



International Network for School Social Work

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SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK IN FINLAND - a new book from a trainer's point of view Aila Wallin, MA, BSW, Organizational Consultant, www.available.com

In Finland they have done school social work (*koulusosiaalityö*) for nearly 50 years. It has been a very marginal and lonely work, but little by little has become more familiar to students, parents, teachers, co-workers and media. It has developed into a strong profession, as a result of national legislation and the persistent efforts of school social workers themselves. Currently there are about 650 school social workers serving around 800,000 students.

There is some literature in Finnish about general school welfare, mental health care and support services, but there have been no specific publications about school social work. Now a Finnish publisher Tietosanoma has released a book *Sosiaalityö koulussa: avaimia hyvinvointiin*¹ (Social Work in the School: keys to well being). It is written by a former school social worker, currently a private consultant and trainer. This may not seem a big step worldwide, but it is remarkable for professional progress in Finland.

Welfare and Education in Finland

Finland, a member of the European Union, is a republic with a population of 5.3 million that is becoming more multicultural. It has a reputation for equality, fairness, openness and confidence, with high quality social security and education, but also high taxes. At the moment it has the same economical challenges as all the countries in the EU. The famous Nordic welfare is under stress with increasing poverty and inequality.

The education system in Finland is public, free of charge and comprehensive. The entire society is built on education, culture and knowledge. All children are guaranteed opportunities for study and self-development according to their abilities, in spite of where they live, their first language and the financial status of parents. Most 6 year olds start their education in a voluntary one-year preschool. Compulsory basic education consists of nine years in primary level, usually years 1-6 in the same school building and then years 7-9 in another one. After primary education around 50% of the students continue to the upper secondary school and another 50% to 3-year basic vocational education. However around 7 percent of an age cohort stays outside of formal education after the primary level, which is one of the current concerns.

Education in Finland is widely appreciated, but also criticized. It offers not only equal learning opportunities, but also diverse support to students with special needs and challenges. Every

student should be provided competent and high-quality education and guidance and a safe learning environment and well-being. All teachers are committed, competent and highly educated - or they should be according the educational legislation. Yet, not all children and adolescents and their families are doing well. Too many children and teenagers are lonely, without the care they need, depressed, bullied, absent from school or have dropped out of school. Another issue arises from the high level of freedom in the Nordic and Finnish school environment (without, for example, any uniforms or authoritarian discipline). This freedom gives the students space to develop independence, active learning and self-confidence. It also can pose a challenge for the teachers and the working peace in the classrooms.

In schools, there are available enough student services: free hot lunch daily, transportation when needed, health care, guidance and social and psychological support. Student support services are organized in multidisciplinary teams, mainly including the principal, guidance counselor, special education teacher, school nurse, and school social worker or school psychologist.

School social work

In terms of school social work, the reality in Finland is not so ideal. There are the same challenges that seem to exist all over the worldⁱⁱ: the work is not consistently appreciated, resourced, organized, qualified and administered. The new book mentioned here (unfortunately only in Finnish so far) aims to show the potential benefits for the Finnish education system through promoting school social work. It argues how school social work can increase the students' social capital and well-being. In order to do this, the book tells something about what school social work has been, what it is like nowadays and what it could and will be in Finland. The author provides the background: how school social work has developed within the famous Finnish school and Nordic social welfare systems. It also describes the progress in school social work professionalization in Finland, while giving a summary of the extent of school social work all over the world.

After reviewing the Finnish child protection legislation, social work theory and professional tradition the conclusion is that in Finland the role of school social worker has four elements:

1. Early intervention and supporting students in their growth and development
2. Supporting parents
3. Increasing well-being in schools (the school climate) and
4. Collaboration and consultation in multidisciplinary teams and networks.

The work is done at four levels: proactive programs, individual intervention, consultation with teachers and intervention in issues affecting the school community.

In order to reach the potential of school social work in Finland, the school social workers need to work on their own behalf to clarify their basic role in the school system that provides students and their families with a readily accessible helping professional. School social workers also have to work on effectiveness and good quality social work. They have to focus more on social work knowledge and methods, even while adapting them to the school environment. The author of the book tries to encourage both current and prospective school social workers in their professional development, to reflect on their role, to evaluate their work and to work on such concerns as ethical issues, empowering interventions, cross-cultural competence and evidence-based practice. Mindful engagement and deep listening are essential in helping parents with problem-solving and students in developing self-knowledge. Finally, a remarkable innovation in school social work is returning to the roots of social work basics and ideals of a caring, engaged professionalism and expertise.

ⁱ <http://kauppa.tietosanoma.fi/9789518853391>

ⁱⁱ Blyth, E. & Huxtable, M. 2002. School Social Work Worldwide. Washington DC: NASW.