

# The Social Worker and the Religious Education Teacher in the Context of the Romanian School

**Emanuel Claudius Nicolescu**

PhD(c.), Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad, Romania

bmwcar2012@yahoo.com

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**ABSTRACT:** The challenges that students in Romanian schools face are increasing day by day, from learning difficulties to different challenges in adapting to the school context. Peer pressure and contemporary temptations that put pressure on students are often impossible to overcome. Therefore, there is a need for the support for those students who are in vulnerable situations, support offered by the school's social worker and the religious education teacher in order to overcome the moments that can have a negative impact on the educational evolution and also on the harmonious development of the student.

**KEYWORDS:** social work, school community, school success, challenges, belonging, volunteering, religious education teacher

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## Introduction

The school, as an institution, has always sought to prepare children for life by providing them with the necessary information and skills to be successful. In the school context, in addition to the instructive aspect, a great emphasis is placed on the formative aspect, which involves the moral and spiritual dimension.

On the other hand, the involvement of students in social activities has a major impact on their development as mature people and responsible individuals in the community. It will lead them to contribute what they

can to the well-being of their living place. The social activities in which students can get involved voluntarily also aim to help them discover their abilities, understand themselves, and identify their aspirations for the future. Volunteering helps, at the same time, to create healthy relationships between students and develop a strong sense of belonging.

### **1. The Religious Education teacher as the person who implements social work in the school in favor of the students**

In the conditions of a hypercognitized education, the school must offer students the elements of support for overcoming difficulties, which can influence the formation and structuring of the character. In this sense, the interdisciplinary approach of some contents, viewed from the point of view of moral and religious education, can contribute to the improvement of a situation, which, for the time being, seems to have no way out, given that consistent efforts are still needed in the direction emphasizing the formative-educational dimension of education.

Throughout the centuries, education aimed to prepare subjects for their integration into the respective social context (Rotaru 2021a, 87-92). This goal is pursued and fulfilled both through the instructive and the formative aspects of education. An education that takes into account the academic (cognitive) part and the civic part, can be a good education, even chosen, but incomplete, because the student also has an immortal soul.

Thus, religious education aims to prepare the subject for this life, with all its problems and difficulties, but also for the next one. That is why in the school context, in addition to the instructive aspect, which is intended to be of the best academic dress, great emphasis is placed on the formative aspect, which involves the moral and spiritual dimension. In school, spiritual formation constitutes „the aura or adornment of the formation of the person as a whole: body, soul, intellect, manners.” (Opriș and Bacoș 2004, 287).

In the educational system in Romania, the presence of a social worker in schools is not yet foreseen, but the need for social workers in schools is supported, along with the obvious reality of the multiplication of medical, psychological and socio-cultural problems in educational systems, and the results of investigations; thus, a study conducted in the USA by the Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher found that, when asked to list services for which they would like to see increased funding in their school,

approximately 40% of American teachers nominate first of all “social work and services for families.” (Metropolitan Life Survey of American Teacher 1989, 27).

The reality in which we live in our Romanian context shows us that there is a need for people to sensitize students to put into practice the social work values and their implementation in everyday life. This very valuable approach is easy to implement through Religious Education classes in school. When it comes to religious education, the educator needs a correct point of reference to know where he is guiding the subject entrusted to him. The Religious Education teacher is specifically mandated to teach this principle and explain how this truth can be applied. They must be taught to put it into practice because, “only then will the teaching be effective when it correlates the truth of the lesson with the life, needs and experience of those who listen.” (Doherty 1998, 67).

The objectives of education aim at learning, internalizing, mastering cognitive, affective and volitional capacities (Rotaru 2021b, 190-196). Religious education is a complex action that aims to inform and train students in order to achieve the ideal of life. The main purpose of education is an informative one, which aims at assimilating knowledge from the teachings of the Holy Scripture that students will use and apply in everyday life. Another purpose of education is the formative one, which aims at the moral and spiritual preparation of students by developing their will, feelings and reason. The formative aspect of education is based on the quality of the human soul to be influenced and formed by external factors. Since the content of religious education derives from revealed teaching, in order to be understood, students must be more sensitive and receptive.

