

Function and position of the Research Institute of Child Psychology and Pathopsychology in research and care-taking for children

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Summary

The overview of the Research Institute of Child Psychology and Pathopsychology, its activities in the field of the psychological research as well as in care taking of children is presented. The brief history and the actual structure of the Institute is presented. The topics of current research projects, especially grants projects and their results are described (integration of handicapped children, gifted children, prevention of social pathology). The facilities of the Institute are presented (Child Centre, Centre of Educational and Psychological Prevention) where the children with special educational needs are treated. At the end, international cooperation and connections of the Institute are mentioned.

Key words: Research Institute of Child Psychology and Pathopsychology, research projects and results, counselling facilities

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A brief history of VÚDPaP

The Research Institute of Child Psychology and Pathopsychology – the abbreviation is VÚDPaP (Výskumný Ústav Detskej Psychológie a Patopsychológie) – is one of 16 institutions conducted by the Ministry of education of the Slovak Republic. The aim of all these institutions is to help the Ministry in improving the educational policy. VÚDPaP is taking a unique place among them because of its emphasis of both psychology and research, a unique phenomenon.

VÚDPaP was established by the resolution of the Slovak National Parliament from November 26 in 1963. This resolution took force on January 1st, 1964. The idea to establish a working place that would deal with psychological research of children was implanted by the University lecturer Miroslav T. Bažány who became the first director. This idea arose from the need of possessing research gained knowledge on child personality development which could be brought into the practice at this time arising a net of psychological educational clinics (later Educational Psychological Counselling Centre). VÚDPaP had this competency for the whole territory of former Czechoslovakia until the end of 1992.

The main topics after the first statute were the following:

- research of creation of child mentality and research of social determination of this process, research of mental development of disabled children and of children with learning and behavior disorders;
- elaboration of basic theoretical issues of psychological educational care for children and youth, professional management of the Psychological educational clinic in Bratislava;
- gathering scientific information from the area of child psychology, pathopsychology and social pathology;
- development, verification and standardization of psycho-diagnostic instruments (Therefore, an independent institution has later been established – *Psycho-diagnostic and didactic tests*, today *Psycho-diagnostics*, whose competency covered the whole eastern Europe before 1989).

At the beginning, VÚDPaP had 25 workers and this number increased to 57 five years later. In 1989, there were 74 people and in 1992, even 85. As a result of general shortage of public money (VÚDPaP is paid from the state budget) there was a strong reduction in 1993 (35 %) and in 1999 (10 %). At present, there are 48 workers at the institute.

In 1989, before the “Velvet Revolution”, the representatives of the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Socialist Republic decided to cancel the Research Institute of Child Psychology and Pathopsychology even in spite of the scientific community and professional authorities. Their opinion was that psychology should contribute more to the improvement of socialist pedagogy, so they merged VÚDPaP with Pedagogical Institute and subordinated it under the management of this institution. Such a situation lasted one year. On July 1, 1990 the Minister of Education of the Slovak Republic rebuilt the former independence of both institutes.

The former structure of VÚDPaP included the following organizational units: department of developmental psychology, department of social development of the child, department

of pathopsychology, and the center of the scientific information with the library. Since 1966, VÚDPaP has continuously published *Child Psychology and Pathopsychology* which is at present the only professional psychological journal in slovak language. The journal is edited quarterly and contains English abstracts. It is intended for all professionals who work with the young generation in the education sector, health sector, and labour, family and social affairs sector. The journal is simultaneously a study material for students of psychology and special education.

VÚDPaP at present

The actual structure of VÚDPaP is not as invariable as the former one. It consists of two stable departments – *Child Centre* and *Centre of Educational and Psychological Prevention* and of several *variable teams*, the staff and a number of others which depend on the nature and number of research projects (there are also *Economical department* and *Information – Editing Centre* with the library which are supportive units).

