with NGOS and mental health clinics would facilitate resource sharing, while public awareness campaigns could highlight the benefits of collective support. By creating these networks, Slovakia can empower school social workers to deliver equitable support, ensuring at-risk youth thrive academically and emotionally.

4.5 Strategies to Enhance Effectiveness of School Social Work Practices in Ruzomberok

Based on the data collected, this theme revolves around identifying actionable strategies and practical steps to address challenges and amplify the impact of school social work practices in Ruzomberok. This theme and the sub-sequent sub-themes directly address research question to develop strategies/practices to effectively enhance school social work practices in Ruzomberok. This theme is further elaborated in the following section.

4.6 Resource Allocation and Sustainable Funding

Stable and sustainable funding is vital to enhance the effectiveness of school social workers in Ruzomberok to address structural gaps in program continuity, staffing, and culturally sensitive interventions. One respondent highlighted:

'Without steady money, we can`t plan long-term help for families with big problems like addiction.'

This quote shows the instability of reliance on temporary, project-based funding for social work. With temporary grants, school social workers face difficulties in planning long-term help for families with complicated issues. Another participant observed:

We lose programs when the grants run out, and the kids suffer the most,'*...too many kids, not enough time or help...The school wants us to do more, but there`s no budget for extra staff or training.*'

These insights illustrate how project-based funding disrupts multidisciplinary teams, limits training opportunities, and intensifies high caseloads, hampering social workers` ability to address complex issues like addiction, or family dysfunction.

Temporary, project-based funding perpetuates cycles of disadvantage and exclusion, as noted earlier on unstable funding (theme 2.2) and professional burnout (theme 3.6). For example, a multi-year effort of a social worker to support substance-dependent family may disrupt when temporary grants expire, ending counselling and eroding trust with families and leaving emotional needs unmet.

Such disruptions align with Kovacs et al.`s (2022) study, *Factors Influencing Dropout Rates in Hungary*, which identifies institutional embeddedness and sustained education funding as critical for reducing dropout rates among marginalized students. Temporary funding severely undermines long-term interventions and contributes to academic withdrawal and social exclusion, particularly for Roma communities and low-income communities.

To address this challenge, neighbouring countries offer suitable models for reform. School social workers also emphasized models of neighbouring countries with little modifications according to culture and context. The Czech Republic`s 2016 legislation institutionalizing state-funded school psychologist and social workers ensures permanent staffing, enabling consistent support for

students with complex needs. Likewise, Slovakia can enact a model after Poland`s "*Family 500+*" program. Primarily, it is a child subsidy but has indirectly stabilized school support systems by alleviating poverty, incentivizing families to engage with social services. Drawing on these examples and UNESCO`s (2009) *Social Inclusion in Education* framework, Slovakia should embed social work funding within national or municipal education budgets through legislative reforms.

In the words of a social worker, Slovakia should allocate a dedicated budget for school social work and prioritize staffing to reduce caseloads and training in trauma-informed practices. These initiatives could be tested in Ruzomberok with local governments partnering with schools to sustain multidisciplinary teams. Such measures would empower social workers to deliver holistic, equitable support and foster trust with families to break cycles of disadvantages.

4.6.1 Professional Development and Specialized Training

School social workers in Ruzomberok lack specialized training and with the skills to address evolving student needs. Targeted professional development and specialized training are, thus, vital to equip social workers and teachers with skills to address complex needs, such as addiction, trauma, and depression. One participant highlighted:

'*Teachers see a kids acting out and think it`s just bad behaviour, not trauma or something deeper,*'

This highlight that due to lack of specialized training, a staff may misidentify emotional distress as disciplinary issue. Similarly, another social worker noted:

'We are not trained to handle things like kids with parents on drugs. We just try our best...we need better training to work with Roma families, they don't trust us, and we don't know how to reach them.'

