

# Developmental Strategies in Hungarian School Psychology

NORA KATONA and IMRE SZITÓ

*Loránd Eötvös University, Hungary*

After World War II psychology as a science was banned from the Hungarian universities. It made its comeback in the early 1960s, and then mainly experimental psychology was taught. In the early 1980s the medical model of psychological services came to the forefront. Although it was very helpful in furthering psychological culture in its own time, the medical model of services became an obstacle in the way of promoting newer, social psychological and ecological viewpoints and putting them to use. The demand to modernize education makes it timely to deal with the question of school psychology. Society expects that as a result of improvements in the quality of work in educational institutions, the cultural disparity stemming from sociocultural disadvantages will be reduced. Moreover, it seems important, as well, to consider the individual cognitive style and learning rate of every school student. These challenges make the upgrading of psychological culture in schools an inevitable demand.

There is more than one alternative method of raising the level of psychological culture. Some of these alternatives are:

(a) Acquisition of a psychological attitude during the basic training in teachers' training colleges and during professional in-service training. This is an inevitable solution, but one which bears fruit only after a long period of time because, by and large, the social norms operating in schools inhibit the assertion of skills and knowledge acquired during training.

(b) Another alternative for improving psychological culture is to provide psychological services. For a smaller section of school-aged children this is currently provided by Child Guidance Centres, Child Psychiatric Centres

and Children's Clinics. A basic feature of this type of service is that it primarily tries to influence children's behaviour and personality development directly through therapy, while neglecting the development of the cognitive sphere. Among the child's social settings this type of service can at best reach only the family. The work of these Centres and Clinics is indispensable in solving those behaviour problems that stem mainly from deficient socialization within the family. A separate network of Vocational Guidance Clinics have been set up, as well. However, the direct mitigation of detrimental socializational effects arising from the organizational factors of the school fall far from their professional field.

---

Presented at the Twelfth Annual Colloquium of the ISPA, Ljubljana, Yugoslavia, August 1989.

Address reprint requests to Dr Imre Szitó, Loránd Eötvös University, Social and Educational Psychology Department, 1378 Budapest, VI, Izabella u. 46, POB 46, Budapest, Hungary.

*School Psychology International* (SAGE, London, Newbury Park and New Delhi), Vol. 11 (1990), 203–208.

(c) Yet another method of raising the level of psychological culture and of transmitting it, and which would suit the problems of school-life even more, is to have a school psychologist within the school.

From the beginning of the century, school psychologists working in Western countries had the basic function of identifying and selecting mentally handicapped children. In Hungary there is the long-standing tradition of a school system for the mentally handicapped, which evolved totally independently and separate from the schooling of normal children. In accordance with this, psychological services for them have developed independently of schools, as well. The identification and selection of handicapped children is done by committees which operate for this purpose, while screening for school-readiness is the task of professionals working at Child Guidance Centres. Mostly clinical psychologists work in both types of institutions.

As one can see, psychological services are fragmented according to the psychological dysfunctions of the child. The involvement of professional roles in such a manner may be prosperous to professional specialization, but is unfavourable in the light of solving the client's problems, because it strengthens segregation and makes integration into society harder to achieve. This very heavy burden of solving the problem of integration seems to be put on the shoulders of the school psychologists.

In Hungary, from the early 1970s onwards psychologists were employed by a few schools in a sporadic way. Generally, these isolated endeavours remained individual initiatives, as these psychologists did not develop a definite professional profile, were not backed by firm organizational connections and were not assisted by a comprehensive developmental concept.

An opportunity to test professional work on a wider scale was created on 1 September 1986, when 30 school psychologists started work. Twenty in elementary schools and 10 in different types of secondary schools. (In Hungary children attend elementary school between the ages of 6 and 14, while adolescents between the ages of 14 and 18 may go to basically three types of secondary schools: grammar, trade or a comprehensive, which is a combination of the

previous two.) The experimental work covered a two-year period and was initiated by the Department for Social and Educational Psychology of the Eötvös Loránd University, the Head of which is György Hunyady. The two-year experiment was partly financed by the Ministry for Cultural Affairs which guaranteed salaries for the school psychologists.

For purposes of the experiment, a school psychologist was defined as a person who has acquired a basic diploma as a psychologist (5 years of university studies), is employed by the principal of a school and works within the organization of the school as a psychologist. The school psychologist exerts professional autonomy by acting in accordance with the principles laid down in the Professional Code of Ethics for Psychologists. Co-operation between school psychologists and the aforementioned department ensured a professional and methodological background for the school psychologists' work and gave help in cases of professional ethical conflicts.