Through religious education, the formation of the religious-moral character is aimed at, but this cannot be achieved without a volume of religious knowledge. A balance must be struck between informative and formative without diminishing the role of either of these purposes (Opriș 2000, 43). When children realize that life is a maze of roads and intersections and that they have choices to make every day, they will look for a good map to help them find their way. This map is called the worldview, and everyone has one. Our children today have to choose between many worldviews, but only one can give them the real answers and good direction (White and Weidmann 2001, 315). Applying the principles of social work within the educational system, through school’ social work,, aims to facilitate the achievement of the major objective of education, namely to provide an appropriate context for learning and development, in which all children are prepared to understand

the world in which they live and in which they will become active in the future (Costin 1987, 538).

The fundamental purpose of the social work services in school is subordinated to the goals of education, aiming to create the necessary conditions for students to satisfy their basic educational needs, develop their ability to make decisions and solve problems, develop their ability to adapt to change and be prepared to take responsibility for their own conduct. Students who are supported to find satisfaction, practical or intellectual, in the process of learning and training their own skills develop a sense of personal and social autonomy defining for effective integration in the community. That is why the general objective of social work in school aims primarily at identifying barriers to learning and removing them. Given the coincidence of the objectives pursued by school education and the school' social work, it follows that all significant changes within the educational system, as a result of the pressures exercised by other subsystems of the social system, influence the content and specifics of the social work activity in the school.

Educational social work refers to practical social work directed towards the education sector and aimed at school-age children. Its aim is to ensure that all children can benefit optimally from a meaningful educational experience. The practice of contemporary educational social work is influenced by increasing knowledge about the value of education. Examining how schools influenced children's behavior and life experiences encouraged the development of the whole school concept - which ensures that responsibility for solving problems is shared among all members of the school community, not simply seen as the sole responsibility of staff from the social work (Blyth 2001, 109). The need for the social work in school became evident in the decades after the Second World War, in close correlation with a series of major developments at the level of society and education, namely: the democratization of education, the extension of civic and child rights, and the increase the role of education in modern social life.

The democratization of education represented a strong current of opinion that appeared in the 60s, as a result of the dissemination of the results of the sociology of education research, which demonstrated how the school takes over and accentuates social inequalities, aiming to ensure the perpetuation of the dominance of the privileged social classes. It was directly incriminated the school selection and evaluation practices, the quantitative

and qualitative concentration of resources in the elite schools in the urban environment, the lack of ideological neutrality of their educational content, the elaborate language code used in the school and which disadvantaged students from poor families, who used a restricted linguistic code, the school's overemphasis on verbal ability, which disadvantages students with intelligent practice, etc. The representatives of different currents of the sociology of education claimed that the school system seems specially designed to give an education of inferior quality to children from the rural environment, those from the working class or belonging to ethnic and racial minorities.

Faced with these realities, the school wanted to be an instrument for equalizing opportunities; if initially the decision-makers considered equalizing the chances of access to school, later it was shown that this approach alone is not enough; the access equalization was doubled by the success equalization attempt. „A central idea in the approach to the democratization of education, the equalization of opportunities does not imply either leveling or guaranteeing an identical treatment to everyone, in the name of formal equality, but means offering each individual a method, a cadence, forms of education that correspond to him.” (Faure 1974, 126).

A sustained and long-lasting effort was necessary to achieve the dissemination of democratic values in education, and in this effort the social workers in the school also got involved; since the democratization of education does not only mean more education for more people, but also more people to participate in school decision-making, both administratively and educationally, school' social workers had to carry out a new mission – the one of facilitating the participation of students and parents in the management of school funds, in establishing the calendar of activities, in discussing the School Regulations, etc. The intensification of the participation of students and their parents in all moments of school life, the resettlement of the teacher-student relationship on a democratic basis and the mitigation of social-cultural disparities in education, determined by the liberalization of access to school learning, were major objectives in the activity of social work in the school.

The extension of civic rights to children represents a particular aspect of the process of democratization of societies, which manifested itself more and more strongly in the second half of the 20th century, as a result of research progress in the field of child psychology and evolutionary trends at the family level. The extension of civic rights over the child represents the penetration of democratic values in the child-adult relationship, which led

to the modification of the status of the child in the family, but also at school, the understanding of the psychological specificity of the child determined the re-discussion of some family and school educational practices; there was talk about the exposure of children to various types of abuse and the need to protect children from the abusive behavior of adults, parents or teachers. The abuse can lead the child to different types of addictions, because the addictive behavior intended to reverse a profound, intolerable sense of helplessness (Dodes 2011, 12). Child protection appeared, as a specific form of social work, which seeks to respect the rights of the child.