To illustrate the general functioning of VÚDPaP at present we can use the axis of ordinates. The *horizontal line* represents the topics of problem areas which we are interested in. The choice of these topics is usually determined by three resources: 1. the current demands of educational practice, 2. the knowledge level of psychological science, 3. the invention of research workers. The key areas of the researches are:

1. *The Mental Development of healthy (“normal”) children*. Approaches of developmental and educational psychology are mostly applied, and influences of various forms of educational impact on child personality are studied. The most important topics are development in the preschool age, issue of gifted children, development of creativity, and coping with stress situations.
2. *Specifications of Mental Development of Disabled Children*. The leading discipline here is pathopsychology. Mostly, the issues of school and social integration, problems of communication and creativity of disabled children are studied as well as coping strategies of children and their preparation for vocation choice.
3. *Issues of Social Development of Children and Youth*. Approaches of social psychology play a primary role here. The research-project is focused on development of positive social characteristics of children (altruism, empathy, prosocial behavior) and on prevention of negative ones (behavior disorders, delinquency, criminality, drug abuse).
4. Exceptional place among the activities of VÚDPaP is given to *Coordination of the system of Counselling Facilities*. This activity encompasses providing methodical, coordinative and supervisory services for Educational psychological Counselling Centres and Centres of Educational and Psychological Prevention.

The vertical line represents the mode or the level of approaching the topics mentioned above. Most of them are worked out on the level of *basic research* which is on the top of the vertical line. The results contribute to the scientific knowledge and to the formulation of psychological theories. Some of the problem areas are worked out on the lower level of *applied researches*. These mostly reflect the demands of educational practice. The results serve as proposals for children care improvement, as expertise for the Ministry of Education and are often worked out into curricula (for handicapped children, for gifted children, for ethnic

minority children). On the bottom of the vertical line there are particular practical activities and care for handicapped children, children with behavior disorders, children at risk and their families.

The topics of gifted children, of handicapped children (and their integration), and prevention from social pathology are worked out on all three levels of the vertical line. This approach gives the opportunity to master the topic in a more valid and effective way (Páleník, 1999).

Current grant research projects

Since 1991, VÚDPaP has been included in the grant system of the Ministry of Education and of the Slovak Academy of Sciences which is administered through the Scientific Grant Agency. The Scientific Grant Agency represents a joint competition system (coordinated evaluation and preference of the scientific projects) for the provision of grants which are financed from the state budget for science and technology. Until 1999, VÚDPaP worked out 20 projects and at present it is working out 5 new projects approved by Scientific Grant Agency. From this point of view, VÚDPaP is one of the most successful psychological institutes.

Some basic research results from grant projects

Integration of Handicapped Children

Integration of disabled children at basic schools is, at the beginning of the third millennium, a regular practice in the Slovak Republic. It is true, that it suffers all child diseases that result from the current political and economic situation.

In the second half of the 1990's, interest in the issue of integration significantly decreased. In practice, this fact manifests itself as decline of direct integration of disabled children into regular classes and as increase of the number of special classes in regular schools. Highlighted are rather economic, legislative and organizational problems than professional psychological and pedagogical ones.

Within the project, several challenging data were obtained from experimental and research evaluation of the integration process (Učeň, 2001). The obtained data primarily indicate the increase of positive evaluation of integration in the involved population. The uninvolved public more positively evaluated differentiated education of intact and handicapped child population, which is in a sharp contrast with attitudes of the professional public – teachers.

For pupils of basic schools we found radically negative attitudes toward handicapped children; they judge them as extremely unsuccessful, slow, obtuse and weak.

From research results it is apparent that the level of self-evaluation of school successfulness and personal evaluation of adaptation of changing conditions in the class is almost identical for disabled and „normal“ children. However, in other data significant differences were found in the individual and sociometric status, which was higher in healthy children, but almost not statistically significant differences were found in the area of negative evaluation.

So the positive aspect is that on the level of personal and social adjustment, no differences were noticed between handicapped and healthy children, which could be a precondition for favorable social development of integrated disabled children.

