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POSSIBILITIES OF DIGITAL SELF-CARE TOOLS AND THEIR USE IN SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK

Abstract. The focus of this paper is to conceptualize self-care in school social work as an important indicator in the life of pupils. Self-care encompasses a set of positive activities through which an individual is able to meet his or her own psychological, physical, social, intellectual and spiritual needs. Awareness of one's need for self-care and its practicing predict multiple positive outcomes for an individual's overall health, including the achievement of mental, emotional and physical subjective well-being, as well as life balance. The starting premise is to highlight the specifics and uniqueness of school social workers who, through their expertise, provide comprehensive services to pupils and families. The theoretical background of the paper relies on the ecological perspective, looking at the human being in the environment with an emphasis on the life-model. The main focus is the analysis of digital self-care tools and their use in school social work. The theses presented,

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drawing on Slovak and foreign scholarship, lead us to conclude that digital tools can be a source of inspiration for pupils, through which it is possible to increase their intrinsic motivation, productivity, and maintain or improve their overall subjective well-being.

Keywords: self-care; school social work; ecological perspective; online space

INTRODUCTION

In the field of social work, according to Jian, Wu, and Du (2023), self-care can be viewed as an effective practice for improving subjective well-being. Self-care includes a set of positive health-promoting activities. The link between health and self-care is an important element in an individual's success, whether they are a student or a professional in the helping professions, according to Corey, Muratori, Austin, and Austin (2023). Because of the daily demands, challenges, and changes, it is desirable for the individual to emphasize psychological, intellectual, social, and spiritual needs. Ideally, an individual's self-care reflects the care he or she provides to other individuals.

Self-care, in Gill Hasson's (2020) view, is the foundation of a life in which the individual feels good and experiences subjective well-being, yet, in his view, few individuals recognize the need to balance their mind and body and maintain physical and mental health. There are a number of options for self-care, but it is important that self-care is part of everyday life, which involves making changes that suit the individual. Self-care is characterised by its individual character, which allows each individual to implement self-care that suits them in terms of their needs, capabilities, form, content, time and space. We focus on defining the possibilities of digital self care tools and their use in school social work.

The National Association of Social Workers (2024) states that school social workers connect the school environment, the family environment, and the community, and strive for pupil achievement. Such workers are involved in providing leadership in shaping school discipline policies, support services, and interventions regarding mental health promotion. We therefore conclude that the school social worker is an important part of an interdisciplinary team whose goal is to help pupils to be successful, motivated and active in the school environment; and that practicing self-care is one of the important aspects in the school environment. Given the focus of the paper, we argue that an important treatment concept is digital self-care tools and their use in school social work, which find application in promoting health, overall subjective well-being, and improving students' social skills.

1. CONCEPTUALISING SELF-CARE

Self-care is defined by Grafton and Coyne (2024) as the practice of activities that an individual initiates and carries out in order to maintain health, subjective well-being, and life. According to these authors, self-care activities must be consistent with personal beliefs and culture in order to be meaningful to the individual. For a comprehensive definition of self, we rely on that of Mordue, Watson and Hunter (2020), whereby self-care is engaging in a combination of activities that promote health and subjective well-being, identify a sense of order and control, and give the individual the mental and physical capacity to respond positively to life. Self-care is a series of practices that, according to Roxas (2023), are adopted by the individual in order to prevent negative health outcomes and promote well-being. This author points out that self-care represents a purposeful and internal process of managing the body through individual work and internal tools or resources that are used to achieve a desired state. Based on the above, Roxas views self-care as a relaxation practice in facilitating and healing the self in order to enhance health and overall subjective well-being. Through the lens of Myers et al. (2012), we argue that self-care can also be viewed as engaging in behaviors that maintain and promote physical and emotional well-being, which includes factors such as sleep, exercise, or the presence of social supports.

As far as the practical application of self-care is concerned, there is, for example, a British charity called Self-Care Forum. It defines self-care as activities through which an individual develops, protects, maintains and improves their health and overall subjective well-being. We agree, arguing that self-care involves self-awareness and connection with oneself, which means that the individual needs to know what to do to ensure their wellbeing. In other words, it is about taking responsibility for oneself in order to promote mental, emotional and physical subjective well-being. Self-care is an ongoing practice through which health is maintained. The Forum's co-chair, Pete Smith, stated that the intention of the Self-Care Forum is to get individuals to incorporate self-care into their lives and understand how to look after their physical health and mental well-being (in 2018, as part of Self-Care Week – the UK's annual National Awareness Week). The rationale is that self-care leads to a happier, healthier and more fulfilling life (Hasson, 2020).