These quotes highlight a significant gap in staff readiness, especially for complex cases in under-served communities, intensifying challenges like burnout and cultural disconnection. Training deficiencies exacerbate student emotional distress and hinder social work effectiveness. For instance, a student exhibiting aggression due to domestic violence may face punishment rather than referral to counselling, escalating anxiety and risking dropout. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner`s (1979) ecological systems theory, which underscores the interdependence of individual, familial, and institutional factors in child development, necessitating systemic training

to address these layers. Research study by Weist et al. (2017) on *School Mental Health* further underscores that trauma-informed training enhances staff capacity to identify and manage distress, reducing misdiagnoses and fostering inclusive practices.

To bridge these gaps, Slovakia should adopt a modified version of the Czech Republic`s *National Action Plan for Inclusive Education* (2016), which allocate funds for regular training of educators and social workers to support complex student needs. This study emphasizes the need of a strategy that includes government-funded workshops, focusing on trauma-informed care, cultural competency, and emerging issues like cyber bullying. These workshops could be complemented by online training modules for flexibility. Likewise, awareness campaigns targeting parents could address intergenerational disadvantage, drawing on Epstein`s (2011) *School, Family, and Community Partnerships* framework to foster collaboration.

Integrating these programs into national education budgets, as mentioned earlier, would enhance sustainability. By investing in training as critically as in staffing, Slovakia can transform reactive disciplinary approaches into proactive, inclusive support systems, empowering social workers to mitigate distress and promote student well-being.

4.6.2 Strengthening Community and Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Collaboration among schools, families, communities, and interdisciplinary teams is necessary for enhancing school social work effectiveness, addressing fragmented support systems and overburdened social workers. As one participant noted:

'*If we had psychologists or community groups working with us, we could do so much more for kids in trouble*,'

This analysis of a school social worker, having extensive experience dealing with children, reveals transformative potential of integrated networks. Similarly, a social worker observed,

'There *is a lack of communication between teachers, parents and social services...we need help from outside, NGOs but there is no system to bring them in.'*

These insights demonstrate how isolated interventions, and limited family engagement, leave social workers ill-equipped to address socio-emotional crises such as bullying, family dysfunction, or mental health trauma.

Such dis-integration of different systems intensifies challenges like burnout and hampers interventions for critical issues like cyber bullying. For example, a student facing relentless online harassment requires not only classroom mediation but also family counselling (via social workers), and psychological support (via mental health expert), and community mentorship (via NGO). Without coordinated efforts, such cases escalate, risking academic disengagement or social exclusion. This aligns with Bronstein`s (2003) model for interdisciplinary collaboration, which emphasizes shared goals and formalized roles to navigate complex school environments.

To address these challenges, Slovakia should adapt modified version of Poland`s *Local Partnership programs*, which foster collaboration among municipalities, NGOs, and schools to support at-risk youth. Rooted in the insights of social workers, this study advocates for the adoption of a strategy that establishes integrated support hubs in Ruzomberok, co-managed by schools, NGOs, municipalities, and mental health clinics. These integrated hubs would then formalize roles for psychologists, special educators, and social workers to ensure coordinated interventions through regular case conferences and shared protocols. For example, a hub could streamline support for a bullied student by assigning a social worker for family engagement, a psychologist for therapy, and an NGO for after-school programs, reducing social worker caseloads. Separate funds allocation must be made for these hubs to build interdisciplinary skills. By fostering these partnerships, Slovakia can create a cohesive safety net, empowering social workers to deliver comprehensive, equitable support to students in crisis.

4.6.3 Family Engagement and Parental Support Programs

Effective family collaboration is central for enhancing school social work practices in Ruzomberok, Slovakia, yet parental resistance, social exclusion, and cultural stigma pose significant barriers. One social worker highlighted:

'Parents don't want to hear their kid needs help...it's likely they are ashamed or too stressed to deal with it.'