Interaction of disabled and intact children of preschool age was researched, too, in the integrated collective. A possibility to increase frequency of interaction by cooperative tasks was not confirmed. The research continues by examination of factors that not only influence the frequency but also the quality of interaction.

Integration of hearing impaired children was elaborated as one of the partial topics.

Intellectual abilities of all children in the samples were in the range of higher average or above standard. However, in the structure of intellect significant differences were found. Discrepancy of verbal and performance component was typical both in the group of integrated and nonintegrated children. However, integrated children achieved higher verbal score. Better verbal ability of integrated hearing impaired children manifested itself by greater endeavor to make understand oneself with hearing children, by larger vocabulary, higher level of term thinking, and a very good writing demonstration. From other positives of integration to be mentioned is the fact that integrated children were more flexible and more inventive. While preferences for material values prevailed in children of special schools, manifestations of empathy and prosocial behavior were noticed in integrated children.

Gifted Children Educated in Special Classes

The research-project focused mostly on finding out of social, emotional, cognitive and physical indicators of gifted children educated in classes and schools for gifted children. The results are interpreted on the basis of comparison with children from regular schools (Laznibatová & Mačišáková, 2000).

The general findings:

- a) Social development – in comparison with the control group, gifted children are more introvert and have bigger problems in committing themselves to others. They do not seek their ideals among schoolmates, do not have a temptation to imitate others; they want to be themselves, who affirms their identity. They rely on their own abilities and knowledge. Social relationships among gifted children are poorer and not so tightly linked as in children from the control group. They are not interested in how others perceive them.
- b) Emotional development – gifted children reason and solve problems generally more rationally, they are more direct in behavior. They do not like entering into conflicts, do not like quarrelling, but are often actors of topic conflicts. They show lower emotional balance and higher measure of sensitiveness. They are more self-centered and less anxious.
- c) Cognitive development – in comparison with the control group, gifted children have better results in more memory parameters (fewer repetitions, longer tenacity, learn more quickly). They are more creative in verbal abilities and show a bigger vocabulary. They have a tendency for original, atypical verbal expressions.

- d) Physical indicators – contrary to the control group, gifted boys have lower weight and height; gifted girls have better physical development (bigger weight, height, and width of shoulders).

Variously Gifted Children

The research focused on the following areas:

- a) The structure of sports giftedness. The significance of creativity, motivation and of assertiveness for sports performances was confirmed. Creativity and sense for humor appeared as factors beneficial to cope with mental distress of young football players and university students, too.
- b) Possibilities of identification of some types of talents. Completed and verified were selective batteries for sports schools, dance conservatory and language classes (Dočkal & Farkašová, 1996).
- d) Psychological factors of education in language classes. The research showed significance of nonverbal intelligence and coping strategies for school success in these classes, and extended teaching does not distress gifted pupils. If certain conditions are kept, it is then possible to start teaching of foreign language already in the 1st grade of elementary school.
- e) Educational process in special classes for gifted children. A positive influence of these classes on the development of performance aspects of giftedness appears here. However, problems were found concerning the emotional and social development of pupils. Therefore, attention was drawn to creation of an intervention program for the development of prosociality of gifted children.
- f) Influence of vacation activities on giftedness and creativity. Apparent was a positive influence of summer camps on gifted and handicapped children and their parents to optimize the level of anxiety, development of creativity and formation of motivation and sociability of those who participated.
- g) Family background and mental development of intellectually and physically gifted children. For a positive development of the child's giftedness, mostly education of its parents, the complete family and cooperation of both parents in education is significant; at preschool age it is a long attendance of kindergarten. While intellectual talent is optimally developed mostly in first-born children, exceptional physical giftedness is more often formed in younger siblings.
- h) Development of creativity. It was shown that while the level of divergent thinking decreases with age, creativity as a personality dimension increases and is positively influenced by experience, education and special training. Again, the effectiveness of development of creativity by goal-oriented programs was confirmed in the regular population, for generally and sport gifted children and for adults, too.
- i) Development of talent and creativity of disabled children. Giftedness and disability are independent phenomena, therefore it is meaningful to consider talents of handicapped individuals, too. We elaborate the issue theoretically; work with several clients of VÚDPaP's Child Center has started. The case-elaborated results indicate positive influence of thus focused interventions on personality development and quality of life of disabled children.