Given the conceptual definition of self-care in social work, we state that we distinguish two dimensions. We draw on Lee and Miller's (2013) division, which identifies personal self-care and professional self-care. In defining personal

self-care, the authors point out that its nature lies in the process of purposefully engaging in activities that promote the holistic health and overall subjective well-being of the individual. The authors view professional self-care as a process of purposeful engagement in practices that promote effective and appropriate use of self in a professional role, with an emphasis on the context of maintaining holistic health and overall subjective well-being. Self-care is a specific area in the maintenance of health and overall subjective well-being, therefore its application is real in the lives of social workers as well as students. The nature of self-care is unique and individual, which is supported by the authors' words that the self-care framework offers a starting point for assessing one's own commitment to developing a systematic approach to effectively engaging in a comprehensive self-care plan. An individual can assign different domains to self-care goals, in relation to which he or she develops an individual plan that includes the steps and processes to achieve them. In this way, regular steps towards self-care are encouraged and thus the individual's health can improve. Self-care refers to activities and practices that, according to the University at Buffalo School of Social Work (2024b), an individual can perform on a regular basis in order to reduce stress, maintain and improve health and subjective well-being. Consistent self-care is an indicator of prevention, which aims to maintain health in the present but also with an eye toward the future.

The fundamental basis of the conceptualization of self-care is underscored through the poem "It All Starts with Self Care" by Jayne Morris (2024, p. 1):

If I care for me, then I can care for you. If I care for me, then I can teach you how to better care for yourself. If you care for you, then you can teach others how to treat you. If you care for you, then you give others permission to care for themselves. If others care for themselves, then they start to care for each other. If others care for each other, then they start to care for the planet. If we all care for ourselves, each other and our planet, then we create the kind of change that builds a positive future for our children. It all starts with self-care.

2. SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK AS AN IMPORTANT INDICATOR IN THE LIFE OF A PUPIL

In terms of anchoring the social work profession, we rely on the definition by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (2024) that "social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and

liberation of people.” Highlighting the uniqueness of the social worker’s presence in the school setting, we note that according to the American Council for School Social Work (2024a) the social worker possesses training and experience that leads to an understanding of various systems such as education, health, cultural indicators, as well as factors pertaining to family and community, or barriers to learning.

According to Ritter, Vakalahi, and Kiernan-Stern (2015), a school social worker is seen as a member of a specialized area of practice within the social work profession who brings unique knowledge and skills to the school system and educational team. Through their presence, the school social worker participates in enhancing the educational experience of students and providing social, emotional, and behavioral support. In these areas, problematic situations may arise, such as the occurrence of mental and physical health problems, truancy, or family issues, and therefore we also appeal to the importance of self-care in the school setting.

Among the basic orientations and dispositions of the school social worker, according to Baker and Jenney (2022), we assign sufficient knowledge, skills and competencies with which to respond successfully to the growing needs and demands of the client, in which we can include the needs of the pupil and efforts to improve his or her well-being. The authors emphasize that it is now necessary for school social workers to receive sufficient training to improve these conditions and meet the complex demands.

One of the roles of the school social worker, according to Anderson-Butcher (2006), is to encourage the family to participate in the school system through strategies to support the family in providing a healthy home environment, supporting and encouraging the pupil in the learning process, and communicating with educators about what is happening during the school day. Through these methods, school performance, attendance, pro-social behavior, social skills, and other positive outcomes in the student’s life are improved. Family support, according to the author, also includes empowering parents to promote healthy all-round development, providing direct services to families, and creating family events and activities that promote positive interactions between children, parents, and the school. Fundamental focuses of the school social worker include a general and holistic focus on the emotional, behavioral, and family challenges of students (Ritter, Vakalahi, and Kiernan-Stern, 2015).

