

The beginnings of educational-psychological counselling in Czechoslovakia: between the system and the child

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Abstract: this study examines the formation of the Czechoslovak system of educational and psychological counselling between the 1960s and the 1980s, showing that its emergence was not the result of a single administrative decision but of a gradual negotiation between professional concepts, institutional frameworks, and ideological constraints. It analyses three key dimensions of this development: the thematic definition of counselling activities, the theoretical and methodological foundations, and the institutional consolidation of the system. The study traces how previously separate strands – vocational guidance, educational counselling, and developmental-psychological approaches – gradually merged into an integrated concept of continuous support for the child, enabling the profile of educational-psychological counselling to take shape within the school system. At the same time, it highlights the persistent tension between professional autonomy and system governance, a tension that gained a pronounced ideological character during the period of normalisation. The study concludes that this historical experience remains relevant: counselling services always operate at the intersection of systemic requirements and the individual needs of the child, and every reform inevitably reopens this delicate balance.

Keywords: educational-psychological counselling, guidance counselling, institutionalization of counselling, education policy, ideology in education

Introduction

Pedagogical-psychological counselling represents a specific domain of profes-

sional support within the education system, aimed at fostering the educational, behavioural and personal development of children¹. Today's counselling system

¹ For the sake of clarity, the term “child“ will be used in the text collectively to refer to all individuals of school-age and adolescence, including children, pupils, students and adolescents.

is regarded as a natural part of the education system, yet its emergence was not the result of a single decision. Rather, it developed gradually through a long process of professional and institutional negotiation, marking a transition from individually fragmented care to a coherently organised system.

The interest in the origins of this system stems from the need to understand its current form. This includes why it is designed the way it is and which professional and societal debates have shaped its conception. The aim of this study is therefore to uncover the underlying logic on which the system was built and the context that must be understood to engage with it meaningfully today or to develop it further. We thus return to its beginnings, where these questions were first articulated.

A historical understanding of these processes helps illuminate the current tension between the standardization of support services and the provision of individualized support to each learner. This issue remains central to contemporary notions of educational literacy, inclusion, and education policy.

The analysis examines three interrelated dimensions of development: the thematic delineation of counselling practice, the theoretical-methodological framework of the system, and its institutional consolidation. It draws on scholarly publications that retrospectively map the evolution of educational counselling

(Kohoutek, 2009; Liberčanová, 2017; Slavíková, 1996), as well as on contemporary sources by authors who were directly involved in shaping the system (Bažány, 1962; Klímová, 1987). The aim is therefore not to reconstruct a complete factual account, but rather to analyse the key conceptual and institutional steps that shaped the current form of the system. For detailed factual accounts, reference can be made particularly to the works of Kohoutek, Liberčanová and Klímová.

Before turning to the historical context, it is useful to outline the current structure of the school counselling system, which serves as a reference framework for understanding its development.

The current system of school counselling in the Czech Republic

The current school counselling system has a two-tier structure that combines the accessibility of support within schools with the expertise of specialised institutions. Such an arrangement enhances schools' autonomy and enables them to respond flexibly to the needs of their pupils. The system is legally anchored in the Education Act No. 561/2004 Coll., as amended, and in implementing Decrees No. 72/2005 Coll. on the provision of counselling services in schools and school counselling facilities and No. 27/2016 Coll. on the education of pupils

with special educational needs and gifted pupils, both as amended.

School level: school counselling team

The establishment of a school counselling team and the appointment of a school counsellor and a school prevention specialist are mandatory for the headteacher of every primary and secondary school. These positions are held by teachers with the required specialised qualifications². In its extended form, the school counselling team also includes a school psychologist and a school special educator.

The school counselling team provides timely and accessible support within the school, offers methodological guidance to teachers, conducts screening to identify pupils with learning difficulties as well as gifted pupils, and serves as the primary point of contact for pupils and their parents.

