



International Network for School Social Work

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School Social Work in France: *Le service social scolaire*

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Margit was born in Germany where she studied to be a social worker. Having spent a year working in France in a school for pupils with behavioral and emotional problems, she decided to write her bachelor's thesis on school social work in France focusing on some of the commonalities and differences in *le service social scolaire* and *Schulsozialarbeit*. We provide the following introduction to school social work in France based on Margit's study and on information from the websites of Education Authorities of several Departments of France. We hope to be able to welcome French school social workers into the International Network and to learn more about current issues in *le service social scolaire*.

Le service social scolaire

School social work in France is grouped with school health (together with the school doctor and school nurse) under the term *service medico-social*. The official job title is *assistante de service social scolaire*, colloquially called *l'assistante sociale scolaire*. Historically the school social worker worked as an assistant to the school doctor to help check the spread of communicable diseases and conducting hygiene education.

Currently, 3200 school social workers (mostly women) are employed and paid by the French Ministry of Education. They provide services to all children and teenagers in public and private schools, colleges and vocational schools, as well as to school staff. Policies for conducting the service were issued by the Ministry in 1991 via Circular 91-248 of 11.9.1991, which set out guidelines for the role. Special social work advisors have a separate role in helping to coordinate the work of the school social workers with the school rector. This hierarchy, in which the school social workers are responsible to the Ministry of Education, gives them official standing in the educational establishment. It also confers a certain independence from the school even while working at the school.

School social work role

The role involves direct services to pupils and staff to promote personal and social development. There is a special focus on marginalized or deprived pupils and their families to improve access to education, help remove personal and social barriers to education and provide assistance with personal and social problems. They have specific responsibilities in various issues including child protection, absenteeism, educating children with disabilities, prevention of risk behaviors, financial help, advocacy and assisting families. The role includes mediation between school, pupil and family. Pupils can speak with the school social worker with complete protection of their privacy. The pupil's issues can also be discussed with school staff in the interest of the student with the permission of the pupil and family, but without disclosing intimate details. However, in situations where there is abuse, the school social worker has a duty to disclose the information. All social work methods such as group-work, case management, community organization and empowerment are used. Often the work involves consulting with various other community partners such as mental health centers, medical services and local social agencies. Conducting prevention activities to create a school setting where children are successful and protected is also an important role.

This description of the goals, role and activities of *le service social scolaire* shows that it is fundamentally similar to what we know about school social work in many other countries. It has a strong central authority influencing how the service is provided and the duties of the social worker and that aspect is different from the situation in countries such as the United States, Germany and Canada where school social work services vary a great deal depending on the State, local authority or school district.

Ideally a school social worker should have his or her own office in the school building, equipped with materials, necessary technology and office supplies. However, the practice is still far from this ideal in many places. Most school social workers cover more than one school and it is only in *Zones d'Education Prioritaires (ZEP)* where the school social worker is responsible for a single school. These are zones in disadvantaged areas (with high unemployment, high percentage of students who are not native French speakers and many pupils who have repeated a grade). In a move that is similar to the introduction of compensatory education in other developed countries, schools in these zones are given more financial resources in order to increase educational opportunity by reducing class size, developing innovative strategies and mobilizing local resources. The program was started in 1982 with the goal of raising educational achievement. After three decades, results have not been impressive and there continues to be much discussion (not only in France, but also in other countries such as England and the US) about how to reduce educational and social inequality. Social work is a partner for promoting social justice in *Zones d'Education Prioritaires* and for marginalized pupils in every school.

***Assistante sociale scolaire: un métier* (Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2004) by Nadine Biou-Neme and Sylvie Journet** gives an in-depth account of school social work practice in France with many case examples. It describes the specialized, confidential role of school social workers in listening and reflecting. This position enables them to develop a trusting relationship with pupils in which a dialogue can take place. The social worker is one of the adults in the school who can work on improving relationships. In addition to working on individual social problems, the school social worker also takes a lead in school teams initiating prevention programs. This book gives an overview of the many facets of social work in schools, and also deals with child protection and child abuse prevention. This book is written as a testimonial to school social work. It aims at transmitting information and experience, while raising questions and sharing shortcomings.