We view the contribution of the school social worker through the lens of Skyba (2018), who points out that his presence and interventions are mainly reflected in an integrative, socializing and protective function. These connections

are made particularly in the context of the goal-oriented social work implemented in schools. She states that the importance of the school in ensuring the optimal functioning of children and their preparation for life is reflected in the different functions. In the above theoretical context of school social work, we point out the uniqueness of applying an ecological perspective through which the complexity and interconnectedness of the services offered can be achieved through collaboration. The main attribute of the ecological perspective is the perception of the person in the environment, emphasizing the relationship and interactions between the individual and their social environment. Its application in the life of the learner, according to the above-mentioned author, takes on a dimension of, for example, the acquisition of a comprehensive view and holistic perception of the environment or a multidimensional understanding of problems, with the possibility of using a spectrum of effective professional and social interventions. As regards social work, Skyba (2014) concludes that, starting from an ecological perspective, it is appropriate to apply a life-model that concentrates on the strengths of the individual and the modification of the environment on the basis of their individual needs. In this sense, we also find room for the application of interventions aimed at self-care in the pupil in the context of his/her interaction in the social, school and family environment.

3. ANALYSIS OF DIGITAL SELF-CARE TOOLS IN SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK

With regard to the present analysis of digital self-care tools in school social work, we present selected background information from the Self Care Forum (2024), which characterizes itself as a UK-based national charity with the aim of extending the reach of self-care and integrating it into individuals' everyday lives. The Forum works with academic and research institutions, educators, voluntary organisations and policy makers to influence the perception and formulation of self-care in practice. The Forum's website provides practical, research-based resources for individuals, practitioners and organisations that include national self-care campaigns. They are specifically oriented to highlight the development of a self-care action plan, understood as a way to help organise and create both the design and planning of self-care activities. This includes videos and webinars aimed at increasing individuals' knowledge to understand key aspects of self-care in their lives. For the possibilities of digital self-care tools, we present selected health-promoting and habit-forming activities and activities

for practicing self-care in an individual's life in a school setting. We reflect on several digital self-care tools oriented towards multiple categories such as mental and physical health, subjective emotional well-being, wellbeing, gratitude, meditation, mindfulness, mood mapping, journal keeping, circadian rhythms, sleep, and others. Self-analysis of self-care tools available in the online space with inspiration from the University of the West of Scotland (2024) and University of Maryland Baltimore (2024) includes a range of self-care support for individuals, the ability to access online consultation or counselling, and defining the content of each app and its focus, aim and approach. Each digital tool is associated with a hyperlink to a website, which can be accessed free of charge by any user without the need to register, where information, articles and other materials can be consulted.

Table 1. Digital self-care tools

Digital self-care tool	App content	Focus and objective	App availability
Calm	Courses on the concept of meditation, breathing exercises and mindfulness for beginners who want to be more productive.	The app is designed for pupils whose goal is to maintain healthy sleep, learn about meditation, combat stress in order to be more productive.	Seven-day free trial for new users.
Aura	It is based on an algorithm that uses a quiz to suggest different content, stories, advice or activities from therapists and coaches. Users of the app get access to study tips, music, wellness or prayers.	Focused on self-care, relaxation, meditation, sleep, subjective well-being and mindfulness.	For an additional fee, there is an option that includes individual online sessions with therapists.
Headspace	Includes introductory meditation courses aimed at improving meditation skills. Users can track their progress in the context of meeting (e.g., daily, monthly, school and family) self-care goals, make friends and complete physical exercises. A range of articles focusing on, for example, self-care, mindfulness, coping or meditation is available in the app.	The central focus is on reducing stress, aiding better sleep, building resilience. One of the goals of the app is to provide guidance for serious meditation. The app focuses on articles on self-care, mindfulness, gratitude, stress, communication, family, grief, habits, goals, mental health, and more.	A pupil plan option is available. It offers better value for money, but the app offers the option to try the premium version for free for seven days.

