



International Network for School Social Work

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Electronic Newsletter December 2013

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School social work behind the success of student achievement in Finnish schools

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Finnish schoolchildren have achieved good results in the International Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). There have been fewer Finnish schoolchildren with low marks in PISA surveys, in large part due to remedial teaching and student welfare work. Students are well looked after, especially those who are disadvantaged.

One key element of student welfare is social work carried out in schools. School social workers (*koulukuraattorit*, also *skolkuratorer* in Swedish language schools) have been employed since the 1960's. Students are referred to school social workers mainly for disturbing behavior and absenteeism. Students' basic problems have remained the same even if they, in the school social workers' opinion, have become more prevalent and more difficult. Social work methods have become more diverse. There has been a shift from working alone to working in a multi-disciplinary team. The lack of resources has moved the point of focus from prevention work to intervention.

From the beginning the school social work role has been defined by the school social worker's personality and local needs and circumstances. School social work has not been centrally directed. Instead social workers have been free to develop their work in the direction best suited to them and local needs. It was not until 1990 that school social work was made statutory when it was included in the Child Welfare Act. Then in 2003 students were, according to the Basic Education Act, given the right to services provided by the school social worker even though the actual work done was still regulated under the Child Welfare Act.

Nowadays, according to *Koulukuraattorit-Skolkuratorer r.y.*, the School Social Work Association of Finland, (<http://www.talentia.fi/koulukuraattorit>) the need for social work in the school environment is increasing. The Association recommends in the upcoming Student Welfare Act an increase in staff so that no worker has over 600 students or more than three schools. Currently in some municipalities a single school social worker can have a caseload of 2000 students. New positions have not been opened to keep pace with the increase in problems in our postmodern society. Finnish comprehensive schools have at the moment over 500 school social workers, not all of whom meet the legal qualifications of a social worker. It has been

proposed that the legal requirement for a school social worker should be that of a social worker, which means University schooling. Currently the required qualifications for a school social worker have been mixed and hiring practices have not been consistent around the country. Historically school social work has been more effectively resourced in Southern Finland than in Northern Finland.

The history of school social work has been marked by constant discussion of the correct administration it should fall under. The majority of school social workers work within the school system, others in social services and a small number work within other administrations. The most effective approach would be if a school social worker could work in one school as part of that school's staff, functioning as an equal member of the school team, an expert in their field, in partnership with the school principal, but not in a subordinate role. In this way the school social worker could provide an unbiased perspective of the students' legal rights. This would enable more preventative work and students and school social workers would know each other better.

School social workers in Finland place a high value on their profession and their expertise and, in their opinion, teachers view school social workers as equals. The school principal is the most important partner in collaboration. Their influence as a generator of the general atmosphere in a school is deeply felt. Other important partners are the school's special education teacher and school nurse. Outside of the school environment the school social worker collaborates with child protection services, the family clinic and youth services. Increasingly more collaboration is being done with the parents of students and also the input of the multi-disciplinary team appointed to dealing with issues of student welfare is vital.

School social workers feel that the most rewarding part of their work is seeing the vigor of young people. Furthermore, the diversity of work practices and independence are appreciated as well as positive feedback about their work. Good communication and interaction skills, courage and assertiveness, patience, empathy and honesty were considered the most essential characteristics of a school social worker.

Research results of my doctoral thesis (*"It's a lot like the person who does it": The work of a school social worker in the upper level of the comprehensive school*) showed that discussion is seen as the most relevant work method in school social work. Primarily this means conferences and consultations. Conversation is also a central element in the following more specific work methods that school social workers refer to: networking, solution-focused work, classroom work, guidance and advising and Neurolinguistic Programming, a brief form of therapy using images. Listening, interviewing, motivational interviewing, student support work, home visits, drawing and drama were also mentioned. Home visits were made by 95% of school social workers. They were usually carried out in cases of absenteeism. In cases of substance abuse and bullying school social workers intervened immediately.

What enables school social workers to keep working in these challenging circumstances? School social workers themselves state that they receive strength from the work environment and the work itself. In other words they gain vitality from the same source that drains it, work feeds on itself. One factor that is especially rewarding is the shared observation of school social workers that the students are starving for the attention of adults. Although school social workers report sometimes feeling isolated in their work, the self-determination they enjoy was acknowledged as a positive aspect of their work.