



## **International Network for School Social Work**

**<http://internationalnetwork-schoolsocialwork.htmlplanet.com>**

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### **Electronic Newsletter October, 2007**

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#### **Introducing School Social Work (školní sociální práce) into the Czech Republic**

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During my studies in the University of Hradec Králové BSW program, our teacher mentioned school social work as a specialization practiced in western countries. The topic of school social work was discussed for the first time at the Conference Socialia 2006 (an international conference for the helping professions) held in the same University. I decided to write my bachelor's degree thesis on school social work, based on my interest in working with children and young people and because school social work has not yet been introduced into Czech Schools.

Since the topic is new in the Czech Republic, I outlined the need for school social work and the contributions of a school social worker. Schools have the primary responsibility of preparing pupils for their professions and their whole future life. The school should also be able to handle problems in Czech schools such as juvenile delinquency, truancy, dropout, bullying, bad or missing communication with parents, smoking and drinking alcohol, behavioral problems, insufficient motivation to learn and racism.

Although teachers in the Czech Republic at present fulfill some of the role of social workers, they do not have the time or training to manage the increasing number of pupils' problems. The school also creates certain risks for pupils, including social, psychological, health and academic risks. Since children spend almost a third of their time in school, the school environment presents social workers with an ideal opportunity to assess the life situation of children and youth and the time to work with those who are in need of services. School social workers can provide primary prevention activities to all pupils, as well as services to pupils at risk. In other words, every aspect of the school climate (functional, aesthetic, social and organizational) is the object of the school social worker's attention. The school social worker also works with the parents and school support services, such as pedagogs (teachers or assistants who provide largely preventive activities) and psychologists.

At present the only school social work practiced in the Czech Republic is in special education schools, in school counseling agencies that mainly evaluate pupils with special needs, and in institutions for children in need of protection. Up to this time there have been no social workers at primary or secondary schools, and neither the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport nor the Ministry of Labour/Social Affairs have considered creating the position of social worker in Czech schools.

However, people are becoming aware of the importance of school social work. Czech social work professors have become interested and are cooperating with associates (mainly Slovak) who have more experience with school social work. My bachelor's thesis is the first study to be done regarding school social work. I interviewed parents, teachers and social workers and found that almost all of these people support the introduction of social workers into schools to handle the increase in pupils' behavioral problems.

Introducing school social work will be complex with political, legislative, organizational and economic issues to be addressed. The demonstrated need and the interest of social workers, schools and parents give me hope that in the near future school social work will start to be introduced into the Czech Republic and eventually be incorporated into the common life of Czech schools.

### **School Social Work and Refugees**

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees recently reported that his agency is caring for 32.9 million people. Joyce Kelen, a school social worker in Salt Lake City, Utah, learned how to make sure that refugee children feel safe and welcomed in their new schools. With her husband, Leslie Kelen, she produced an award-winning book, exhibit and curriculum *Faces and Voices of Refugee Youth*, based on her experiences with refugee youth at school. Joyce's curriculum guide "Faces and Voices of Refugee Youth" uses themes (e.g. cultural awareness, citizenship and conflict resolution) from the Utah State Office of Education social studies curriculum (<http://cdautah.org/pdfs/faces02.pdf>). It is an example of how school social workers can provide primary prevention for both the refugee child and the school population.

### **Faces and Voices of Refugee Youth, Joyce Kelen, DSW, LCSW**

When a young Sudanese boy arrived at school he rarely interacted with others and fainted at least once a week. After calling the paramedics and searching for the causes of his problem, we discovered he was paralyzed with fear. Since I had two social work interns who were artists, we included him in an art therapy group for refugee youth. After consulting with a music therapist we purchased instruments, including three large drums, which allowed us to incorporate music therapy into our program. By the end of the school year the boy was not interested in the art therapy group any more. He wanted to be outside with his new American friends playing "four square", which became his favorite activity. He no longer had any fainting episodes.

As a school social worker for 27 years I have noticed the changing population of students arriving in Salt Lake City, including many refugees from Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. I watched these refugee youth enter my schools and witnessed the school staff's concern for their well-being. Yet with all the support and encouragement provided, it was clear that we were unprepared for the challenges they faced. Language barriers seemed like the least of their struggles. Often a youngster came to us with complex psychological and health issues that required the coordination of hospitals, mental health providers, special education teachers, and alternative language services to understand and to find the best interventions.

One day on arriving at school I saw a mother talking with her two children in Bosnian. She checked their clothes, put a note into one of their backpacks, then kissed them good-bye. As they walked to their classes she stood there, eyes glowing with pride and uncertainty, a gaze that fell somewhere between wonder and fear. I stood beside her and said, "You have wonderful boys." She took my hand and thanked me. I explained that I was the school social worker and worked with her sons in their classes. She started to tell me how they came to Salt Lake City. I wanted to know this story. I realized that if I knew where these children came from I could better help them.

Jeremiah tells of the enduring hope that kept him alive throughout his escape from religious persecution in the Sudan. He says, "It was like a dream. I heard the big sound of bombs. Then, within a minute, houses were on fire, and the whole village was about to be murdered. It was my first experience of great numbers of dead. We ran away to save our lives. Nobody knew where to go...I met a lot of people who were in that same situation. That gave me strong hope that I could make it to Ethiopia."

Muna, born in Somalia, speaks of the concept of being homeless. "Even though we have a place to live, in our hearts we don't have a home. We feel homeless 'cause there is nowhere we can go back to. There is still a war going on...[Sometimes] I feel like we lost a part of ourselves. Like you know how you want your grandchildren to go back some day, and [you want] to show them your culture and what you are all about? To us, we don't have that, and that's really very sad. They destroyed our future."