In formulating basic principles orientating the experimental work, the experiences of international school psychology were taken into account. The level of professional service systems prevailing in Hungary in the early 1980s was roughly the same as in most of the developed Western countries by the end of the 1950s. This system of services was widely criticized in the 1960s and during our work we made use of these viewpoints, as well.

Discontent was voiced in respect to traditional psychological services because it often couldn't give a graduated characterization of the child concerned. It only selected, classified and labelled the child. Recommendations indicating the child's strengths and weaknesses were lacking. Advice regarding the management of the child were missing, too. In contrast to the professional who concentrated on treatment and individual therapies, criticism found expression in the following demands:

- the professional should shorten the treatment time for each child,
- during the treatment of the child, the child's teacher should also be supplied with advice,
- the professional should try to recognize the problem of the child at an earlier stage and give help before the situation becomes severe (Bardon, 1982; Bardon and Bennett, 1974; Carr

and Kemmis, 1986; Catterall, 1982; Gutkin and Curtis, 1982; Johnson, 1979; Reinert, 1976; Schmuck 1982; Swanson and Watson, 1982).

On the basis of international experience and the knowledge of the situation prevailing in Hungary, the following basic principles were formulated and used by school psychologists.

(a) The emphasis is on prevention as opposed to treatment.

In professional work where prevention receives more emphasis, the function of the school psychologist is to recognize the emergence of learning and behaviour problems as early as possible. If the identification of problems takes place in good time, then corrective measures are realizable with less effort. On the other hand, there is a need for prediction for the purpose of cultivating outstanding ability.

(b) During the assessment of the child, the school psychologist tries to set up a diagnosis which contains both the strengths and the weaknesses of the child, and in the light of these, offers advice on what can be done within the institution. In other words, intervention should be coupled with diagnosis.

The differentiated diagnosis of problems and their early recognition make it possible for the child to receive adequate help within the school and as a result, admission to mental health institutions becomes necessary only in very critical cases. The more the learning problems and behaviour disorders of children can be eliminated within the school, the greater can the teachers' self-esteem grow, because the situation improves as a result of their own efforts. The most efficient way of helping within the organization is to couple diagnosis with intervention methods and plans. In this way, instead of labelling, development and help are stressed and move to the forefront.

(c) Beyond becoming acquainted with individual children and treating them on a one-to-one basis, the recognition of the dynamics of children's groups and school classes becomes important, as well as the development of psychologically grounded group training programmes.

Intervention programmes based on traditional psychological theories seek reasons for the child's problem behaviour in their personal

history or personality alone. In accordance with this viewpoint, psychologists emphasized dyadic therapeutic relationships. Recognition of the fact that a disadvantageous position in a school group can be a source of achievement and behaviour problems has come to the forefront. One alternative form of correction and of giving help is to try to influence and change the prevalent relationships and norms in child groups.

(d) In addition to direct psychological interventions with children, a consultative relationship with teachers has become more important, as well.

The goal of consultations with teachers is to increase the teachers' skills and knowledge and, as a result, the teacher is able to execute the desired corrective steps with children or child groups. Therefore, consultation with teachers is an indirect psychological service through which teachers become more skilled, more self-confident and more efficient in situations which the teacher had previously regarded as critical. At the same time, the possible transient failures will be instructive for the psychologist as well, with a view to future consultations. A consultative professional relationship of this nature does not become productive because the psychologist 'tells' the consultee what has to be done. It becomes productive because through the joint problem-solving process, both can develop new insights relating on how the educational situation can be influenced.

We may consider these ecological systems-orientated principles as long-term goals which serve to orientate us to our professional work. We were and are well aware that we shall have to face many obstacles in the practical realization of this viewpoint in a school system which cannot really be deemed as up to date, characterized by monolithic ideology and which is determined by a single, centrally prescribed curriculum.

Another factor that makes our work difficult is the fact that in Hungary no other profession has established itself as an integral part of the school, its organization and staff. School psychologists were the first to do so. The teachers are on their guard against the intruder 'trespassing' on their territory, which up till now had been exclusively theirs. They

were apprehensive of the psychologists, their defences were up.

With 3 years of work behind us we can summarize our experiences as follows:

After 2 years of experimental work the 30 job openings for school psychologists increased to 44. The 14 new job openings were initiated by the schools themselves and the financial background for these were created by them as well. This increase in number in itself shows how favourably it was received and that there is a genuine need for school psychological work.