On November 20, 1989, the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Child's Rights, an international document that recognizes for the first time in the history that a child has the same human value as an adult and must be treated with the same respect (Morşanu 1996, 193).

The growing role of education in social life has drawn attention to another phenomenon, namely school maladjustment. School maladjustment and school failure have evolved from the stage of isolated problems, specific to certain students and interpreted as problems related to the deficiencies of the subject, to the stage of true social phenomena as social integration demanded an increasingly higher level of studies, under the conditions in which everywhere in society a higher and higher educational qualification is demanded and the level of compulsory schooling is prolonged, from the individual's academic failure his social failure is deduced.

School maladjustment is the phenomenon that school social workers must prevent or solve, which implies the following directions of action: investigating the social causes of school maladjustment, improving the school-family relationship and training the skills specific to social maturity. School adaptation involves both achieving school performance and adapting to the school group, based on the assimilation of age-specific values, there is a strong relationship between school success and adaptation to the group of students, expressed in the definition of school success as an indicator of school adaptation; thus, for example, it is appreciated that the student registers a school failure when he is unadapted to the school environment, to the collective of his class, when he experiences a situation of exclusion or conflict. Along with attending school, the child's relational field diversifies and enriches by establishing cooperative-competitive relationships with peers. In puberty, the needs for security, as well as those of love and belonging to the group, are specific (Munteanu 2003, 244).

Forming groups for students to participate in is of great importance, especially groups aimed at integrating students into society or calling on them to use the gifts and talents that they possess. The Religious Education teacher can also involve the students in the activities led by the church from the community. So, the process of socialization in school is characterized by social involvement, the context of the student class, and the process of social comparison, which influences the acquisition of school and social norms and values. These can be seen and put into practice in the community, especially by the people who live locally and the R. E. teacher who transmits them. It is so necessary for the students to see a role model in the adults from the school, especially to see a role model in the social worker and the R.E. teacher. It is so easy to judge and criticize them but not give them a model to follow and to support them in the moments of their vulnerability. Children need more models of healthy behavior than criticism (Burns 2010, 97).

The school's social work fights for the prevention of juvenile delinquency and other dysfunctional social phenomena: drug addiction, alcoholism, vandalism. The school is a subsystem of the global social system, having both a reactive and proactive character in relation to the dynamics of the society in which it integrates. The school and the community form an ecosystem characterized by relative stability and, consequently, the problems of the school cannot be treated separately from the problems of the community. Between school misadjustment and juvenile delinquency, a circular causality relationship is established, which can be summarized as follows: the models of deviant behavior in the community are reproduced in school, generate punishment, labeling and marginalization - the frustrations experienced by students at school fuel the motivation of non-compliance with the norms and school values, manifesting in deviant behaviors in the school and extracurricular social space.

Analyzing the phenomenon of child development, we find that it involves a socialization process in which the child learns to conform to society's norms and act appropriately (Bonchiş and Secui 2004, 53). But unfortunately the reverse is also true, when the child refuses to socialize, the link between school and community raises additional difficulties in the way of developing strategies to prevent maladjustment in school. Thus, measures such as stricter supervision of student behavior, school rules with appropriate prescriptive content may have the effect of reducing acts of violence and vandalism in schools, but at the same time, these problem behaviors will migrate into the community.



To the extent that the social worker in the school has the role of improving the relationship between the school and the other institutions of the community, naming the church also, favoring the school adaptation of all students, this approach translates into a reduction of social integration problems at the level of society. The therapeutic character of the work of the social worker in the school also serves the community, as the school becomes more capable of providing it with balanced, competent, healthy graduates, with the ability to adapt to the changes in the world in which they live.

Educational programs made in school aimed at preventing alcoholism, drug use, violent behavior, etc. have proven their effectiveness over time (Robbins 1966, 98). The school has the power to positively influence the behavior of students, even if they come into contact with deviant patterns of behavior outside of school. The school's social work can act decisively in this regard, coordinating the efforts of all educational staff and rewarding socially desirable models of conduct.

In conclusion, from the presentation of interdependent developments of the level of the school education and the level of school's social work, it follows that the need for the social work in school comes from the very social determination of educational systems, students arrive at school marked by their socio-cultural origin, which is manifested in the set of specific values, in the „pre-scientific” level and content of using school knowledge, in their social interaction skills. The social determination of educational systems refers to the multitude of socio-cultural variables that characterize the school population and that influence the development of the educational process and its efficiency. The action of these variables manifests itself in the family socialization process and in the school socialization process.

