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Prevention work in schools: education for citizenship

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Introduction

Recent political, economic and socio-cultural changes have generated severe problems in the societies undergoing them. This is reflected in the extremely high ratio of unemployment (varying, but around 20% of the labour force on average), low turnout for parliamentary elections (around 35%), and a tremendous rise in crime and delinquency, especially among the young generation. Such phenomena raise questions about the perspectives of development of European identity and European citizenship in a social context in which alienation, marginalisation, and social exclusion pose a serious threat to the processes of social and cultural unification.

The concept of prevention

Suggestions for the reasons for the growing number of maladjusted children and adolescents include: the educational inefficiency of contemporary families; lack of proper moral patterns, common values, and positive models and the promotion of disputable value patterns; consumerist ideology spread by the mass media; the availability of substances of abuse and the weakness of local community relationships.

Prevention has been suggested as a measure against these factors. The prevailing forms of prevention include activities aimed at eliminating, or at least limiting, the impact of these factors. In practice prevention programmes executed both on national and local level dominate: these activities engage substantial human and financial resources, but in everyday life not much improvement can be observed.

This may be caused by an inappropriate concept of prevention. Three underlying assumptions of the notion are contentious. The first maintains that it is possible to determine factors that are dangerous or harmful. However, observation suggests that factors labelled 'dangerous' or 'harmful' may serve as positive in certain situations and with some individuals, e.g., the use of alcohol and drugs by some artists to stimulate the creative process. And positive values taken to excess may become the opposite, as in the case of 'workaholism'. It could be concluded that anything might turn into a negative factor leading to risk behaviour depending on the way it is introduced into the individual's life and activity.

The second assumption claims that prevention work should be aimed at eliminating endangering factors from the social world, but the expectation that one day the world will be free of violence, diseases, and other problems troubling mankind seems rather unrealistic. Again, observation shows that for example the endless resources allocated to counter drug activities has not stopped proliferation. This does not mean that efforts to limit such activities should be abandoned, but prevention work should not be restricted to them.

The third assumption relates to learning about the causes of risk behaviour. It is claimed that such knowledge is a necessary condition for developing effective remedies. This appears to be false, since in each case there is a combination of factors characteristic of the concrete individual. Generalisations based on quantitative data allow for a better understanding of the phenomena in question but it is doubtful if they can contribute greatly to prevention practice.

To overcome the pitfalls inherent in such assumptions an alternative concept is being developed (Niemczynski, 1999; Vanderhoeven 1998). This defines prevention as a positive activity aimed at supporting non-risk behaviour. It is important to be aware that every individual is somehow 'contaminated' with the tendency to undertake risk behaviours modelled by her/his 'educators'. No educational environment is entirely free of some patterns of risk behaviours, e.g., a parent who smokes. However, some individuals seem to be more prone to adopt such patterns. The reason for this lies in the frustration of some psychological needs vital to the individual and in his/her inability to satisfy them in a non-risky way. Research into the causes of substance abuse, delinquency, and premature sex as cited by adolescents reveals that risk behaviour is a means of satisfying important needs such as affiliation, acceptance by the peer group, and the release of psychological or physical tension caused by school or family problems. All these needs can be satisfied by means of non-risk behaviours provided that the individual has the appropriate knowledge and skills. Unfortunately, the social problems mentioned above prevent a growing number of children and adolescents from receiving effective instruction in this area. Lacking proper leadership and guidance both at home (parents either busy with their jobs or with other problems) and at school (strongly focused on subject knowledge), young people rely on the behavioural patterns available to them elsewhere in their immediate environment, i.e., their peer group and the media.

The project

The Department of Management in Education at Uniwersytet Jagiellonski, in co-operation with several international and local partners, has initiated an organisational change in several primary and middle schools in Kraków. This consists of establishing in each school a system of teamwork aimed at early detection of students' problems and the organisation of proper support for the student in her/his attempts to solve the problem (Kłodziejczyk, 2000). This may not seem a very revolutionary change, but it needs to be stressed that teamwork is relatively new in Polish organisations in general and in schools in particular. Rather, teachers perceive their professional tasks and activities as individual ones, performed in teacher-class interactions. Secondly, teacher training is strongly subject-oriented with very little instruction on how to deal practically with students' problems. Thirdly, the liberal turn observed in Poland in the 1990s is reflected in the area of education by the widely accepted belief that the main responsibility of the school is subject teaching, while families are responsible for personal-social development.