Prevention of Social-Pathological Phenomena

The project is based on the comparison of the experimental group (boys with behavioral disorders) and the control group. The general results are as follows: the boys with behavioral disorders presented lower level of anxiety and a decreased level of externality. On the other hand, in their personality structure a higher rate of aggressiveness and hostility has been observed. They also presented a lower rate of self-esteem and not significantly lower level of prosocial tendencies. The boys perceived their fathers as less kind and less tolerant.

After having passed the group counselling program, the boys changed their aggressiveness to more acceptable forms, the level of anxiety decreased and prosocial tendencies (egalitarianism, altruism) strengthened. The still remaining negative self-esteem which is established on the basis of the feedback information from others is probably a more resistant part of the personality structure.

Coordination of the system of counselling facilities

There is a range of guidance and counselling services provided in specialized centers with regional or district competency. In some of them, where the psychological approaches are mostly applied, VÚDPaP (after its statute) plays a crucial coordinating role. These are, as it was said above, Educational Psychological Counselling Centers and Centers of Educational and Psychological Prevention.

After 1989, a number of changes both in the goals and in the organization of educational and psychological counselling have taken place. The focus of services provided by counsellors has shifted towards the currently and prospectively endangering spheres of personality and social development of children and youth, yet without any significant reduction of the problems in which counselling had engaged before. Counselling has been extended to the care for handicapped children, especially in connection with the requirement for social integration of these children into normal schools. The counselling of children and youth with increasing negative phenomena in behavior began to emphasize work with the family and with the broader social environment of the child. Thus, beside long-term existing Educational Psychological Counselling Centers, the new counselling facilities started to be established – Centers of Educational and Psychological Prevention. The first one which serves as a model and plays the coordinating role in relation to the others, is an integral part of VÚDPaP and will be discussed below.

The *Educational Psychological Counselling Centers* fulfil demands for psychological diagnostics, educational and psychological child care and the demands for counselling concerning education and personal development. The aims of professional intervention realized in Educational Psychological Counselling Centers are the following:

- To carry out psychological examination and psychological diagnostics,
- To identify the causes of children's problems in their personality, educational, social and vocational development,
- To assist in personality and social development of children,
- To participate in the solution of educational problems,

- To provide reeducational and psychological care,
- To provide consultation to children, to their legal guardians and to pedagogues,
- To work out information about psychological examination and data as proposals for decision about integration of the handicapped child or transferring it to a special school,
- To participate in working out vocational and study information and to provide it (along with information on the labour market) to pupils, their legal guardians and educational counsellors at schools,
- To give professional and methodical help for educational counsellors at schools and school psychologists, and (at request) also for school special pedagogues and other authorities.

In the frame of professional activities (methodical, coordinative and supervisory services) VÚDPaP also provides the counsellors from Educational Pedagogical Counselling Centers periodical trainings of socio-psychological skills, trainings in communication skills and trainings in educational skills focused on the work with the children with disorders and the children at risk. All this is made in order to improve the proficiency of the counsellors.

The annual reports made to inform about the functioning of Counselling facilities in particular regions and districts make sure that the existence of Educational Psychological Counselling Centers in the sector of Ministry of Education is inevitable (Kopčanová, 2001).

Center of Educational and Psychological Prevention

The *Center of Educational and Psychological Prevention* represents the institution which provides the complex prevention from social pathology (including drug abuse prevention). The actual process of establishment of these counselling facilities is seen as a logical result of the following.

A significant feature of the present society is occurrence and spread of social-pathological phenomena, starting from small problems in behavior and more serious torts up to delinquency, criminality or drug addiction. They have destructive effects, they intervene in individuals' lives well as in the lives of their families and other social groups.

