



**International Network for School Social Work**

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### **A Reflection on Experiences in a School Social Work Placement: Relationship Building at a School System in China**

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Schools in China focus strongly on the academic performance of students. School social workers must therefore respond to problems with students' academic performance and initiate services accordingly. Nonetheless, a number of professionals are utilizing the unique perspective, knowledge and skills of social work to collaborate with school and community, promoting a holistic approach to students' needs, resulting in huge progress in the development of school social work in China.

According to the literature, Shanghai was the first city in Mainland China to develop school social work services, starting in 2003. Based on the second author's experiences in South China, a pilot project of school social work services was first funded by the local government in Canton (now called Guangzhou) in 2012. The project is now being operated by a local NGO serving 13 primary and secondary schools. Please refer to the Newsletter published in July 2016 for the details.

In this article, the first author reflects on her experiences of fieldwork placement at a junior high school in Guangzhou. The placement was conducted from October 2018 to April 2019. It was supervised by the second author. This junior high school is one of the schools served by the NGO Qichuang. The number of students of the school (grades 7 through 9) is around 900. Two full-time social workers (one of them is the supervisor of the other) are stationing at the school 5 days a week. Several years ago, teachers were troubled by behavioral problems among the students. Smoking, drinking and fighting happened frequently within this school. Hence, the school started to emphasize the students' moral education, aiming to reduce and prevent behavioral deviation. In order to have better management, the school assigned a director to work on the students' moral education and to cooperate closely with the school social workers. In this article, the authors would like to share the process of rapport building during the fieldwork placement, so as to illustrate how the ideas and practice of school social work could be indigenized in a Chinese context.

#### **1. The Foundation of School Social Work Services: Understanding the students' needs**

This school is mainly educating the children of migrant workers. Over 50% of the students and their family members are non-local residents. Most of them come from the cities around Guangzhou or neighboring provinces. They moved to Guangzhou seeking a better life for their families and better

education to their children. Therefore, the first author designed a series of activities to help those students adapt to the local situation. In addition, she realized that the social workers of this school were making progressive efforts to promote some ideas: to a) maintain good mental health for the students; b) highlight the importance of promoting the students' resilience; and c) taking care of the students' individuality is more important than only focusing on their academic performance. Implementing these ideas mainly included organizing life planning and career planning programs for the students. The life planning project is a combination of various services and activities (e.g. casework, group meetings, and mass programs). For services, users were either referred by the teachers, or were students highly motivated to participate. The school social workers have also tried to reduce unhealthy peer activities against academically low achievers by implementing some anti-bullying activities to enhance resilience. In a nutshell, the social work services were not only paying attention to the students' problems, but also highlighting strengths and potential.

## **2. Working with Significant Staff Member**

Within the school system, the social workers communicate with the director of moral education. (S)he is the person in-charge that has the right to approve or disapprove related proposals at the school. Proactive and constructive cooperation with this staff member helped explore the social network and benefited program implantation. It is a first and vital step that the school social workers require to build and maintain a mutual trust and professional working relationship with that director. The trust was built on the cogent proposals and positive results through program evaluation. Meanwhile, a Chinese proverb said, "To see a small beginning, which may have significant implications to future development" (□微知著, *Jian Wei Zhi Zhu*). Therefore, some routine and daily work (e.g. paperwork) provided by the school social workers do enhance the relationship building. It can also demonstrate the workers' attitude and attention to details to school personnel.

## **3. Clarifying Roles and Duties for Effective Collaboration**

The school social work station in the school is next to the office of adolescent psychological aid, which focuses on providing psychotherapy for the students and their parents. This had confused many students signaling that only persons with psychological problems would come for help. In addition, in the beginning of every academic year in September, new students unfamiliar with the school called school social worker "Teacher". Therefore, it is necessary to clarify the role of school social worker and break the stereotype of who can receive services through publicity such as giving speeches to introduce the services to students. They also wore nameplates with the title of "Social Worker" or "Social Work Placement Student". Furthermore, they actively attended the weekly general meetings at the schools for sharing information and seeking any opportunity of cooperation.

In conclusion, this article described three strategies on building professional relationships at a school setting in China. 1) Providing professional services to build a trustworthy connection so that students trust both school social worker and the specialized services. 2) Within Chinese culture, teamwork and connecting with significant social networks such as staff members help relationship building. 3) Activities for clarifying the roles and duties of school social workers have to be done to help the school population understand the social work profession and be receptive to services.

**Regrettably, the international conference for 2020 in Perth, Western Australia has been cancelled owing to unforeseeable problems.**