



International Network for School Social Work

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The Beginnings of School Social Work in Bulgaria, Annette Marinova

School social work is at the beginning in Bulgaria. It was mentioned for the first time in 2003 during a seminar organized by the Ministry of Education and Science with the participation of pedagogical advisors from schools in Sofia.

Schools with over 500 pupils have the services of pedagogical advisors who can be psychologists or pedagogs. They work on identifying pupils' needs, consulting with the pupils, parents and teachers, mediating conflict and as the liaison with community agencies. In 2003 the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) took up a campaign against aggression at school in connection with violence among adolescents and a case of murder that shocked our country. The seminar that I mentioned above was held in this connection. The necessity of working with children's problems at school was reported during this seminar. The number of pedagogical advisors is insufficient to cover the wide range of problems in schools. The MES presented the concept of separating the function of pedagogical advisor into school psychologist and pedagogical advisor, and adding school social workers.

Social workers are currently under the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy and they work in child protection, social assistance and Non Governmental Organizations. Factors favoring the impetus to develop school social work are social work's situation in NGO's and educational reforms in 2003 that required inclusive education for children with disabilities.

I will illustrate the beginnings of school social work as it relates to the integration of children with special needs into the public school. I work as a member of the team of clinical social workers in a pioneering project, developed with the Parents of Children with Epilepsy Foundation. The project started in 1999 when seven children with epilepsy enrolled at a public school in Sofia. As a clinical social worker I worked in a pioneering project to develop appropriate education in the mainstream for children with epilepsy and other disabilities. I now work also for the public school as a pedagogical advisor, using my social work training under the direction of the school principal.

A public school education for Victor

Victor is a 12 year-old boy with epilepsy, plus movement and speech disorders. Up to 4th grade he had a public school teacher who was willing to teach him, although there was no legal requirement at the time.

The situation for Victor changed at the next educational stage. Starting in 5th grade, the system includes more teachers for different school subjects. Victor's parents acted to implement the reforms of 2003 so that Victor could have an individual program in the mainstream with his peers. A team meeting for Victor was held at school, at which parents and teachers expressed their concerns about his needs. Although there was agreement that Victor has the right to stay in the public school, there was disagreement about fully integrating him into the regular classes, with the parents believing that Victor must be fully included and the teachers wanting Victor to have the special protection and individualized instruction of the resource room. I, as school social worker, interviewed all sides, including Victor, and developed a plan to include him fully in the regular classes with support and activities designed to help all concerned understand his needs and strengths. The plan honors and addresses everyone's fears about the process. It divides tasks among team members, including resource teachers, nurses and speech therapists, specialists who work for the schools from a central location providing services when requested by the school principal.

The class teacher has a key role in Victor's integration with his classmates, representing Victor in a favorable light, emphasizing his strong points in class, as well as to the other teachers.

The resource teacher, working in close cooperation with all teachers, adapts the syllabus in such a way that the child will achieve at his optimum level. He can also participate directly in teaching the child and works with the parents.

The nurse is a team member who meets with Victor's parents, administers his medication and also talks with the class about health and disabilities.

The speech therapist is especially valuable in collaborating in the Individual Program, working on Victor's speech and coordinating with team members.

Victor's doctor participates as a team member, although he is not in the school.

The art therapist is an integral part of the system, knows all the team members, and takes part in official holidays or school/Foundation events.

Victor's parents participate during team meetings as partners. They educate themselves about his condition and share the facts with others, for example bringing brochures to school and organizing a seminar with a film about epilepsy

Victor is an active participant in his program. He is informed, consulted, and heard by the school social worker and the team. The meetings help him to accept reality and make choices to realize his dreams

The school social worker coordinates Victor's case. Her work includes consultations with the child and his family, consulting with the teachers, meetings with outside experts, helping prepare the Individual Program and negotiating for team meetings to change the plan as needed. Her work is dynamic and multilayered, inside and outside of both Victor's family and the school.

Difficulties for the practice of school social work in Bulgaria

School social work makes its way with difficulty because of the nature of the culture of helping in Bulgaria. Traditionally social workers provide state assistance from the "Social Assistance Services" to people such as minorities, single parents and people with disabilities who need financial help. This results in a perception of inequality between social worker and client. The model we have recently established changes this relationship. The social worker engages the client in determining his own goals and working on his own behalf. This requires building a trusting relationship in which the client understands that his own wishes are respected.

This new paradigm focusing on individual progress, rather than the group interest, is a departure from tradition and is the challenge for educating social workers in Bulgaria.

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