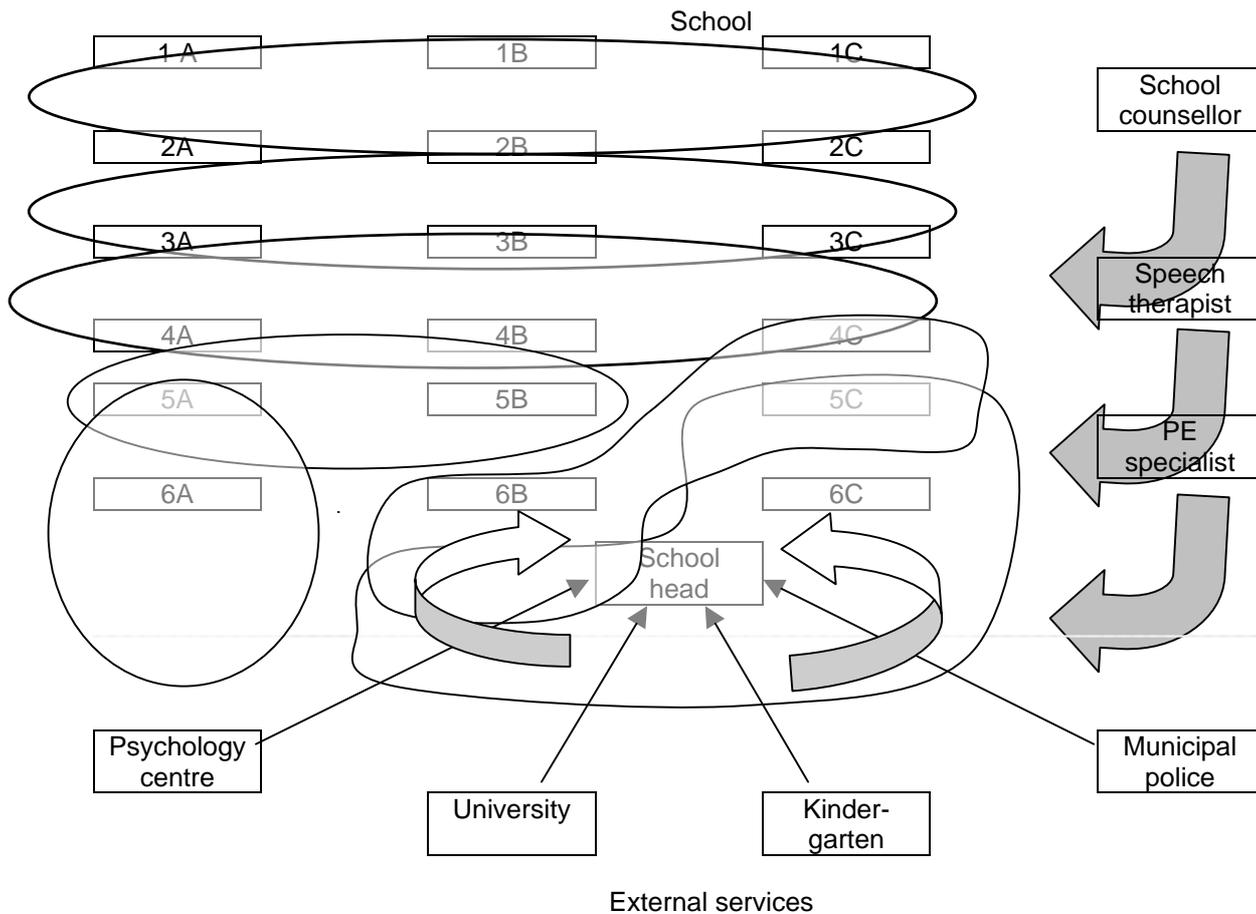
The project has three levels of activity. The first comprises the activities teachers undertake with their students, mostly in class settings. While teaching her/his subject, the teacher has plenty of opportunity to identify emerging problems - this is mostly a matter of sensitivity to symptoms displayed by students, of the teacher's general and practical knowledge about solving such problems, and of a willingness to react to them. However, many problems require resources not available to a teacher, which is why the second level was introduced. Regular team meetings were instituted, in which teachers share their knowledge and experience in dealing with students' problems and jointly seek the best support to deal with the student's problem. If the problem exceeds the resources available to the team, the third level is activated. This is the school's governing body, consisting of the school head, the deputy, the school counsellor and leaders of the teachers' teams. The main task of this body is to provide teachers with external resources through liaisons with other social services. Representatives are invited to team meetings if necessary. Unfortunately such cooperation is strongly contradictory to the prevailing mode of functioning of social service agendas, so the introduction of this particular means of support has met with great difficulty.