Regional level: school counselling facilities

School counselling facilities comprise pedagogical-psychological counselling centres and special education centres. Pedagogical-psychological counselling centres primarily support pupils in the so-called mainstream schools³ who experience learning or behavioural difficulties, adaptation problems, or who need assistance with career guidance. Special education centres focus on supporting the education of pupils with disabilities, including assistance with the use of compensatory aids, training in specific skills, and support for their inclusion in mainstream education.

Their teams are interdisciplinary, including a psychologist, a special educator, and a social worker. These centres are the only institutions authorised to issue formal recommendations for educational adjustments through support measures in accordance with Decree No. 27/2016 Coll. (e.g. adjustments to the organisation of instruction, assessment, provision of personnel support, etc.).

² The school counselor is trained in the field of educational and career guidance and in providing support to children with learning and behavioral difficulties. The school prevention methodologist has extended competencies in the field of prevention of risky behavior, promotion of a safe school climate and intervention in crisis situations.

³ In the Czech education system, the term “mainstream schools” refers to mainstream kindergartens, primary schools, and secondary schools. Alongside these, there are also special schools designed for pupils with more severe types of disabilities or needs that cannot be adequately addressed through standard support measures within mainstream education.

The focus of school counselling: At the intersection of education, work, and care

Any counselling system is defined by its scope and focus—by the understanding of what needs it should address and whom it is intended to serve. In the case of the Czechoslovak system of educational counselling, its thematic core developed at the intersection of education, upbringing, and career guidance. Professional discourse evolved along two main lines: one focused on educational and behavioural issues, and the other on career and vocational guidance for young people (Kohoutek, 1998; Slavíková, 1996).

Career guidance, which Klímová described as “a developmentally older specialised counselling service” (1969, p. 14), began to emerge as early as the period of the First Czechoslovak Republic⁴. At that time, vocational guidance centres, organisationally independent of the education system, primarily performed economic-informational and job-placement functions (Kohoutek, 1998, p. 33).

After the Second World War, this field needed to be re-established on a more systematic basis; however, af-

ter 1948⁵, under the influence of ideological requirements, it developed primarily in administrative and economic terms—within labour offices focused on information provision and job placement (Kohoutek, 1998, p. 34).

At the same time, another line of development focused on learning and behavioural difficulties was emerging, although still outside a unified system. Its roots are primarily associated with psychologists working in health care and social services (Liberčanová, 2017; Slavíková, 1996). Their research—for example, the work of Langmeier and Matějček on psychological deprivation Jirásek’s studies on school readiness—contributed to a deeper understanding of the developmental needs of children. The child was considered from a psychological perspective, but always in relation to the family and the social environment.

In the post-war period, the state pursued socio-economic development and the formation of an ideologically loyal and disciplined youth workforce. At the same time, experts emphasised the importance of psychologically healthy and socially well-adjusted individual development. These two orientations often converged in calls for the prevention

⁴ The term “First Czechoslovak Republic” is a historiographical designation commonly used to refer to the period 1918–1938; the official name of the state at that time was the Czechoslovak Republic.

⁵ The year 1948 marks the Communist Party’s seizure of power in Czechoslovakia and the beginning of a period of centrally governed, ideologically oriented education. The education system was integrated into state administration and became an instrument of the state’s social and economic policy.

of behavioural problems, the promotion of school success, and effective vocational placement of young people.

It was therefore considered productive to integrate both lines of development into a comprehensive framework of child support. A unified guidance system began to emerge through a lifespan-oriented (biodromal) approach emphasising the continuity of development and the interconnectedness of individual life stages. Educational, instructional, and vocational issues were understood as parts of a single developmental trajectory that guidance services were intended to support (Klímová, 1969; Kohoutek, 1998; Slavíková, 1996).

Theoretical and methodological approach to the educational guidance and counselling system

The conceptual preparation of a unified educational guidance and counselling system was carried out from the early 1960s under the direction of a working

group composed of leading Czechoslovak experts – Klímová, Bažány, Bárta, Košč, Doležal and Chmelař (Klímová, 1969). Although formally established as a single team, two distinct conceptual strands gradually emerged within it – the Prague and the Brno–Bratislava approaches – differing primarily in their emphasis on the aims and nature of guidance work.