This quote highlights how barriers like cultural stigma and personal crises deter family collaboration. Another participant observed:

'*some parents are dealing with so much.....that they don't even show up for meetings about their kids*,'

Another social worker stressed:

'*if we could teach parents how to support their kids better, it`d make our job easier, but they don't trust us.*'

Familial resistance is common in Ruzomberok for many reasons, few among them is cultural stigma, substance dependency, and intergenerational trauma. These are systemic stressors that prevent parents from collaborating with social workers, further intensify challenges like fragmented support and burnout.

Social workers` use of non-confrontational, empathetic conversation to collaborate with family is an effective strategy, however hurdles undermine their efforts and lead to inconsistent outcomes. For example, a student struggling with trauma from parental addiction may receive only school-based counselling if parents disengage, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage and risking dropout. This aligns with *Murray Bowen`s (1978) Family Systems Theory*, which underscores understanding child`s challenges within the family context, necessitating interventions that address critical issues like trauma or poverty. Similarly, research by *Henderson* and *Mapp* (2002) in *A New Wave of Evidence* further underscores that structured parent engagement programs improve student academic and emotional outcomes by equipping families with supportive skills.

To address these barriers, Slovakia should enact a "*Parent Academy*", similar to that of the United States Parent University programs. Drawing from the United States model, this initiative can deliver structured, free workshops on positive parenting, conflict resolution, addiction awareness and child development.

These programs, if implemented, would empower parents to address children`s evolving needs or emotional distress. Community awareness campaigns could further reduce stigma, encouraging parental involvement in school decision-making for mutual accountability. By institutionalizing these support programs, Slovakia can transform fragmented efforts into a cohesive, family-oriented approach, enhancing social workers` capacity to foster student well-being.

4.6.4 Student-Centred and Culturally Adapted Interventions

To address the diverse and complex needs of students, student-oriented and culturally adaptive interventions are vital to overcome the limitations of standardized approaches. One participant observed:

"*We try to avoid words that make kids or parents defensive—it helps them talk about problems*,"

Reframing issues is a creative strategy, often employed by social workers. The above quote highlights reframing stigmatized terms like "bullying" to "broken relationship" to foster dialogue. Similarly, another social worker stated:

"*Some kids, especially Roma, don't open up unless you make it feel safe—like through games or drawing*.....w*hen we got the grandparents involved, the Roma kids started showing up more—it's about respect in their culture*." One social worker added, "*We need better training to work with Roma families—they don't trust us, and we don't know how to reach them*."

The above insights suggest that tailored language and methods, such as non-verbal activities (arts, sports, and mindfulness) and community engagement enhance student agency and build trust.

One-size-fits-all interventions often fail to engage marginalized students, particularly Roma youth,whose historical marginalization fosters skepticism toward formal institutions. For instance, a Roma student experiencing cyber bullying may withdraw if interventions ignore cultural norms, such as the respected role of grandparents, who can legitimize school programs and bridge trust gaps.

Such interventions align with Ladson-Billings' (1995) *culturally responsive pedagogy*, which emphasizes aligning interventions with students' cultural identities and community values to promote engagement. Research by Sandler et al. (2014) on *Arts-Based Interventions in Schools* further supports using creative activities like art and sports to bypass linguistic barriers and facilitate emotional expression, particularly for traumatized students.

To implement these strategies, Slovakia should establish a "*Student Voice and Culture*" program in Ružomberok schools, integrating culturally adapted interventions into social work practice. This program, funded through national education budgets, would include workshops for social workers and teachers, trained by cultural mediators and mental health experts, to develop skills in reframing language and designing expressive activities. By prioritizing student agency and cultural relevance, this program would empower social workers to foster trust, reduce distress, and enhance student well-being, creating inclusive school environments.