The teamwork system increases the chances of improvement of school prevention work. Instead of focusing only on eliminating allegedly harmful factors through global prevention activities on a school level (information campaigns, workshops, control of students' behaviour, etc.) the teachers have the opportunity to deal with the real students' problems and to promote positive solutions to them. This raises the probability of preventing students from resorting to risk behaviours as means of satisfying frustrated needs.

Data and results

It was hypothesised that in schools that employ this system the number of reported problems should decrease because the majority of them are solved at the classroom level. Early intervention by teachers prevents the problem from developing more serious symptoms including risk behaviours.

Four schools participating in the project were invited to provide the data (Table 1). The schools have a considerable degree of freedom in the practical application of the 'rules' of the system. This is because of specific needs that stem from the local context in which the school functions. An example of system organisation is shown in Figure 1. However, this freedom produced one unfortunate result: interviews with head teachers revealed that there is no common method of recording data concerning guidance work. That is why in this paper each school is presented separately. Although all four schools have been participating in the project from its inception the data for the first years of the project are not always available.

Figure 1: Cluster structure in elementary school in Krakow**Table 1: Schools participating in the survey on the effectiveness of teamwork system in guidance and prevention - current situation.**

No.	Type	No. of grades	Students' age
1	Primary school	6	7-13
2	Primary school	6	7-13
3	Group: primary + middle (<i>gimnazjum</i>)	6+3	7-16
4	Group: primary (last year) + middle (<i>gimnazjum</i>)*	1 (last) + 3	13-16

* As a result of educational reform in 2000 that introduced middle schools, some primary schools stopped recruiting new students: these schools will disappear once the last students finish their final grade.

School 1 is a primary school located in a residential area not far from the Kraków city centre. The teamwork system is well established and the liaisons with local social services are functional (Table 2).

Table 2: Severe students' problems registered in School 1

School year	Number of students	State police interventions	Municipal police interventions	Cases in court in progress	Students under legal guidance
1999/2000	604	1	1	1	20
2000/2001	510	3	0	4	22
2001/2002	486	3	0	1	14
2002/2003	452	1	0	3	8
2003/2004	399	1	0	4	11

There has been a rapid decrease in the number of students attending this school; one third over four years. This reflects a sharp demographic decline on a national level but probably has been strengthened by the school's catchment area, which contains a substantial number of elderly people. The number of police (both state and municipal) interventions remains low and stable. The school registered one case of substance abuse and three of tobacco smoking among students. Legal guidance is assigned to students who are neglected by their parents or who have committed law violations. The number of such students has decreased, which is in line with the decrease of the general number of students.

In School 2 the number of students has slightly increased in last four years. This is a primary school located in an underprivileged area with strong social problems of unemployment, poverty, substance abuse, and crime. Opposite the school is an orphanage, and children living there attend the school.

Table 3: Severe students' problems registered in School 2

School year	Number of students	State police interventions	Cases in court in progress	Students receiving material assistance
2000/2001	331	0	6	-
2001/2002	324	0	4	16
2002/2003	325	0	1	38
2003/2004	352	1	2	39

One significant problem in this school is the need of material assistance experienced by many students. In Table 3 only those students who were formally granted such assistance from local government agenda are reported: not all students in need qualify for such assistance. The scale of the problem is illustrated by the doubling of the number of students receiving assistance in last two years despite a stable number of students.

School 3 is a primary school that forms a group with a middle school. They share the same set of buildings located in a huge residential area on the outskirts of Kraków. The school admits students suffering from various physical deficits. The school counsellor reports a substantial drop in the number of students from 750 in 1998-1999 to 663 in 2003-2004.