Finch	Possibility to set your own goals for each day. Examples include visiting the library or completing homework. Includes a set of self-care exercises such as walking, exercise and healthy eating.	Helps the individuals thrive by setting personal self-care goals with an emphasis on motivation and sending encouraging messages throughout the day.	It includes a free standard version and a premium version that makes additional goals and activities available. The free version does not contain ads, so there is no need to invest in the premium version.
MyFitnessPal	Tracks and records progress in strength training and cardiovascular exercises. Third-party support such as smart watches are recommended with the app.	It is specific to the health, diet, calories and fitness of the individual.	The app has a free version available, with a paid version for more demanding users.
Sleep Cycle	The content is a wide variety of articles and statistics on sleep, circadian rhythms, meditation, habits affecting sleep, suggestions for improving sleep or links to relaxing sounds, and more.	The intent of the app is to track and analyse the sleep cycle, helping to achieve better health for the individual.	The app can be used for free, with partial access, the premium version is paid.
Happyfeed	The app offers to record a list of gratitude or positive experience one had during the day. Using the digital gratitude journal, an individual's health, productivity and focus are promoted, stress is reduced and social connections are improved.	Gratitude journal that helps cultivate joy by means of one's reflecting on positive things.	The app has partial free access and a paid version.
Gratitude Journal: Affirmations	Wide variety of articles, videos, recommendations and suggestions that focus on topics such as bedtime self-care routines for restful sleep, self-care ideas to help individuals boost their subjective well-being, or inspiration on how to start the day positively, and more.	It focuses on a strategy of gratitude and mindfulness.	Partial free access with a trial version, no registration required. Premium version available.
MindDoc	The app contains a mood diary, questions focused on one's subjective well-being, mindfulness, and more.	The main goal is subjective emotional well-being. The app offers ways to cope with difficult emotions, relieve	Free entry and no registration required. Premium version available.

		stress, and practice communication skills.	
Insight Timer	The app is aimed at a variety of audiences, including families and children, with articles, audios and videos on self-care, well-being, sleep, breathing, yoga, calm music, meditation and mindfulness.	The goal is for the individual to develop healthy habits and routines that promote subjective well-being.	The app is available to all users free of charge.
Smiling Mind	The app offers programs for youth, adults and school classes. Programs focus is, among others, on stress, sleep, concentration, subjective well-being, school performance, resilience, pupil's thriving, social connections, sports or mindfulness. Programs are based on promoting the development of children's social and emotional skills and overall health.	The intention behind the app is to become a guide for the individual in realizing their daily mindfulness, created by psychologists and educators to support children's mental health and subjective well-being.	Includes free programs for children and adults.
Sanvello	The app provides the individual with the ability to track their mood, daily activities, sleep or exercise. It offers tools oriented towards relaxation, coping with stressful situations, or the user has the possibility to set personal goals each week.	The aim is to offer strategies for coping with stress and building health maintenance skills, for example based on mindfulness meditation.	The user is allowed to use the app for free, but a premium version is also available.

Personalized plans through the integration of artificial intelligence in the context of digital tools focused on mental health have produced, according to Olawade et al. (2024), a significant shift towards personalized interventions. Digital tools contain large datasets and with the help of artificial intelligence, it is possible through machine learning capabilities to analyse the unique characteristics and needs of an individual.

For inspiration on the application of other digital self-care tools in school social work, we highlight selected self-care exercises and activities available at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work (2024a) that focus on mindfulness, relaxation techniques, slow breathing, meditation, as well as specific worksheets to download and then develop, for which direct hyperlinks are also provided. An example can be the Self-Care Assessment, through which individuals

can think about the aspects of self-care that they practice in their lives, or in which areas of self-care they have an imbalance. The worksheet provides suggestions for other self-care activities that support the maintenance and improvement of individuals' subjective well-being. As an example of self-care activities, in the mentioned worksheet, we can highlight physical self-care (e.g., healthy eating, sleep and exercise), psychological self-care (e.g., one-day trips, writing a diary, reading literature, attending an artistic performance or a theater play), emotional self-care (e.g., maintaining social contacts, identifying calming activities and humor) or spiritual self-care (e.g., time for reflection, spending time in nature, practicing mindfulness, reading or listening to inspirational literature, conversations and stories). My self-care plan is another example of a worksheet helping individuals think about what they are currently doing as part of self-care and identify strategies that they can incorporate into their self-care plan. Individuals can also identify the existence of barriers to self-care and the possibilities of solving them. In the worksheets are also examples from practice, situations from the school environment and other areas that pupils may encounter in their lives. These illustrations of examples of tools in the online space present that self-care represents an ongoing practice of maintaining physical and mental health. The practice and forms of self-care are individual, which means that each individual determines when, what and how much self-care they need in their life (Hasson, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Drawing on an analysis of available digital self-care tools, we report that individual self-care goals for a pupil include personal reflection, physical activity, rest, healthier eating, a slower pace, a morning or evening walk, writing a reflective journal, reading books, studying and other activities that promote physical and mental subjective wellbeing and that lead to a healthy balance between personal and school life (Hasson, 2020). In recent years, digital self-care tools for pupils have been a source of inspiration through which to increase productivity, manage stress and improve health and overall subjective well-being. We perceive that the application of digital self-care tools carries with it certain limitations. An example is that an app focused on self-care may help an individual fall asleep with soothing music or a spoken meditation, but fail to understand why an individual struggles with insomnia. Another example is that digital tools can provide an individual with the tools and processes to address an adverse situation, but fails to assist in identifying the specific triggers (University of the West of Scotland, 2024).