4.6.5 Policy Advocacy and Systemic Reforms

Policy advocacy and systemic reforms are crucial for addressing structural barriers that hamper

school social work practices in Ruzomberok, Slovakia. Barriers like rigid academic protocols, lack of legal frameworks, and temporary funding could be replaced by initiating structural reforms. As one participant critiqued Slovakia`s family preservation policies:

"*The rules focus on keeping families together, even when it's hurting the kid—we need laws that put the child first,*"

Similar observations were shared by another social worker,

"*We can't do much when the system ties our hands—courts take forever, and we don't have the power to act*,"

While another criticized prioritization on academic well-being as:

"*The school's all about grades and tests, but we need policies that let us focus on kids' mental health.*"

These quotes show how bureaucratic hurdles, lack of child-centric legal authority, and funding instability intensify challenges like professional burnout and limit interventions for digital-era issues like cyber bullying.

Existing policies prioritize family preservation and academic outcomes over student well-being. This aligns with Barth et al.'s (2005) findings in *Child Welfare Outcomes*, which advocate for child-centric legal frameworks that prioritize safety and well-being over family preservation in high-risk cases. UNESCO's (2009) *Social Inclusion in Education* framework further emphasizes integrating trauma-informed policies to support vulnerable students, complementing culturally responsive pedagogy.

To address these gaps, Slovakia should initiate legislative reforms to establish trauma-informed legal guidelines and child-centric policies. This study advocate for amending child protection laws and gave social workers and school authority to intervene in cases of abuse or addition. Additionally, reforms in curriculum must integrate socio-emotional learning (SEL) modules to prioritize student well-being over academic grades. By embedding these systemic changes, Slovakia can empower social workers to address students' holistic needs, fostering safe and inclusive school environments.

4.6.6 Technology and Innovative Approaches

Leveraging AI and digital technologies offers enormous potential to enhance school social work practices in Ružomberok, Slovakia, addressing contemporary challenges like cyber bullying, digital dependency, and inequitable resource access. Participant noted,

"*Cyber bullying doesn't stop when school ends—it's on their phones, and we need ways to catch it early*,"

It highlights the urgency of tech-driven interventions. Another social worker lamented,

"*Kids are online all the time, but we don't have tools to keep up with what they're facing there*," similarly a social worker having experience in leveraging technology observed, "*If we could use apps to report problems anonymously, kids might feel safer telling us what's going on.* "Another social workers added, "*I've had no training on things like depression or cyber bullying—it's overwhelming when you don't know what to do*."

This finding reveals the under-utilization of digital technologies to engage tech-savvy youth, monitor mental health and delivers services, intensifying challenges like cyber bullying and access inequities.

The absence of digital tools, today, leave social workers ill-equipped to address issues that occur beyond school walls, such as cyber bullying on social networking sites which can intensify student distress and disengagement.

This aligns with Selwyn's (2016) *Education and Technology*, which emphasizes digital tools for equitable access and early intervention in schools. UNESCO's (2017) *School Violence and Bullying* report further advocates for tech-based reporting systems to enhance student safety, complementing culturally responsive interventions.

To address this issue, Slovakia should adopt a "Digital Safeguard" model that integrates AI-driven tools and digital programs into social work practices. This would include: (1) an AI-powered risk detection app to monitor online platforms for cyber bullying indicators, alerting social workers for early intervention; (2) an anonymous reporting app, enabling students to report issues confidentially; (3) online counselling platforms to provide accessible mental health support, particularly for rural or marginalized students; and (4) quarterly digital literacy workshops for students and parents, co-hosted with NGOs, to promote responsible technology use. These

workshops, supported by training for social workers, could be modeled on Estonia's "*e-school*" system, which integrates digital tools and real-time data tracking.

Chapter 5 Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Key Findings

This study is about filling a critical gap to understand the practice of social work in Slovakia by investigating the roles, challenges they face, and developing practical strategies to enhance the effectiveness of school social work in Ruzomberok schools. This exploration is guided by three research questions: (1) the key roles and responsibilities of school social workers in supporting students' academic, social, and emotional well-being, (2) the challenges they face, and (3) practical strategies to enhance their effectiveness. Through thematic analysis, this exploration revealed the critical yet restrained role of school social workers in nurturing equitable education amidst systemic and cultural barriers. Based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, this research highlights how school social workers guide individual, institutional, and societal dynamics to support students' academic, social and emotional needs. This conclusion produces three main themes – roles and responsibilities, challenges they face, and actionable strategies – stressing their significance for academic knowledge, policy reform, and student outcomes in Slovakia's evolving educational landscape (Hepworth, Rooney, & Rooney, 2017).

