



International Network for School Social Work

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About the situation of School Social Work in Japan

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Beginnings

In 1985 Eizaburo Yamashita conducted a study for his social work thesis on the need for school social work in Tokorozawa City. The superintendent of the School Board was interested in the findings and offered him a part-time position. Mr. Yamashita worked for the school from 1986 to 1998, providing services to students with behavioral problems and others who were not attending school. Since school social work was unknown in Japan, Mr. Yamashita advocated from then on for school social work to be implemented. He gave speeches and interviews, wrote articles and books. By 2000 the government was trying to find ways for agencies to cope with the increasing numbers of cases of child abuse. The Ministry of Education organized a research team to deal with this. Mr. Yamashita participated in the team and he continued to press for school social work. During this study the team accompanied government people to observe school social work in the US and Canada. The team recommended introducing school social work to facilitate collaboration among agencies serving children.

School social work is introduced

In 2008 the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology officially started the School Social Work Program. The cost of hiring 944 social workers was covered by the government. Only 26% of these workers were certified social workers, the rest having a variety of qualifications including teaching or psychology certification. The next year the government funding was cut to one third and the rest of the budget was to be picked up under several different projects by each municipality.

With an increase seen in child poverty the government suggested placing one part-time school social worker in each junior high school and its feeder elementary schools, but this has not been achieved. In 2020, 2,859 people were working as school social workers, more than 60% of these were certified social workers and 34% were qualified teachers. There are 3.5 million elementary and junior high school children so the current level of service is not sufficient to provide adequate service.

The way school social workers are deployed varies by municipality. In some locations the school social worker works at one school, while in others the practitioner serves several schools, sometimes working from one school as a base. The most common type of placement is the “dispatch type”, where the school social worker is dispatched when a school requests the service for a case. In this type of placement the service is often provided after the problems have become very difficult. It is difficult to do prevention and early intervention under the “dispatch type” of placement.

Another problem that makes it difficult to show effectiveness is that many, if not most, school social workers are hired on a part-time basis. In 2021 the School Social Work Association of Japan (SSWAJ) surveyed school social workers. Of the 88 who responded 90% of them were part-time workers. Although a small sample, the survey indicates that how hard it may be to show the effectiveness of having a full-time service.

Recent needs of school children

During the COVID-19 pandemic, most primary and secondary schools were abruptly closed with hardly any preparation or support for children and families until schools opened again several months later. With restrictions on home visits, it was very difficult for school social workers to reach the children and families who needed support. After schools closed, the number of children who do not go to school rapidly increased, and it is anticipated that disparities in academic ability and advancement and socio-cultural capital will become even more apparent in the future.

The need for school social workers to act to guarantee the rights of children, through direct service and social action, is growing. Individual casework is much needed. There is almost no macro-level activity such as lobbying the educational administration to improve conditions for children and families. The problem of “young carers”, even at elementary and Junior High level, who provide care for their families is receiving attention. The Tokyo Metropolitan Government had launched a model for solving needs of young carers and will bear the budget for the increase in school social work personnel to help meet the need in fiscal years 2022-2024.

What is next

There are many problems in Japanese schools for school social workers to address, including poverty, bullying, child abuse, non-attendance and issues for children with developmental disabilities. There are also problems within the school system itself that require attention from all stake-holders including school social workers. Although school social work has grown, the conditions for effective work (full-time employment, improvement of qualifications and inadequate salaries) have not been established. It is time for school social workers to act together to build up their power to create national policies for their professional status and to work for a better society for children. At the same time the SSWAJ is providing workshops and lectures for school social workers to build skills for working with school children. The focus is on child rights and specific needs in the school population such as children who refuse school, children with developmental disorders and other current topics.

Meanwhile we can say that school social work is growing and being extended to all levels from nursery school through university. This is an important time to spread the values that we hold dear to meet children’s needs and keep our practice child-centered.