A shared methodological premise of both strands was the conception of the guidance system as one that links empirically validated knowledge with an understanding of the individual and social aspects of human development. Guidance centres were intended to fulfil both practical and research functions: research was to be grounded in the needs of practice while simultaneously providing the theoretical foundations for its further development.

The Prague centre

The Prague approach drew on the influence of the Institute of Human Labour⁶ in Prague and later centred on the Institute for Youth Research and Educational Counselling and Guidance⁷. The Czech

⁶ The Institute of Human Labour is associated primarily with names J. Doležal, J. Stavěl, and Fr. Hyhlík. It followed on from the Psychotechnical Institute, founded in 1920, which focused on the psychology and sociology of work, particularly on the selection of the workers and their adaptation to working conditions. In the 1930s, it was transformed into the Central Psychotechnical Institute, co-founded by the Ministry of Education. After 1939, it was reorganized as the Institute of Human Labour, which developed research in the field of psychology, physiology and sociology of labour. After World War II, it was incorporated into the newly established Czechoslovak Institute of Labour in 1947 and dissolved without replacement in the 1950s.

⁷ The Institute for Social Research on Youth and Educational Counseling was established in the early

conception emphasised issues of educational and vocational guidance relying on psychometric and diagnostic methods. Test results were to be interpreted within a broader social and developmental context – diagnosis was intended not as a tool of selection, but as a means of understanding the pupil’s personality (Kohoutek, 1998; Slavíková, 1996).

The Institute for Youth Research and Educational Counselling and Guidance published the periodical *Výchovný poradce* (*School Counsellor*), primarily intended for teachers and school counsellors. Its content reinforced the pedagogical-psychological focus of the system and reflected its orientation toward educational issues, school achievement, and vocational choice (Liberčanová, 2017).

The Brno–Bratislava Centre

The Brno–Bratislava line, associated with the Research Institute of Child Psychology and Pathopsychology (Výskumný ústav detskej psychológie a patopsychológie, VÚDPaP), emphasised developmental-psychological and therapeutic approaches. It stemmed from the need to gain a deeper understanding of the child’s individual development, as well as

the family and social context, and from the view that counselling should simultaneously fulfil educational, preventive, and therapeutic functions. This approach aimed to develop a comprehensive, interdisciplinary model of child guidance integrating insights from psychology, medicine, pedagogy, and social work. A key figure in this line was Bažány, who advocated the need for etiological analysis of difficulties and conceptualised counselling work as a process of understanding and supporting the child’s development (Bažány, 1962, 1963).

VÚDPaP also published the professional journal *Psychológia a patopsychológia dieťaťa* (*Psychology and Pathopsychology of the Child*), which became a major platform for the publication of research on personality development, psychodiagnostics, and psychotherapeutic interventions. Unlike the Czech journal *Výchovný poradce* (*Educational Counsellor*), which was aimed primarily at pedagogical practice, this publication targeted a professional audience of psychologists and therapists (Liberčanová, 2017; Slavíková, 1996).

1970s at the Faculty of Education of Charles University. Its establishment followed the activities of the Psychological Institute of the Faculty of Arts of Charles University, led by Jan Doležal, where Marta Klímová—later the institute’s director—was also active. Under her leadership, the institute became a center for research in the field of educational counseling and youth career guidance. After 1989, the institution was dissolved.

Conceptual differences reflected in the names of institutions

Differences between the Czech and Slovak approaches were also reflected in the names of counselling institutions. Klímová (1987) pointed out that the designation “psychological-educational clinic and centre for vocational choice”, used in Slovakia, reflected the separation of vocational guidance from the child’s overall development. By contrast, the Czech conception sought to integrate these strands and emphasise the interconnectedness of pedagogical and psychological approaches—an idea embodied in the name “educational-psychological counselling centre.”⁸

This thematic and methodological synthesis—the effort to link educational, developmental, and behavioural approaches—formed the foundation upon which a unified counselling system could be built. In this spirit, considerations of its systemic and organisational anchoring began, forming the subject of the following section.