The journey of integrating artificial intelligence in the context of digital tools into mental health care dates back to the mid-twentieth century with the advent of the computer age. The goals of interactive digital applications include the delivery of therapeutic interventions that emerge from evidence-based prevalent mental health conditions. However, advances in artificial intelligence are accompanied with challenges related to privacy, ethics and the preservation of the human element (Olawade et al., 2024). Linking to the central intentions of the paper, we highlight the need for the school social worker and the application of their direct and specific social interventions. In this sense, we also refer to the Code of Ethics for Social Workers and Social Work Assistants of the Slovak Republic (2024), which stipulates that social work is a dynamically developing and complex profession that finds application in various departments and areas of society and is based on the values of social justice, human dignity and the importance of interpersonal relationships.

In this sense, the place of the social worker in the school setting is irreplaceable, since their participation is part of a team that promotes the educational and personal development of all students in the space of the school, the family and their community. We support the thesis that the presence of a school social worker can also have positive benefits on the university campus. Currently, there is a growing need for social workers and other mental health professionals to address the wide range of issues that students encounter in the college environment (Ritter, Vakalahi, and Kiernan-Stern, 2015). The school social worker provides a spectrum of social interventions for the student, their family, and the space in the social environment in which they function, and is therefore also specified as a bridge and link between the student's school, home, and community (Ritter, Vakalahi, and Kiernan-Stern, 2015). The focus of the school social worker is on social work related services and services provided to students, families, communities, schools, and districts. We agree with the statement that the school social worker helps to promote the school's overall mission of providing an appropriate, supportive, and stimulating environment for teaching, learning, and gaining competence and self-confidence (American Council for School Social Work, 2024b).

We underlined the different theses of the conceptual framework on self-care, school social work and digital self-care tools through a theoretical foundation based on an ecological perspective with a person-in-environment and life-model orientation. We have adapted the theoretical and practical treatment to the area of health and subjectively perceived well-being of the individual, which we have also highlighted from the perspective of social work. In relation to the above, we have linked the possibilities of self-care tools and their use in school social work.

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MOŻLIWOŚCI CYFROWYCH NARZĘDZI SAMOOPIEKI I ICH WYKORZYSTANIE W SZKOLNEJ PRACY SOCJALNEJ

Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest konceptualizacja samoopieki w szkolnej pracy socjalnej jako ważnego wskaźnika w życiu uczniów. Samoopieka obejmuje zestaw pozytywnych działań, dzięki którym jednostka jest w stanie zaspokoić własne potrzeby psychologiczne, fizyczne, społeczne, intelektualne i duchowe. Świadomość potrzeby samoopieki i jej praktykowanie przynosi wiele pozytywnych skutków dla ogólnego stanu zdrowia jednostki, w tym osiągnięcie subiektywnego dobrostanu psychicznego, emocjonalnego i fizycznego, a także równowagi życiowej. Założeniem wyjściowym jest podkreślenie specyfiki i wyjątkowości szkolnych pracowników socjalnych, którzy dzięki swojej wiedzy specjalistycznej kompleksowo wspierają uczniów i rodziny. Ramy teoretyczne artykułu obejmują perspektywę ekologiczną, który ujmuje człowieka w jego środowisku naturalnym, z naciskiem na model życia. Głównym przedmiotem zainteresowania to cyfrowe narzędzia samoopieki i ich wykorzystanie w szkolnej pracy socjalnej. Przedstawione tezy, oparte na słowackich i zagranicznych badaniach, prowadzą nas do wniosku, że narzędzia cyfrowe mogą być źródłem inspiracji dla uczniów, dzięki którym można zwiększyć ich wewnętrzną motywację, produktywność oraz utrzymać lub poprawić ich ogólne subiektywne samopoczucie.

Słowa kluczowe: samoopieka; szkolna praca socjalna; perspektywa ekologiczna; przestrzeń online