This school has had to deal with problems emerging in relationships among students (Table 4). Although the theft of goods valuable enough to be reported to teachers (mostly mobile phones) is not very common, the number of aggressive acts requiring

teachers' intervention has increased steadily. A similar tendency is visible in the number of students involved in some kind of court procedures. These results may be interpreted as either the consequence of worsening life conditions caused by economic and social problems on a national scale or as the consequence of the more effective system of monitoring students' problems employed in the school.

Table 4: Severe students' problems registered in School 3*

School year	Thefts reported to teachers	Physical aggression acts among students	State police interventions	Cases in court in progress	Students receiving material assistance
1997/1998	1	4	2	4	1
1998/1999	4	2	0	7	0
1999/2000	2	8	2	5	2
2000/2001	1	8	1	8	1
2001/2002	0	7	0	8	3
2002/2003	3	10	2	10	2
2003/2004	3	11	1	12	2

* Data available from the primary school only.

Numbers of students varies from 750 in the year 1997-1998 to 663 in 2003-2004.

School 4 is a middle school which includes the final (6th) grade of a primary school that stopped admitting new students after the reform introduced in 2000. In 2005-2006 the primary school will cease to exist. The school is located in the same area as School 2. Instead of providing quantitative data the head teacher offered one hour-long interview which was largely concerned with her narrative about the introduction of the system to her school and its impact on the quality of guidance and prevention work. She reported that a considerable decrease in aggression (both physical and verbal) among students had been noticed by the majority of teachers. However, this was accompanied by a rise in teachers' concerns about their inability to meet the new expectations of the students, who required more attention to their problems. At an early stage of the project (1996-1998) the school developed a very effective liaison with the local psychological centre; one of the psychologists employed there regularly participated in teamwork at the school, offering input whenever necessary. This was thought to bring about the rapid decrease in the number of students requiring external psychological help: the estimated drop was from ten in the first semester of 1997-1998 to two in the second (the total number of students that year was 380). Unfortunately, in 1999 this co-operation ended due to a change of internal regulations introduced in the psychological centre.

In 2000 the middle school was established, and an increase in problems displayed by students starting at the middle school was observed. These adolescents felt anonymous in the new environment: this, together with the problems they experienced in their families and because of their underprivileged background, produced such unwanted phenomena as robberies (five in the year 2000-2001; four involving schoolmates and one an adult) and thefts (five). This tendency was quickly stopped thanks to the installation of an internal TV circuit in the school building and to special workshops for the students on law, run with the participation of representatives from the local police station. The students who committed these acts underwent a special internal educational procedure aimed at re-establishing the social relationship between the culprit and his/her victim and compensating for the damages. If the culprit succeeded in completing this

procedure the case was not reported to external agencies (police, court). No cases of relapse were observed in those who completed the procedure.

In the middle school the problem of drug abuse and drug dealing appeared. This was in accordance with the appearance of organised crime in the area, the high unemployment ratio and increasing levels of poverty. Some of the students caught in the act of drug dealing explained that they did this in order to support their parents financially. In several instances where the student was put into an institution as a result of a court trial, the parent took over the drug-dealing business.

In 2000-2001 there were fifteen students who were found to be taking drugs. In response the school developed a liaison with a therapeutic centre for drug addicts. The specialist from this institution runs workshops in the school and offers therapeutic sessions for students after initiation. Of the fifteen students, two were placed in special institutions for drug addicts, one returned to drug use after a two-year break, and twelve stopped taking drugs completely. Currently eighteen students participate in therapeutic activities.

Another problem observed in School 4 is the increasing number of students who require psychiatric assistance (or their parents do). Whereas for many years this was a minor problem (not more than one case per school year if any), in 2002-2003 there were three such cases and in 2003-2004 five. The school needs to develop procedures to deal with this problem as it did in the case of delinquency.

Conclusions

- The data suggest that the teamwork system improves the effectiveness of prevention work in schools.
- In general the number of students exhibiting risk behaviours does not increase in these schools despite the increase of social problems in their life environment. This suggests that improved guidance work in schools is the best form of prevention.
- The picture of students' problems is different in each of the schools. This suggests that the effectiveness of prevention work should be assessed within each school's context.
- The qualitative data collected by interviewing the school head proved to be more useful than quantitative data in studying the effectiveness of the teamwork system. A structured interview will be developed for further study.

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