Systemic anchoring of the counselling system

During the institutionalisation of a unified system of guidance and counselling,

a central question arose as to how this domain should be positioned within the broader system, and how it should be related to existing forms of child and youth care.

Experts in the 1960s built on the prevailing concept at the time of three pillars of care for children and young people—health, social-legal protection, and education (Klímová, 1969; Bažány, 1962, 1963). The health pillar ensured prevention and support for children’s physical development; the social-legal pillar focused on family stability and the protection of children from neglect; and the educational pillar encompassed personality formation through school-based and extracurricular education.

Bažány (1962, 1963), a leading representative of the Slovak line, proposed the establishment of a fourth pillar of child care—a psychological-educational pillar that would place psychological support on an equal footing with the other three domains. He understood psychological-educational support as a comprehensive service for families and schools, aimed at promoting healthy child development as well as preventing developmental and behavioural difficulties. Bažány (1962) emphasised the family and social context of these difficulties.

The Czech line, formulated by Klímo-

⁸ In M. Klímová’s concept, inspiration from the French reformist thinking of P. Langevin and H. Wallon can be recognized, which emphasized the social function of education—a concept consistent with the ideological framework of pedagogy at the time (Liberčanová, 2021).

vá, viewed the guidance and counselling system as part of the educational domain, which ought to be expanded to include psychological aspects. Klímová emphasised the integration of guidance work within the school environment and its alignment with the school's educational and developmental aims.

According to Liberčanová (2017), the Slovak concept was criticised for its excessive psychological focus and for its tendency to separate guidance work from the school setting and from the broader process of shaping the child's personality.

According to contemporary authors (e.g., Dočkal, Kohoutek, Liberčanová), the placement of the guidance and counselling system within the educational pillar was driven more by ideological considerations than by professional consensus. As Dočkal (2017) notes, this development might also have been influenced by Bažány's emigration after 1969, which weakened advocacy for the concept of independent psychological care. The resulting solution thus represented a compromise between professional ambitions and the ideological pressures of the period: the psychological component was retained, yet subordinated to the pedagogical framework and to the administrative control of the school system.

From a professional standpoint, however, this compromise also had certain benefits. It enabled the stabilisation and systematisation of the guidance and

counselling system, allowing it to build on the existing structure of schooling and to become more accessible to the public. As Liberčanová (2017, p. 150) notes, integration into the pedagogical sphere indeed entailed a loss of some professional autonomy, yet it simultaneously fostered greater professionalisation, methodological support, and wider availability of services.

At this stage, we encounter a tension between professional autonomy and institutional stability—an ambivalence typical of any systematisation of professional expertise. In a totalitarian context, however, this relationship takes on a different meaning: institutionalisation ceases to be merely a means of professionalisation and also becomes a tool of ideological control. This raised the question of how to establish a balance between professional decision-making and political-administrative governance—a challenge that became fully apparent in the structure of the emerging system.

Structure and development of the guidance system

The organisational structure of the system reflected the tension between professional autonomy and institutional control, mirroring both the hierarchy of schools and the broader state administration. As Klímová (1979) notes, guidan-

ce institutions operated under a form of “dual dependence” – administratively subordinate to the national committees while professionally directed by the methodological leadership of the education sector. The Ministry of Education defined the overall framework and organisational structure, whereas the Institute for Youth Research and Educational Counselling and Guidance functioned as the main professional authority. As a result, guidance work emerged at the intersection of political-administrative governance and professional expertise.

Within this structure, three mutually interconnected levels of guidance provision gradually developed: school-based, district, and regional. The core of support was intended to be located within the school, backed by regional specialist centres and methodologically aligned within a unified nationwide network.