## **2. The social work in the school context carried out with the help of students**

### ***2.1. Support for other students***

Life is getting more and more difficult and it seems like we only face problems. They do not want to avoid the children either, who, from an increasingly young age, face the concept of problems. However, children are with pure souls, ready to help and from what they have, they are ready to give to others, either material or spiritual, which is in fact an inexhaustible source. The social worker and the RE teacher can be there for the children to open their eyes to see the people in need around them and to challenge the students to



help, and by doing small things, they do great things for themselves. Serving others will make the students achieve greatness. We are to instill into the children a desire for greatness, but also instruct them that this is achieved through the virtue of service (Evans 2014, 212).

The social worker has to lead the solution of some things, and when he does it through other people, especially through children, he is satisfied that not only was the problem solved, but he also helped someone else learn to help. „He who succeeds in doing good things through others exercises the best kind of leadership.” (Sanders 1993, 189). Children’s help for other children seems to have a huge impact on and helps the person in need get over what’s bothering them. Here we are talking about family or school-related troubles, misadjustment to school requirements, misunderstandings with colleagues.

The social worker can positively influence the students’ adaptation to school, stimulating friendships between students and creating a series of opportunities to develop informal social relations between them. All social psychology studies demonstrate that a friend can influence an individual’s attitudes and behaviors. The necessary condition to develop friendships is proximity, which is met at school. The proximity in classes is not a sufficient condition, given the evaluative and constraining framework of instructional activities; therefore, the most convenient option is promoting extracurricular activities, which provide more opportunities for interaction with colleagues who carry out the same activity.

Stimulating social networks would configure a school ethos that would offer students more alternatives for expression, valorization and access to status. Access to status only through school success becomes frustrating for many students, a phenomenon visible in the labeling of those with school success as nerds and their marginalization. For example, in the USA, the prestige and popularity of a student can be due to other merits than exclusively high grades, namely: membership of the school’s sports teams, theater teams, instrumentalists or majors (for girls), to the teams of orators, editors of the school magazine or the team of animators from the school radio, etc. (Lawrence 1996, 48).

The ethos of the school generates multiple advantages for both students and teachers. For students, the ethos of the school represents the best alternative to learn to assume responsibilities, to cultivate their interests, talents, to develop their social maturity and to access status; from the point

of view of the school representatives, the ethos of the school contributes to the life preparation of the students, offers equal chances for success and affirmation, represents a way to highlight professional skills and interests and ensures the school's openness to community values. The isolation of the school from the cultural patterns of the students and the values of the community fosters a sense of rootlessness and loss of identity. Therefore, the organization of various activities, sporting, cultural, social, artistic, humanitarian, economic, scientific, consecrating specific ceremonies for significant moments in the life of the school (the beginning of the school year, graduation ceremonies, investiture of a new principal, anniversary ceremonies), stimulating the students' participation in the decoration of the school, in the management of the school's funds contributes to the creation of the feeling of belonging to the school, to the edification of the pride of being students of a certain school.

The school has the power to influence those student characteristics that can become a basis for social recognition and friendships; if the school authorities reward, in various ways, a certain character trait or a particular talent, the implicit value judgment thus carried out will enshrine the personality of the student in question as a role model. Giving specific responsibilities to all students based on their personality and choice will stimulate student interactions. The experiences made everywhere in the world demonstrate the effectiveness of this strategy, all students having the opportunity to assume responsibilities (De Peretti 1996, 153). Responsibilities such as expert in a certain field (mathematics, history, environmental issues, etc.), delegated with the relationship with the management (canteen, library, parents' committee, etc.), assigned specific issues at the beginning and end of the school year, delegated for various social institutions, responsible for the sick, with security, negotiator of the difficulty of tasks or the severity of sanctions, organizer of festive moments or excursions, educational visits, photographer or reporter of the class, responsible for humor, supporter of the expression of shy students, responsible for good reception of new batches of students, responsible for cooperation and teamwork, expert in a certain procedure, monitor, spokesperson, etc. It is very benefic for the person to get involved in something that his or her heart to be involved too in that activity. Any work that does not enjoy the input of a person's endowments remains unproductive and useless (McDowell and Hostetler 1999, 505).