Reports written by the principals of the schools and the psychologists working in schools showed that there is a demand for prevention mainly in the following areas: early screening of learning-disabled students, identification of adolescents with learning problems, assessment of children at risk of emotional disturbances, the recognition of the lack of friendship ties in adolescents, the recognition of being at risk of drug-addiction and severe parent-child conflicts in the case of adolescents. There was a general demand for the psychologist to investigate problems concerning the choice of a vocation in the case of children 12 years and older. The early identification of the gifted was called for only in two or three schools. Usually secondary schools were interested in this.

One of the professional problems in connection with prevention is the motivation of child and parent towards change. As opposed to the case where the child has neurotic symptoms, in most instances neither the child nor the parent is intrinsically motivated enough to accept help from a professional. Moreover, the early identification of problems may go hand-in-hand with negative or positive labelling, and this may make it a self-fulfilling prophecy which justifies prevention.

\* \* \*

We managed to realize intervention linked to diagnosis in the case of learning-disabled elementary-school children, adolescents with learning problems and in the case of certain groups of emotionally disturbed children. Linking an intervention to the diagnostic procedure was easy, and was successfully attained when the school psychologist had a semi-finished

technology for identification and intervention available. In this case, the task of the school psychologist was to adapt the 'know-how' already used successfully elsewhere, to present given conditions. It was problematic from the viewpoint of the evolvement of the professional role, that the school psychologist by and large used the same diagnostic tools as the clinician, who — on the basis of using the same tools — finds intrapsychic reasons which explain the child's behaviour problems. A diagnosis based on psychodynamic principles can be linked to an intervention of the same viewpoint, which does not take the wider social context into account as an influencing factor. The training of social skills and the clarification of personal and social values is more attainable and important from the aspect of prevention than looking for personal happiness by therapies building on insights.

Often group assessments concerning whole classes (sociometry, attention and creativity tests, attitude scales, assessments for vocational guidance) were important, even if the professional only used them for the sake of giving appropriate feedbacks of their results. The knowledge of the results of such assessments loosened the one-dimensional classroom structure determined by academic achievements. As a result many types of rank-orders became obvious within the class and this helped the students to enrich their self-concept and in this way helped to question the validity of stereotypes voiced by peers or teachers.

\* \* \*

Individual and group interventions equally played a role in the school psychologists' work. The ratio of individual interventions were often larger than that of group interventions. One of the reasons for this is that clinical psychology with its traditions give a model for individual interventions, furthermore the professional who deviates from these traditions of individual therapy has to shoulder larger conflicts. If they wished, students were able to participate in guidance and training groups only in their free time, so the disintegration of a group is a conspicuous failure whereas success is not directly appreciated by the school. If and when group training did result in success,

many of the teachers working with large classes tended to attribute this success to the relatively smaller number of students in the training group and argued that the school psychologist is in a unilaterally advantageous position to work with only a few students at a time. The teachers themselves voiced the opinion that they could do the same if given small groups and adequate salaries.

When conducting individual sessions, school psychologists mostly did important diagnostic work, or gave emotional first aid to children in a family-school crisis situation. A common characteristic of individual sessions was that they were time-limited and often few in numbers. Of course there is no need to prove that a more personal relationship is in accord with the role of a psychologist and can be best fulfilled in a dyadic relationship.

As has been mentioned above, school psychologists applied group guidance and training methods in a wide sphere, such as: cases of elementary-school children with learning disabilities and emotional disturbances; cases of adolescents' vocational guidance; and helping to solve learning problems. Over and above these, one colleague in an elementary school led a creativity training group for 11-year-olds for a year, another held music therapy sessions, and in two other schools whole classes participated in a drug-addiction prevention programme launched by the psychologists working there. Others initiated sex-education classes for adolescents. Many of the psychologists led vocational guidance groups otherwise structured and orientated towards skills training with the aim of heightening the self-knowledge of the students; while still others used relaxation techniques in combination with others.

Three colleagues taught optional classes on psychology for a term for groups of eight to ten children, and these classes combined theoretical knowledge with tasks aiming to improve the knowledge of self and of others. Whereas the groups mentioned first are more adequate for the 'pure' psychological role, the teaching of optional psychology classes means a compromise between the role of teacher and psychologist.