School-based guidance: The emerging role of the school-based guidance counsellor

The professional profile of school counsellors was the subject of lively debates at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s. The original designation “school psycholo-

gical counsellor” gradually shifted to “school-based guidance counsellor”, reflecting a move from conceiving the counsellor as a specialist psychologist to viewing the role as a pedagogical staff member embedded within the school structure (Liberčanová, 2021). This development reflected a broader controversy regarding the nature of guidance work—whether it should be primarily individual and psychological, or institutionally pedagogical. Over time, the pedagogical conception prevailed, defining the counsellor as a member of the teaching staff responsible for coordinating guidance and counselling support within the school.

The role of school counsellor was initially piloted in selected nine-year basic schools. From 1962, it was implemented nationwide across all nine-year basic schools and, a year later, extended to general secondary schools⁹. From the mid-1960s onwards, specialised post-graduate training began to be offered for the performance of this role.

According to Klímová (1969), the school counsellor was intended primarily to assist the headteacher by coordinating career guidance, monitoring pupils with learning difficulties or exceptional ability, and providing methodological guidan-

⁹ In 1962, the Ministry of Education issued the Directive on the Establishment of Educational Guidance and Counseling System in Nine-Year Primary Schools (Ref. No. 1868/62), and in 1963, the Directive on Education for Career Guidance in General Secondary and Vocational Secondary Schools was published (Ref. No. 18711/63_11/5).

ce to the teaching staff. Individual work with pupils was rather exceptional.

Regional centres as the backbone of guidance practice

Alongside the development of school guidance, the idea of a regional system of specialised support also emerged. A model was provided by the psychological-educational clinics rooted in the Brno-Bratislava tradition. In 1967, the Ministry of Education issued a directive entitled “On the Establishment of Regional Psychological-Educational Centres”, which initiated the creation of additional facilities. Each centre was required to include an affiliated vocational guidance unit.

The remit of these regional centres included gaining insights into child personality development, providing methodological support to the newly established district guidance centres, training school counsellors, and ensuring the provision of expert information in the field of career orientation. Their services were directed primarily towards teachers and parents (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1967).

A unified system: Standardisation of terminology and governance

By the mid-1970s, the process of establishing a comprehensive system of

educational counselling had reached its culmination. After more than a decade of conceptual debate and experimentation, guidance services were formally integrated into the structure of the education system and placed under unified governance. A key document in this process was the Instruction on the System of Educational Counselling within the Competence of the Ministry of Education of the Czech Socialist Republic (1976), which defined the tasks, competencies, and organisational arrangement of the system.

The system comprised three interconnected levels:

- school counsellors,
- district educational-psychological counselling centres,
- regional educational-psychological counselling centres.

At the regional level, psychological and educational clinics were established in the 1960s. In connection with the formation of a unified system and on the basis of the 1976 Instruction of the Ministry of Education of the Czech Socialist Republic, these institutions were gradually transformed into pedagogical-psychological counselling centres. The change in terminology symbolically reflected a shift in emphasis—from a clinical-psychological approach towards a pedagogical-psychological one.

This Instruction was followed by Decree of the Ministry of Education No.

130/1980 Coll. on educational counselling, as amended. At the same time, Act of the Czech National Council No. 76/1978 Coll. on educational institutions, as amended, established a general legislative framework for the functioning of educational institutions. Together, these legal regulations anchored the network of counselling services within the education sector. At the same time, the role of school counsellors was extended to secondary vocational schools and apprenticeship training schools.

The influence of politics and ideology

Political and ideological factors fundamentally shaped the framework within which the counselling system developed. In socialist Czechoslovakia—much as in other totalitarian regimes—the relationship between science and decision-making was governed by what Weiss (1979) terms a political model: expert knowledge was not applied according to its scientific validity but according to its ideological compatibility with the official line.

The humanities, particularly psychology, became a sensitive domain. Approaches that emphasised individuality or innate dispositions were dismissed as bourgeois pseudoscience. By contrast, the conception of so-called Marxist psychology—conceived as a tool for shaping personality through the social

environment and education, especially schooling—was considered ideologically appropriate. In this framework, the school was expected to cultivate the “socialist individual” (Kohoutek, 1998; Liberčanová, 2017).

