



International Network for School Social Work

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Contact mhuxtable@olympus.net

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The experiences of early-career school social workers in the U.S. and implications for countries new to school social work

Ozan Selcuk, PhD, Assistant Professor, ozan.selcuk@erdogan.edu.tr

Research on school social work in Illinois

I am an assistant professor of social work at Recep Tayyip Erdogan University in Turkiye, and currently a visiting international scholar at Loyola University, Chicago, Illinois. From January to December 2022, I am researching the perceptions and experiences of school social workers in US schools in terms of education, training, and professional orientation. I should emphasize that school social work is not officially adopted in Turkiye, but only exists in voluntary pilot projects. My goal is to contribute to the initiatives to officially introduce school social work in Turkiye.



Firstly, I familiarized myself with school social work to learn about the system of how one is hired as a school social worker in the US. In Illinois, you can earn a bachelor's degree in social work (BSW) from an accredited university and pursue a master's degree (MSW) with a specialization in school social work. See Loyola University details at <https://www.luc.edu/socialwork/academics/graduate/msw/curriculum/schools/>. Once you receive your degree, you must complete an internship as part of your professional training. Upon completion, you will be eligible to take the licensing exam for a Professional Educator License (PEL) for endorsement as a school social worker. Once you are licensed, you can begin working as a school social worker. In the US, states vary in requirements for a school social work license. In Turkiye, only a unified system can be implemented in schools, since education has a centralized system.

Secondly, I interviewed 20 school social workers in the early part of their career in Illinois, Arizona, and Wisconsin. The lived experiences of these newly minted school social workers provided a basis for understanding the relationship between school social work education and professional practice.

School Social Work Education

As defined by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), school social work is a specialized area of practice within the broader field of social work. School social work education consists of a master's degree that requires completion of social work courses in policy and practice. However, most of my study participants indicated that they received few courses directly related to school social work, which themselves were not sufficient to cover all school social work topics, such as child development, family dynamics, educational systems, relevant laws and regulations.

School Social Work Training

Field work is an important component of the school social work training. Students work in a variety of urban and suburban public schools and have the opportunity to build relationships with students, families, school personnel, and the community at large. When study participants were asked to describe their field practice, almost all participants indicated that hands-on experience, having their own cases, and good supervision were of utmost importance. Some of the participants were fortunate that their supervisors did their best to provide space for them to gain practical experience and to give them immediate feedback during their field practice.

Professional practice

The professional orientation of school social work has changed over time. The profession's focus has shifted from direct services to preventive work, with the goal of helping students before they need intensive intervention. However, when study participants were asked about their roles and responsibilities in the schools, they gave varied responses, implying that each school (or school district) has its own focus in practice. The majority of participants indicated that they are primarily micro-focused, working with students one-on-one. Social-emotional learning is the most important issue when working with children. Some participants indicated that they are more mezzo-oriented, working with groups and families, especially if there is more than one school social worker at the school. Lack of social work supervision was a concern, often not provided for in the school's budget.

Implications for Turkiye and international school social work scholars

Clearly, school social work is a mature specialty of social work in the US and has many implications for countries that, like Turkiye, do not yet have a school social work model, but are working toward establishing it. School social workers are an essential component of school mental health care, and the curriculum, field training, and professional practice ideally allow school social workers to provide a wide range of services and interventions.

Turkiye has 22.7 million children and 18 million of them are school age. Currently mental health services are provided by school counselors and one counselor may be available for every 1000 students. This is a great burden for them. It is clear that school mental health services in Turkiye can be advanced with the hiring of school social workers. Although there are gaps between the training for school social work and professional practice, the national school social work model in the US and the findings of my study provide a comprehensive understanding and deep insights for the development of a school social work model in Turkiye.

I hope that my findings can also contribute to school social work initiatives in countries that are not implementing school social work as yet. More information: ozan.selcuk@erdogan.edu.tr.