



International Network for School Social Work

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Mental health in schools Insights from the Asia Network of School Social Work

The Asia Network of School Social Work

In 2019 a small group of school social work experts and professional association representatives from Korea, Singapore, Japan and Taiwan met in Japan and organized a network of school social workers in Asia. The Board of 2 to 3 persons from each country organizes an international conference every 2 years and issues newsletters that focus on issues of common concern.

The ANSSW Newsletter of March 2022

The most recent newsletter, edited by Melissa Lim-Ler, focused on “School Social Work and Mental Health in Asian Countries”. The articles from four school social workers reported on the mental health of the school population. Case studies of students highlighted the intensive and extensive services that school social workers in Asia provide when students have major emotional problems.

Japan

Yumi Tokunaga, school social worker from Kumamoto Prefecture, described working with four students (from elementary through junior high school) who had some of the problems revealed by the Ministry of Education’s 2019 survey of school social worker utilization. The problems include severe self-harm, school refusal, addiction to internet and games, absenteeism and reclusiveness. Yumi helped teachers understand the students’ complex problems, met with parents, made referrals to and coordinated with mental health agencies, worked directly with the students and built up supports within the school for these students. The cases illustrate the role of the school social worker in working with students with mental health problems. Yumi points out the lack of appropriate psychiatric services and pediatricians. With serious mental health issues on the rise, it is most helpful when the school social worker is available in the school and able to communicate with teachers daily making it easier to intervene early to engage the school’s support system and provide help directly to student and the parents, as well as collaborating with other institutions.

Korea

Soon Hee Lee has been working as an education welfare project worker for 16 years in a Middle School in Daegu. She conducted a study to compare the levels of stress, depression and self-

mutilation among students before and after the Covid-19 outbreak to find implications for school social workers' response. The increases she found suggest that a wide range of supportive programs are needed including educational programs for families, outdoor activities, play opportunities, one-on-one face-to-face counseling and counseling by e-mail. A detailed case study illustrates how one school social worker provided a wide range of services for several months to a middle school student who was dealing with major life changes during the chaos of the pandemic. In response to the extensive care, the student has shown gratifying progress in school, rebuilt a healthy relationship with his mother and made substantial emotional growth.

Singapore

Tan Yi Ying, a core member of the School Social Work Chapter in Singapore, reports that the Covid-19 pandemic has focused national attention on the mental health of youth. Surveys from the National Youth Council during 2020 show that mental well-being was a challenge for over half of students polled. School social workers from the School Social Work Chapter of the Singapore Association of Social Workers (SASW) reported in September 2021 on their findings from a youth survey, showing the difficulty that youth face in seeking help. In response school social workers have proposed educating students, parents and teachers about mental health. They recommended shifting the focus of education to allow teachers to establish greater trust with their students. Mental health programs led by peers and mindfulness practices in schools were recommended. In 2021 the Education Minister announced plans for mental health programs that mirror the recommendations of school social workers. The government is aware of gaps in mental health service and will set up a national well-being office. This quote from the Minister of Education shows that societal change is needed. *“Our approach should not only be to strengthen the overall system of support, but to engender a much more caring, much more nurturing environment in our society”*.

Taiwan

Shu-han Tsai, President of the Taiwan Association of School Social Work, reported that incidents of self-injury and suicide have been increasing year by year. Family issues such as unemployment, substance abuse, domestic violence and parent-child conflict have contributed to students' emotional problems. The article gives a case study that illustrates how childhood trauma impacts the ways students handle emotions. The student responded with self-harm and violence to a pattern of beatings and neglect that had existed in the family through three generations. The social worker helped by providing connections between the school and medical care, while helping the family to understand the child's behavior and find better ways to interact. The school community needed help to deal with the student's violence towards self and others. Advocating for the student's right to education, helping the school establish and practice appropriate crisis responses and working towards successful interactions between teachers and students are all part of the social worker's responsibilities.

Uncertainty. Loneliness. Grief.

These powerful emotions have enveloped the lives of many millions of children, young people and families. Children and young people could feel the impact of COVID-19 on their mental health and well-being for many years to come.

The State of the World's Children 2021, UNICEF Report