School social workers in Ruzomberok play a critical role in fostering supportive educational environments, playing ambiguous yet multifaceted roles to address the academic, social, and emotional needs of students, thus fulfilling the research's first objective. As counsellors, they adapt strength-based interventions, such as mindfulness, art therapy, and sports to foster trust and alleviate trauma. One social worker explained using sports to reintegrate a withdrawn 13-year-old boy after his parent's separation into his peer group: "*He found confidence through team activities, which helped him reconnect*" (participant 4). These approaches align with global social work principles emphasising student agency (IFSW, 2018).

As collaborators and mediators, school social workers connect fragmented systems, coordinating with teachers and community organisations to support students` academic, social, and emotional well-being. For instance, one experienced social worker stated, "*I secured food aid for a family via a local charity, easing their financial strain*" (Participant 2). This mediation function of school social workers reflects Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, integrating micro-level student needs with meso-level school dynamics (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Moreover, school social workers for

systemic reforms, such as reduced academic stress, to prioritize holistic well-being over grades. These responsibilities strengthen student resilience and create inclusive school cultures, clarifying the research's objective to clarify school social workers' contributions to Slovakia's educational landscape.

The second objective of the study disclosed consequential challenges that curb school social workers` effectiveness. Financial constraints, driven by reliance on project-based EU projects, results in resource scarcity and job insecurity. One social worker responded to the lack of proper funds, "*We lose momentum when grants expire; planning becomes impossible*" (Participant 4). Staff shortages further aggravate burnout, with enormous numbers of cases overwhelming limited school social workers, a challenge common in under-resourced systems (Schroer, 2019).

Cultural stigma surrounding mental health is prevalent, isolating families and hampering interventions. One participant highlighted, "*Parents see emotional issues as shameful, so they avoid help"* (Participant 4). Bureaucratic obstacles, such as strict parental consent procedures, delay early support, especially in cases of abuse or addiction, exposing students to prolonged distress. Emerging challenges like cyberbullying, unaddressed due to policy gaps, disproportionately affect disadvantaged populations such as the Roma community. This study highlights a systemic misalignment between Slovakia's inclusive education aspirations and its resource-constrained reality, stressing the study's significance for informing policy reforms (European Commission, 2021).

The last research question analysed strategies to enhance school social workers` effectiveness, offering practical solutions to tackle identified challenges. The findings propose policy reforms, such as replacing temporary project-based funding with stable state budgets, to ensure consistent service delivery. One school social worker noted, "Permanent jobs would let us focus on students, not paperwork" (Participant 5). Institutional changes, encompassing trauma-informed training and multidisciplinary teams, can strengthen collaboration and shift schools toward supportive practices, as seen in Finland's comprehensive school support systems (OECD, 2020).

Culturally responsive strategies, such as engaging Roma communities or reframing "bullying" as "broken relationships" address stigma and foster inclusion. These solutions, grounded in local practices, offer a viable model for Slovakia's schools. The findings align with the EU's 2021-2027 education strategy, which prioritises equity and inclusion (European Commission, 2021). By

enhancing school social work practices, this research study contributes to academic literature and offers practical insights for policymakers, as intended in the beginning. Future research should uncover the long-term impact of funding reforms and culturally responsive interventions, ensuring sustained support for complex student needs.

5.2 Recommendations

This study identified systemic, socio-cultural, and institutional barriers to school social workers' effectiveness. Strategies are proposed to address challenges, aimed at empowering school social workers in Ruzomberok, enhancing student well-being, and aligning Slovakia's educational framework with global standards of inclusive practice.