Ideology and the Transformation of Terminology

The renaming of psychological-educational clinics to educational-psychological counselling centres carried primarily symbolic and ideological significance. As Dočkal (2017) notes, “nothing essential changed” in their activities—the centres continued to carry out diagnostic, intervention, and methodological work, but were newly expected to emphasise the pedagogical dimension and their subordination to the educational system. According to Kohoutek (1998), they remained “scientific-practical, operative, and methodological units,” though with a stronger emphasis on pedagogical leadership and a weakening of psychologists’ autonomy. Liberčanová (2021) adds that even after the renaming, the centres continued to operate at a professional level, indicating that the change represented an ideological shift rather than a professional transformation.

As a consequence, the balance of power between disciplines was transformed: pedagogues gained greater influence over the direction of counselling work than psychologists, thereby

shifting the centre of practice toward the school's educational function at the expense of therapeutic or developmental care (Dočkal, 2017; Kohoutek, 1998). However, as Liberčanová (2017, p. 150) points out, this integration also had positive effects—counselling services expanded, became more firmly embedded in schools, and became more systematic.

Dual subordination and interference in practice

As noted earlier, the counselling system operated under a form of dual subordination—it was professionally and methodologically guided, yet administratively subordinate to state authorities. In its early phase, this structure created a space in which ideological steering could permeate everyday practice, particularly in areas of economic or political significance.

The most visible manifestation appeared in career guidance, where conclusions regarding students' occupational choices were often "optimised" to reflect the current economic needs of the state. According to Liberčanová (2021), counselling services were expected to "broaden the interests" of individuals toward occupations aligned with the planned needs of society. Decision-making was further influenced by methodologists and officials without professional qualifications, whose role was to "direct" the work of specialists (Dočkal, 2017; Liberčanová, 2021).

There were concerns that the counselling system would gradually become an instrument of state educational and employment policy—responsible not only for supporting children but also for fulfilling broader social and economic objectives. Although counsellors strove to maintain professional and ethical consistency in their work, their conclusions and recommendations could be administratively adjusted ("optimised") in accordance with prevailing political priorities.

Over time, however, increasing professionalisation and methodological standardisation took place. While counselling practice remained embedded within the structures of school administration, these developments enabled greater stability and professional expertise (Kohoutek, 1998; Liberčanová, 2017). Ideological pressure did not disappear, but it shifted into the structural background rather than functioning as a direct tool of everyday governance.

Conclusion

The development of the Czechoslovak educational guidance and counselling system in the 1960s–1980s demonstrates that its final form emerged through a gradual process of negotiation among professional concepts, institutional structures, and political constraints. What had originally been separate strands—educational, vocational, and

developmental-psychological—gradually converged into an integrated understanding of continuous support for the child, forming the foundation of subsequent educational-psychological counselling.

Anchoring the system within the education system also revealed that counselling services inevitably arise at the intersection of two logics: the systemic requirements and the individual needs of the child. The ideological framework of the 1970s intensified this ambivalence and altered the balance between professional autonomy and institutional steering.

At the same time, the development of counselling in the analysed period cannot be reduced solely to its ideological function. The analysed historical studies show that counselling services retained a significant professional and practical role even under conditions of political constraints. Alongside institutional and ideological pressures, their activities also consistently included

professional care for children with learning and behavioural difficulties, developmental complications, milder forms of intellectual disability, as well as for gifted children. Although this clinical-pedagogical dimension was often addressed only marginally in historical syntheses, it nevertheless constituted an important part of everyday counselling practice and contributed to maintaining continuity and the gradual professionalisation of professional work within the system.

From a contemporary perspective, this historical development serves as a reminder that no reform of counselling services—whether related to support measures, inclusion, or career guidance—can avoid the question of how to connect the logic of the system aims with the logic of individual development. Counselling practice consistently takes shape at the intersection of these two perspectives, and maintaining this balance remains a persistent challenge for current school counselling.

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