After the third year a growing number of school psychologists feel they should undertake

to teach psychology as an optional subject. This tendency helps to reduce two types of tension. First, it reduces conflict between the roles of the teacher and the psychologist (the psychologist's actions are perceived as free, unsupervised, working with individual children, or small groups, and not tied to a rigid plan). On the other hand, this reduces the tension between the desired role of school psychologist and the role of a clinical psychologist ascribed by the adolescents. Adolescents usually suppose that during sessions the psychologist will regard them as ill, not normal, stupid, etc., so they automatically defend their private self-concept. The school psychologist must overcome these projected obstacles in order to convince students into believing that the psychologist regards them as healthy human beings, irrespective of the fact that they are participating in therapeutic sessions.

\* \* \*

Consultation with teachers either took the form of giving feedback to the form head on the results of the assessments or, if the psychologist observed the class, then the observations were jointly interpreted. It was the view of many teachers that they can teach without tension in the presence of a school psychologist who does not carry the power of a school superintendent or principal. Beginning teachers, who were more open-minded and less well-defined in their professional role, more frequently partnered the psychologists in consultation than did the more experienced teachers. Experienced and self-confident teachers were resentful of psychologists in their classes, questioned their competence in educational matters, the need for their work and the efficiency of it. On the basis of the traditional, direct-service model, teachers wanted school psychologists to deal with the children only. Also, these teachers formulated a belief system in which their causal attributions explained learning and behaviour problems solely on the basis of the child's abilities, efforts and personality traits. School psychologists may receive more trust from teachers if they teach a subject in a circumscribed time, and apply methods in the optional psychology programmes which can be used and taken over by teachers. In such

cases psychologists can generate models without insistence on consultation.

Next in line after the aforementioned dynamics of the evolution of teachers' belief systems, parents may become the cause of the child's learning and behaviour problems. Perhaps that is why school psychologists were holding consultation sessions with a growing number of parents on an individual or group basis by the end of the experimental period. Naturally, the number of parents seeking a consultative relationship with the psychologist was boosted by the fact that these parents were more motivated and had more methods to influence their children than the teacher.

In three schools, the teachers and the school psychologist jointly undertook to hold case-study groups led by the psychologist and to take part in social skills training.

Teachers who were self-confident, creative, tested new educational methods and who took advice from other professionals also sought consultation with the school psychologist because this was one way to widen the information base for their work and meant a guarantee of success. These were the teachers who wanted evaluative research to be done in connection with the effectiveness of their work and who regarded consultation as a mutual exchange of information. The behaviour of these teachers suggests that a widespread need for consultation will emerge within an educational system in which a teacher can choose between ideologies, curricula and methods, and may become an active colleague in problem-solving within action research where creative work can be achieved.

\* \* \*

In order to maintain and improve their professional identity, school psychologists must consult with each other. During the early stages of building a network, the School Psychology Methodological Base established the Department for Social and Educational Psychology at the Eötvös Loránd University, which assists school psychologists in their pro-

fessional work in many ways. It provides opportunities for professional consultation, protects interests, organizes in-service training, motivates research and developmental work, it gathers information of field investigations, edits different publications and, last but not least, has the function of maintaining international contacts.

After school psychology has become a stable part of the Hungarian educational system, the purpose of all these efforts is to gain strength and to assist the renewal of the schooling system in Hungary.

## References

- Bardon, J.I. (1982) 'The role and Function of the School Psychologist', in Reynolds and Gutkin (eds) *The Handbook of School Psychology*, pp. 2-23. New York: Wiley.
- Bardon, J.I. and Bennett, V.V. (1974) *School Psychology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Carr, W. and Kemmis, S. (1986) *Becoming Critical*. London: The Falmer Press.
- Catterall, C.D. (1982) 'International School Psychology: Problems and Promises', in Reynolds and Gutkin (eds) *The Handbook of School Psychology*, pp. 1103-27. New York: Wiley.
- Gutkin, T.B. and Curtis, M.J. (1982) 'School-based Consultation: Theory and Techniques', in Reynolds and Gutkin (eds) *The Handbook of School Psychology*, pp. 796-820. New York: Wiley.
- Johnson, D.W. (1979) *Educational Psychology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Reinhert, H.R. (1976) *Children in Conflict*. St Louis: Mosby.
- Schmuck, R.A. (1982) 'Organization Development in the Schools', in Reynolds and Gutkin (eds) *The Handbook of School Psychology*, pp. 829-57. New York: Wiley.
- Swanson, H.L. and Watson, D.K. (1982) *Educational and Psychological Assessment of Exceptional Children*. St Louis: Mosby.