5.2.1 Allocate Stable Funding and Staffing

The Ministry of Education should replace temporary EU-funded projects with state-allocated budgets to integrate school social work in the national education framework, as modelled by Finland's stable funding for school support services (OECD, 2020). This reflects one of the main findings where school social workers face job insecurities due to lack of proper funding. Likewise, the Ministry of Education should mandate a minimum school social worker-to-student ratio (e.g. 1:150) to reduce high caseloads and prevent emotional and professional burnout.

5.2.2 Reform Child Protection and Digital Policies

The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, should align child protection protocols with global social work standards to allow social workers to bypass parental consent in cases requiring urgent interventions such as abuse, as practised in Germany (Shroer, 2019). Participants reported strict laws preserving families as impediment for urgent intervention. Therefore, Schools should be mandated to adapt digital safeguarding policies to address cyberbullying, with the ministry developing national guidelines to fill policy gaps.

5.2.3 Strengthen Interdisciplinary and Technological Integration

Schools should partner with NGOs and formalise inter-disciplinary teams (teachers, social workers, psychologists) via binding school protocols and train staff in trauma-informed practices, drawing on Finland's collaborative school models (OECD, 2020. The Ministry of Education should fund trauma-informed training for staff. Additionally, the Ministry should commission an

AI-driven, anonymous reporting app for cyberbullying and mental health concerns, ensuring accessibility for students. These recommendations are consistent with the findings in the sense that respondents expressed the need for strengthening inter-disciplinary collaboration and technological integration.

5.2.4 Foster Community Engagement and Combat Stigma

Schools, in collaboration with local NGOs, should launch "Parent Academy" workshops to teach parenting skills and conflict resolution, and spread awareness to reduce mental health stigma. This is particularly significant in the context of Ruzomberok, where families shy away to access support due to fear of social judgement. The Ministry of Education should fund culturally responsive programs co-created with marginalised communities, such as the Roma, inspired by Germany's community engagement initiatives (Schroer, 2019).

5.2.5 Enhance Professional Development

Respondents repeatedly stated the necessity of investing funds to enhance professional development. Therefore, the Ministry of Education should mandate certifications in trauma-informed practices, addiction counselling, and cross-cultural competency, partnering with Slovak universities to offer annual training. A national school social worker association, supported by the Ministry, should be established to advocate for standardised roles and share best practices, aligning with global practices (IFSW, 2018).

These recommendations will empower school social workers in Ružomberok, fostering resilient, inclusive school environments and enhancing student well-being across Slovakia by addressing systemic barriers and promoting equitable education.

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Appendices





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App.1 Declaration of informed consent for fieldwork

Informed consent

The following is a presentation of how I will use the data collected in the interview.

In order to ensure that projects meet the ethical requirements for good research I promise to adhere to the following principles:

- Interviewees in the project will be given information about the purpose of the project.
- Interviewees have the right to decide whether they will participate in the project, even after the interview has been concluded.
- The collected data will be handled confidentially and will be kept in such a way that no unauthorized person can view or accessit.

The interview will be recorded as this makes it easier for me to document what is said during the interview and helps me in the continuing work with the project. In my analysis, some data may be changed so that no interviewee will be recognized. After finishing the project, the data will be destroyed. The data I collect will only be used in this project.

You have the right to decline answering any questions or terminate the interview without

giving an explanation.

You are welcome to contact me or my supervisor in case you have any questions (e-mail addresses below).

Student name & e-mail

Muhammad Idrees,

muidrees@stud.mruni.eu

Supervisor name & e-mail

Maria Joao Pena

Maria_Joao_pena@ iscte_iul.pt

Interviewee

App.2 Non-plagiarism declaration

(*To be submitted with the Master Thesis*)

submitted to the Erasmus Mundus Master's Programme in Social Work with Child and Youth:

- Has not been submitted to any other Institute/University/College
- Contains proper references and citations for other scholarly work
- Contains proper citation and references from my own prior scholarly work
- Has listed all citations in a list of references.

I am aware that violation of this code of conduct is regarded as an attempt to plagiarize and will result in a failing grade in the programme.