It has been observed that as students take on responsibilities and experience more and more of such responsibilities, schools and classrooms transform from a mass of anonymous in a known community, in a small solidary collectives, marked by the progress of all students and the assiduity in work; each student realizes that everyone's success also depends on him, that others recognize him according to his own responsibility and no one is marginalized. The school thus becomes a real center of activities, where each student can find his or her own path. The role of the social worker in this process is to crystallize the new social networks and to encourage all students, especially those with scholastic maladjustment, to assume such responsibilities, to support them in carrying out the specific tasks arising from these responsibilities, to encourage students to experience as many roles as possible during school.

Social networks can be created both inside and outside the school. The school's social worker must provide information about the existing resources in the community - sports clubs, cultural, civic, humanitarian, environmental protection associations - and encourage the involvement of students in wider social networks. The variants of action are multiple: for example, the social worker can stimulate a „twinning” program between school students and children with impairments, schooled in special educational institutions, or with younger children growing up in foster care centers, can stimulate students to assume the role of the „big brother” for one of the children with school adjustment problems; can suggest to students with alcoholic parents to participate in the activity of some associations, where they can meet children with similar problems, etc.

## ***2.2. Support for other people outside the school***

### *2.2.1. The families of needy students*

The family is the basic unit of society and it must be strengthened, protected and supported, having the main responsibility in the protection, growth and development of children. All social institutions must respect the rights of children and their well-being and provide appropriate support to parents, families, legal representatives and people who have children in their care, so that children can grow and develop in a healthy and safe environment and an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding (Save the Children, UNICEF 2003, 13).

Generally speaking, school social workers support students' families in using existing resources in the community specialized in the protection of their rights, connecting them to charitable associations, medical services, legal services, or facilitating grants for vulnerable social segments by various institutions from the community. School social workers can refer parents to such institutions and act as a link between the family and the community. If the social workers are members of the governing council of the community, they can contribute to improving the policy of using local resources, they can change local development strategies, they can coordinate the activity of the groups specialized in social assistance, they can even make the needs of the school better known to local level.

### *2.2.2. The people in need*

By training students in voluntary activities in favor of people in need, the school's social work can directly serve the needs of the local community alongside those strictly professional tasks.

The social worker in the school, and in his absence, the religion education teacher, can coordinate the activity of a group of students who want to use their free time by putting themselves at the disposal of their peers in need: the elderly from various homes, the elderly alone and helpless, the people with chronic diseases, children who don't attend school due to medical problems, orphaned children in families, children from different placement centers, street children, homeless people, etc. Why can the religion teacher call on students to volunteer? In Romania, volunteer activities arise thanks to the activities organized by the Church and are aimed at helping those on the margins of society. Only then the normative acts that encouraged this type of activity appeared in our society (Goian 2004, 13).

Such activities are highly effective for all involved; students develop the skills of helping, cooperation, the attitude of solidarity, altruistic emotions and feelings, and from the point of view of school and professional orientation, they can clarify their professional ideals. And on the other hand, the beneficiaries of these services are satisfied for fulfilling series of needs, which contributes to increasing their quality of life. The school's social worker, based on the cooperation with social welfare institutions in the community, will identify the best courses of action and the best places to place students for social involvement, creating a new social network for students.

## Conclusions

In our educational system in Romania, the presence of a social worker in schools is not yet foreseen, but the need for social workers in schools is supported, along with the obvious reality of the multiplication of medical, psychological and socio-cultural problems in educational systems. The school's social work is the prevention of juvenile delinquency and other dysfunctional social phenomena that can be seen even in the school environment. It was demonstrated that a friend can exert a major influence on an individual's attitudes and behaviors. The necessary condition to develop friendships is the proximity but in the school is not a sufficient condition, given the evaluative and constraining framework of instructional activities; the most convenient option is promoting extracurricular activities, providing more opportunities for interaction with colleagues.

A school can stimulate social networks among the students, and they are about involving the students in doing good to others, and it would configure an ethos that would offer students more alternatives of expression, valorization, and access to the status they long to have in the school and the community. These social networks can be created both inside and outside the school under the direct contribution of the school; the school's social worker or the R.E. teacher is the person who can directly provide information about the existing resources in the community and opportunities to get involved. Involving students in volunteering is beneficial for the students also. The social worker has to lead to the solution of some challenges in others' lives, and when he does it with the help of other people, especially with children, he is satisfied that not only the problem in the community was solved but also another person was helped on learning how to help the needy.

This research article aims to underline the need for support the school can give students in situations of risk and to anticipate and be proactive towards a possible undesirable behavior. On the other hand, by involving the students in social activities, volunteering will give students a good purpose and goal to achieve.

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