



International Network for School Social Work

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Electronic Newsletter May 2010

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School Social Work in Switzerland: A new field of action amongst established youth services.

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School social work (Schulsozialarbeit in German) is a relatively new field of work in Switzerland. In the German speaking part of Switzerland, school social work was established in the mid-1990's and has expanded rapidly since. It is the fastest growing service amongst all youth services in Switzerland. By the end of 2009, there were approximately 450 school social workers employed in approximately 1000 schools.

Switzerland is a federal republic. Each of the 26 cantons has its own system of social work. Some cantons have developed or are developing their own regulations mandating communities to provide school social work and covering fully or partly all expenses. In most cantons, every community decides whether school social work should be initiated and how it is financed, while in a few regions school social work is organized by the canton. Equally heterogeneous is the students to social worker ratio: Avenir Social, the Social Work Association of Switzerland, recommends a full-time school social worker per 400 students, which is achieved only in a few schools so far. More commonly there are 1000 to 1500 students per social worker. At the moment, most school social workers work at secondary schools with pupils (age 12 to 16) from lower-achieving academic levels. Also there is a growing number of school social workers in elementary schools and preschools. School social work provided for pupils at schools on higher academic levels is still an exception.

School social work is organized in different ways. In some communities school social work is responsible to the department of social affairs, in other communities school social workers are employed by the school or by the department of education. In other cases representatives of both departments and of the school share the responsibility. Normally the school social workers have an office directly at school where they can see students.

School social work in Switzerland can only be understood in connection with the school system. The Swiss school system is highly selective. Pupils are separated after primary school into different academic levels, depending on their previous school achievement. The lowest level (with different names in each canton like Realschule or Oberschule) offers poorer prospects for later participation in the labour market and the students have come to be stigmatized. The selection decision is highly correlated with the socio-economic background of the students. According to PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), the Swiss school system has the second-worst record of participating countries relating to equal opportunity for all socioeconomic groups to achieve at higher academic levels. In addition children of families with foreign nationality are overrepresented in the lowest academic level of secondary school. It is surely no coincidence that school social work exists predominantly in the schools with lower

academic levels. School social work deals with pupils “having problems” or “causing trouble”, but on closer inspection a part of the problems are the result of inequities in the social system.

The main reasons for the implementation of school social work are problems such as violence, problems in families, problems between pupils and teachers and deviant behaviour such as alcohol abuse or vandalism. Teachers feel overwhelmed by disruptive behaviour during lessons, child neglect and conflicts between students. The general public discusses incidents of violence in schools and puts pressure on politicians and school authorities to act. School social work is considered to be a possible answer to these problems and is accordingly seen in a positive light.

School social workers are salaried like other social workers, however earning less than teachers. This results in a subliminal power difference, with a subtle effect on the working relationships between school administrators, teachers and social workers. This difference could impact the school social worker’s effectiveness, which depends on the school staff understanding and respecting the social worker’s methods and being willing to collaborate.

The role and practice of school social work in Switzerland varies. It refers to the needs of pupils, teachers and parents and offers support that is easy to access. The main goals are to find fair solutions for problems and to support pupils in their personality development. Intervention with ongoing problems and prevention are both included.

School social workers counsel pupils with regard to problems at school, at home and with peers. They advise parents and consult with teachers. School social workers offer individual counseling and case-management for personal problems, group counseling and classroom interventions in cases of conflicts and bullying.

Conducting prevention projects (about issues such as alcohol and drug abuse, sexuality, health and interpersonal skills) depends predominantly on the number of pupils school social workers have to deal with and how much time is left. An important aspect of prevention is school climate. School social workers work together with teachers and the school board to improve school climate, e.g. with establishing school rules or with giving pupils a say in student councils.

In the German speaking part of Switzerland, social work has been evaluated, mostly by process evaluations. This provides the field of school social work an increasing amount of knowledge based on research data. For example, in evaluations of school social work in Switzerland, the majority of pupils said they liked school better since school social work had been offered in their school, even if they had no direct contact with the school social worker. The fact that they could visit a school social worker in case of need made them feel better. These evaluations show that school social work constitutes an important link between school and social institutions. When a pupil has serious problems, school social work intervenes at an early stage and initiates further social support, including connecting pupils and schools to youth services. With school social work, children and juveniles can get support and problems can be solved *before* they cause trouble or show behavioural problems.

The main Internet platform for school social work in Switzerland is www.schulsozialarbeit.ch. The web site informs about school social work and provides professional articles, overviews the locations of school social work in the German part of Switzerland and gives communities the possibility to publish their job advertisements for school social work.

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