Date (dd/mm/yyyy):20/05/2025

Signature: 

.....

Name (in block letters): MUHAMMAD IDREES



Informed Consent Form for Participation in Research Interview

Research Title:

Application of the Ecological Model to School Social Work in Ruzomberok, Slovakia

Researcher:

Muhammad Idrees

Master's Student, Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Program in Social Work with Children and Youth (ESWOCHY)

Email: muidrees@stud.mruni.eu

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this research is to explore the practices, challenges, and experiences of school social workers in Slovakia, particularly in Ružomberok. The findings will contribute to understanding the role of school social work and will be used solely for academic purposes in the researcher's master's thesis.

Procedures:

You are invited to take part in an interview, which will last approximately 60–90 minutes. The interview will involve questions about your work, experiences, and professional perspectives. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded for transcription and analysis.

Voluntary Participation:

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may decline to answer any question or withdraw from the interview at any time without any negative consequences or the need to provide a reason.

Confidentiality:

Your identity and the name of your organization will be kept strictly confidential. All data will be

anonymized in the final report. The audio recordings and transcripts will be securely stored and will only be accessible to the researcher.

Risks and Benefits:

There are no known risks involved in participating in this study. While there is no direct benefit to you, your contribution will support academic research and potentially inform future social work practices in schools.

Consent for Audio Recording:

Please indicate your consent to have the interview audio recorded by checking the appropriate box below.

Participant Declaration:

I have read and understood the information provided above. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and received satisfactory answers. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

- I agree to participate in this interview.
- I agree to have this interview audio recorded.
- I do not agree to have this interview audio recorded.

Participant's Name: _____

Signature of Participant: _____

Date (dd/mm/yyyy):

Researcher's Signature:



Interviews Guideline for Oral Interviews – School Social Work Research

Hello, and thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. My name is Muhammad Idrees, and I am currently pursuing my master's degree as part of the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Program in Social Work with Children and Youth (ESWOCHY). This program brings together students from different countries to study social work in four different European countries. I am originally from Pakistan, and this semester I am studying in Slovakia.

As part of my master's thesis, I am conducting research on school social work in Slovakia, with a focus on understanding the roles, practices, challenges, and experiences of school social workers in Ružomberok. The working title of my thesis is:

"Application of the Ecological Model to School Social Work in Ruzomberok, Slovakia "

You have been selected for this interview because of your professional experience as a school social worker. I hope that you can contribute by sharing your valuable insights, experiences, and reflections related to your work.

This interview consists of several open-ended questions, and it may take around 1 to 1.5 hours. I may ask follow-up questions depending on your responses. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you are free to skip any question or stop the interview at any time, without giving a reason.

All information you provide will remain anonymous and confidential. Your name and the name of your school or organization will not be mentioned in the final research paper. The collected data will only be used for academic purposes as part of my master's thesis.

With your permission, I would like to audio record this interview to ensure that I accurately capture your responses. The recording will be securely stored and deleted after the research is completed.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview Date: (10/12/2024)

Participant agrees for the interview to be recorded: Yes

Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me something about yourself and your role as a school social worker?
2. What are your main duties as a school social worker in your school?
3. How do you perceive your role as a social worker in school?
4. How is social work integrated into daily activities and programs in your school?
5. Can you give examples of how you collaborate with teachers and other staff to support students?
6. How do you usually connect with students? Which methods help you the most?
7. Can you share a story where you helped a student in need?
8. How do you determine what a specific student needs when providing help?
9. How do you think friends influence students' behavior and engagement?
10. What do you do to involve parents or guardians? How do you build good relationships with them?
11. What challenges do you face in communicating or collaborating with families?
12. What are the biggest challenges you face as a school social worker?
13. How do problems in the school system affect your ability to support students?
14. How do community services help you support students?
15. Can you share a success story or positive outcome from your role?
16. How do you assess whether your support is making a difference in students' lives and academic outcomes?
17. What larger issues affect how social work is practiced in Slovakian schools?