



International Network for School Social Work

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

Contact mhuxtable@olympus.net

Electronic Newsletter June 2013

Editor: Marion Huxtable

The Diverse Field of School Social Work in Austria - a Situation Report

Michaela Adamowitsch, Lisa Lehner and Rosemarie Felder-Puig

Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Health Promotion Research

“Increase the number of pupils, who successfully complete compulsory education, and who therefore have the opportunity to attend a secondary school or pursue further education.”
This was the declared aim of the Austrian government for education in 2007.

Data from 2006 showed that 19 % of students in Austria had missed school for more than two weeks per semester. Policy makers concurred in regarding this as a risk for national educational objectives, and agreed that students who were cutting school needed extensive support to address a range of individual, social, family and/or school-related problems. Consequently, the Austrian Ministry for Education launched a national initiative in 2010 with the aim of testing new, innovative concepts of school social work, coordinated with and complementing existing support structures. Several pilot projects were initiated throughout Austria with the joint goal of reducing school refusal and absenteeism rates. In the course of this initiative, the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Health Promotion Research (LBIHPR) was commissioned to provide a nation-wide overview of school social work programs. The following represents a brief summary of the resulting report.

In a first step, relevant actors were contacted. School social work in Austria has been implemented mostly by local child and youth service agencies, school boards, or private agencies (partly authorized by local child and youth service agencies). We then developed an online questionnaire that was based on an extensive review of German-language literature. The survey was conducted at the beginning of the 2011/2012 school year. The majority of questions were asked retrospectively for the 2010/2011 school year.

A total of 20 providers of school social work participated in the survey, supplying us with data from 24 different projects/programs. Ten of these were part of the national initiative launched in 2010. We could identify at least one project/program in each of Austria's nine federal states. The majority had been initiated within the past four years. We found that Vienna was the only federal state where school social work was provided by the regional school board and school social workers there were formally employed as specialized teachers. In a second federal state (Upper Austria), the regional child and youth service agency was the main authority offering school social work itself (without contracting out to certified private agencies). All other projects/programs, however, were implemented and organized by private agencies, mostly authorised by the respective child and youth service agency. The national

initiative promoted only projects/programs following the latter structure of implementation. Projects/programs were to a large extent funded by municipalities and federal state authorities.

In 2010/2011, a total of 131 school social workers were in charge of 256 schools all over Austria. As there are about 6000 schools in the regular school system, it can be concluded that school social work had been offered at about 4 % of these schools and 96 % of schools still do not have school social work services. Almost 60 % of the schools provided with school social work services were general secondary schools (grades 5 - 8), 13 % of them were elementary schools (grades 1 - 4), 11 % were polytechnic schools (school for the last year of compulsory education at grade 9 prior to vocational education) and 6 % were special needs schools. School social work was least often implemented at academic secondary schools (grades 5 - 12) and vocational schools.

Working hours of school social workers averaged 20 hours a week with a nation-wide 3:1 female-to-male ratio. Great variance between projects/programs was discovered regarding the support ratio, as it ranged from 320 to 3989 students per school social worker. This is a consequence of the broad spectrum of projects/programs, variation between states, available funding and political support.

Most practitioners were certified social workers and some had a background in social pedagogy or educational sciences. As of yet, school social workers are not officially required to have a specific educational background, since to date there are no comprehensive quality standards for school social work in Austria.

Almost all of the projects required the school social workers to have fixed times at the school and many also did outreach work in the community visiting homes, youth clubs etc. School social workers cooperated most often with headmasters and teachers, in formal as well as informal settings. In regard to informal exchange, school caretakers turned out to be important cooperation partners as well, which might be due to the fact that they are fixtures in day-to-day routines of maintaining the school.

Students were named as the main target group in all of the 24 projects/programs. Two thirds of the respondents stated that their program addressed the student population as a whole. Further important target groups mentioned were students at risk of early school leaving and students showing an increased readiness to use violence. Concordant with these results, 18 programs were committed to reducing rates of school refusal, absenteeism or suspension from school (among other objectives). Apart from students, teachers and parents were the second most commonly mentioned target groups.

For all of the projects/programs, casework and conflict counselling were named as main methods of school social work. In order of decreasing frequency of mention, these were followed by group work (23 programs) and conflict management or de-escalation, intervention, and violence prevention (22 programs). Prevention in general was an important method used in 21 programs.

The most important guiding principle for school social work in Austria turned out to be the adherence to an open-door policy, that is it should be possible for students to get in contact with school social workers in an informal and unrestricted manner, and without having to enter into any further commitment. However, this general principle does not preclude referrals from teachers/headmasters if the student is in agreement. Also important was the obligation to confidentiality. Other crucial prerequisites were that school social work was free of charge, process-oriented, transparent and a generally voluntary offer for students.

Following the creation of this report, the LBIHPR developed a general quality and evaluation framework for school social work in Austria. This document is a recommendation on ways to incorporate quality management and processes of evaluation into daily work practices, providing also a series of quality indicators and templates to further support practitioners. Furthermore, we are currently working on a guideline to support future implementation. This document is to be used in practice by everyone involved in the implementation of school social work as a mutual basis for strategies in planning and communication, providing an illustration of school social work as a field, a general overview of the law, anchor points for cooperation and, at its core, a model for step-by-step implementation.

Reference: Adamowitsch, M, Lehner, L, Felder-Puig, R (2011). Schulsozialarbeit in Österreich: Darstellung unterschiedlicher Implementierungsformen. Wien: LBIHPR Forschungsbericht. [School social work in Austria: outlining different models of implementation. Vienna: LBIHPR Research Report.] Available from: http://www.bmukk.gv.at/medienpool/22071/ssa_oesterreich_fb.pdf (accessed 30 May 2013).