



International Network for School Social Work

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Current situation of school social work in Japan

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Trend of school social work in recent years

It was a sudden announcement when the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, and Science & Technology (MEXT) decided in 2007 to initiate a school social work project in Japan. According to the MEXT, the project would start in April 2008 with a budget of approximately fifteen million US dollars and be implemented in 141 areas. The announcement surprised us social workers who had been trying to introduce school social work into schools in Japan for years, since it was scarcely known by people in the school settings and even among social work professionals. The MEXT expected school social workers to be knowledgeable both about social work and education and to have experience in either area. This presented a big question as to who would be the school social workers without any resource for providing the personnel.

Although there were some important issues unsolved, the project was initiated in April 2008. Two hundred ninety four school districts launched the project and 994 school social workers were employed on a part-time basis. Twenty four percent of the social workers had a national certificate of social work and the rest were individuals without knowledge and experience regarding social work. There were very few who knew about school social work even among personnel with a social work certificate. It meant there was little hope to expect good services.

The second surprise in terms of the MEXT's policy was reduction of the budget in the program's second year down to the one third of the 2008 fiscal year budget, without reviewing the results of the project. The MEXT demanded that the local government bear the other two thirds of the budget. A significant number of local governments were obliged to discontinue the service in 2009, as they could not afford it.

Although the number decreased in the second year, it began to gradually increase from 2010 and recovered up to 784 school social workers by 2012. The MEXT planned to extend the number to as many as one thousand in 2014. The reason why the number has been growing despite the budget cut back seems to be the effect of the services delivered by school social workers in many places. It appeared that the service was highly valued.

Roles of the school social worker defined by the MEXT

According to the MEXT the goal of the school social worker is to help children with difficulties

solve their problems. The role of the school social worker is outlined in five categories, as follows:

1. Intervention into children's environments such as families and local communities.
2. Networking, linking and coordinating with agencies.
3. Building and supporting a team with school staff.
4. Support, consultation and provision of information to parents and school staff.
5. Training school staff.

The MEXT does not refer to any philosophy or principle of social work, but just to roles and function. It allows any person to be a school social worker regardless of his/her background.

In 2012 school social workers dealt with cases involving non-attendance (24%), problems associated with family circumstances (24%), developmental disorders (13%), poor peer relationship (6%), child abuse (6%) and others.

Unstable working conditions and services

In spite of the unstable policy of the MEXT, school social work in Japan seems to keep developing. However, there are issues to be solved. The first concern is the instability of working conditions of the school social workers. The social workers work from one day to four days a week. No more than 1% of social workers are employed on a full time basis, which means they can hardly make a living. As a result, a lot of school social workers are obliged to have two jobs, causing social workers to leave the position and resulting in lack of continuity for children and families.

The second issue is the ambiguity in the standards of services. As mentioned earlier, 24% of the school social workers had the national certificate of social work in 2008. The ratio went up to 43% in 2012. Yet, the majority still does not have training in social work. Although there are some opportunities for training in each district, the content of the training is far from adequate.

Future implications

Demand is growing for effective counter measures against the problems of school children such as bullying, non-attendance, behavioral problems and abuse, and with this demand the need for school social work. However, there is a question about the competency of school social workers many of whom do not have a social work background. It is crucial to provide proper training for such workers and at the same time to arrange a systematic training program within a social work degree program. Another critical issue is working conditions. As stated before, the school social workers' position is extremely unstable and is made light of although their job is demanding. It is crucial to improve their circumstances in order to secure stable services for children and their families. As there are other pressing issues, there is much for school social work advocates still to do.

News items from the Japan Broadcasting Corporation in July 2014 report that the government has compiled guidelines (to be approved this month by the Cabinet) for fighting poverty among children. A 2012 survey estimates that 16.3% of Japanese children under the age of 17 live in poverty. That's up 0.6 percentage points from the previous survey, and a record high since the survey began in 1985. The plan involves educational support measures including increasing the number of school social workers, who will work with both schools and local authorities. The goal is to provide equal opportunity to children who live in poverty.

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