When analysing developmental trends in delinquency, criminality and drug abuse in the last decade in our country, it is obvious that after a relatively stabilised situation until 1989, the convulsion followed after the „Velvet Revolution“ with annual dramatic increase in number of children and youth who came into discrepancy with social rules or even with laws.

There is no doubt that one of the reasons of this enormous growth is the fact that in the period of the sudden social-political changes there had been no applicable system of prevention at disposal in Slovakia to operate against the increasing trend of the occurrence of delinquency, criminality and drug consumption.

VÚDPaP in collaboration with the Child Fund of the Slovak Republic in 1993 prepared a draft which became the starting point in the legislative assignment of Centers of Educational and Psychological Prevention. At present, there are over thirty of them in the country and others are gradually establishing.

The systematic and comprehensive professional effort of the Center of Educational and Psychological prevention is focused on the optimisation of the behavior of children and youth already in the period when the behavior is not yet in serious discrepancy with school order and social rules. In close collaboration with the family and natural social environment, the Center provides a specific social, psychological and therapeutical-educational care to children threatened by social-pathological phenomena, usually in the form of out-patient care. Group techniques, family psychotherapy, group dynamics and methods of social training are used aimed at positive influence on difficult, dissocial or anti-social behavior of children and youth. In the case of need, the client is provided with individual educational and psychological care.

Child Center

The foundation of Child Center in 1991 was stimulated and supported by the „Kinderzentrum“ in Munich. The general scope of work is multidisciplinary care for families with handicapped children. The Center has an out-patients department, an integrated kindergarten and diagnostic-therapeutic groups which are cared for half a day.

The out-patient department provides diagnosis, developmental stimulation, therapy, expert counselling (in the field of neurology, psychiatry, physiotherapy, psychology, social work, special pedagogy).

The clients of the Center are children from the age of 6 weeks, coming from all parts of Slovakia. The most frequent diagnosis is cerebral palsy, mental retardation, speech disorders and learning disabilities. The number of registered children so far is approximately two thousand, at present about four hundred are in care.

The main aim of the care for handicapped children is their social integration. On the one hand this means support of the parents, collaboration with the kindergartens and schools, on the other hand we must encourage the social development of the handicapped children first by individual developmental stimulation and therapy, then by forming therapeutic groups and finally by integrating them into the kindergarten with nonhandicapped children.

In addition to the actual work with children and parents, the Center participates in research investigations (social interactions in integrated groups, spontaneous motor activity), provides practical studies and gives lectures for students of psychology and pedagogy. All services are for free. Some activities and equipment are subsidized by the NGO „Friends of the Child Center“, which was established by the children's parents.

International cooperation

After the political and social changes in 1989, the science in our country became more open to information coming from Western countries. The research workers of VÚDPaP have entered into personal or mail professional contact with the institutions and their workers all over the world. From the very beginning of the last decade, they were: Kinderzentrum München (Germany), Defence for Children International (Switzerland), Developmental Studies Center (USA), Irlen's Institute for Perceptual and Learning Disorders (USA), Danish Center for Human Rights (Denmark), Center for Deaf Studies (Great Britain), Bolzmann Institut der Universität Wien (Austria), International Association for Counselling (Great Britain), International Family Therapy Association (USA), Systems in Transition (Germany),

International Round Table for Advancement in Counselling (Great Britain). Among them, the most productive relation is to UNESCO. VÚDPaP has been involved in the project *Monitoring Learning Achievement* since 1994 and in 1999, it successfully organized a subregional workshop *Monitoring Learning Achievement for EFA (Education for All) 2000 Assessment* in which eight central European countries took part. There were organizational and methodological foundations so that *Monitoring Learning Achievement*, as a modern and progressive method for improvement of educational systems, could be used also in other Central and East European countries. As a result of the good experience with the Slovak team (mostly created of researchers from VÚDPaP) the Division of Basic Education of UNESCO decided to establish an *Institute of Quality of Education for Central and Eastern Europe* in Slovakia.

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