



International Network for School Social Work

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School social work (*Schulsozialarbeit*) in Germany **Anja Turner (Hanover) and Hermann Rademacker (Munich)**

School social work: through the schools or from youth services?

In Germany we find two types of employment for social workers. They are either employed by the school administration under the supervision of the headmaster or they are employed by a youth welfare agency contracted to provide the service to schools.

Most social workers employed directly by schools are in North Rhine-Westfalia, Lower Saxony, Hamburg, and Berlin. These are those *Länder* (states), which, as a result of school reform, established in the early 1970's many *Gesamtschulen* (comprehensive schools) to educate secondary school pupils of all abilities together. These schools employed social workers for extra-curricular activities, rather than for specific social work with pupils who needed special help.

In the other 16 *Länder*, for example Rhineland-Palatine, Bavaria and Saxony, the majority of school social workers are employed by youth welfare agencies, a service of local Government. In this case the community decides whether to establish school social work or not and administers the program, receiving some financial support for personnel from the *Land*.

Recently, school social workers are also serving a small but increasing number of primary schools. We do not yet have complete data about the provision of service or the number of school social workers. However the German Union for Education and Science has started work on official statistics for this field.

A quick glance at the relationship between schools and youth welfare

The responsibility for schooling and for youth services is different in Germany from in many other countries. The school system is mainly responsible for instruction, but not for the social welfare of its pupils. The *Länder* parliaments pass education legislation and the Education Ministries set the curriculum, the standards and employ the teachers. Teachers are evaluated strictly on their teaching ability and they are expected to attend school only for their lessons and for conferences. Traditionally, school finishes at noon and students have neither meals nor do they participate in any extra-curricular activities at school. On the other side we have the field of youth services, which usually have little institutionalized connection with the schools. Traditionally youth services provided services for those young people who caused problems in schools. It is difficult to overcome this traditional understanding of the role of youth services as agencies delegated the responsibility for troubled and trouble-making young people, and to establish instead a kind of shared responsibility with the schools for these young people.

This traditional distribution of responsibilities between the school system, governed by the *Länder*, and the youth services, financed and regulated by communities, was codified in German youth welfare

legislation in 1924. Then in 1990, in parallel with the reunification of East and West Germany, a new Children and Youth Services Act came into force. In this act, for the first time, youth services were asked to co-operate with schools to offer extra services for those socially disadvantaged and individually impaired young people who need special support to meet the demands of school. After German reunification in 1990, almost all of the eastern *Länder* started school social work programs, often accompanied by research. The new legislation also supported the development and expansion of school social work in the western *Länder*, most of which also now offer school social work.

Some facts about the German school system

At the secondary level Germany has a highly selective school system, based on aptitude, career aspiration and school performance. Attempts in the 1970's in a few *Länder* to replace this system with comprehensive schools did not succeed, leaving in place a school system with both comprehensive and selective schools.

The "PISA Shock" of 2007, in which Germany discovered that it no longer ranked at the top of international education rankings, resulted in a broad variety of reform activities which however do not touch the basics of the selective structure of the school system. The main reforms are related to the improvement and expansion of pre-school education, the establishment of nation-wide education standards and the implementation of extra-curricular activities in a program of all-day schools (*Ganztagsschulen*). The latter program is usually handled by co-operation between schools and youth services. Independent of these post-PISA reform developments, school social work expanded in the eastern *Länder* following German reunification. Here one of the main reasons was the discontinuation of the extra-curricular activities in secondary schools run by the socialist youth organisation, which now were seen as indoctrination. This "School Social Work Boom" as some call it was accompanied by expanded research activities, and this also was important for the development of school social work in Germany by raising the professional status of school social work.

Fields of school social work

School Social Workers in Germany are now working both with pupils needing special support and with leisure education in non-formal settings with the aim of informal learning. Karsten Speck's research found the following types of activities characterizing school social work in Germany:

- Counselling for pupils with special needs, including personal, school or family problems
- Socio-pedagogical groupwork for social learning through projects in classes or outside school
- Informal opportunities for conversation and social contacts during school and leisure activities
- Involvement in developing extra-curricular programs at school, especially for social development
- Consultation with teachers and parents
- Collaboration with a variety of youth services and other community agencies.

School social work associations in Germany

School Social Workers often work with little professional contact with other school social workers. Their job security depends on a changing political environment. Consequently, school social workers in many *Länder* have established school social work professional associations to provide mutual support and professional communication. Some examples are the [*Landesarbeitsgemeinschaft Schulsozialarbeit Niedersachsen*](#) and the [*School Social Work Network in Baden-Württemberg*](#). [*The Education and Science Workers' Union*](#) (a labor union) provides support for school social workers as well as for teachers. Another nationwide association, the *Kooperationsverbund Schulsozialarbeit* (Cooperative Union for School Social Work), seeks to connect the separate *Länder* associations to promote national communication and also to foster debate about professional standards.