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Significance of supportive services in education: school social work as a new horizon in Turkey

"Nurullah Calis, Sirin Targan Calis" *

Hacettepe University I.I.B.F., Ankara 06800, Turkey

ASPB Ankara İl Mudurlugu, Ankara 06250, Turkey

Abstract

Since problems are essentially parts of life, it is not surprising for students to face problems in their education. Problem solving experiences contribute their personal development. However, we face a balls-up when problems are not solved and people who have similar problems increased. Increasing risky behaviors amongst students such as violence, drug use, sexual abuse, committing crimes, drop outs etc. point out a failure of Turkey in terms of dealing with students' problems. In this regard, this study emphasizes on the importance and configuration of school social work practices which is a recent trend for Turkey.

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1. Introduction

When school life begins for a child, it will turn into a journey that is going to continue for many years for him or her. Actually, this journey is not only about education but also is a long way which prepares children to years ahead. This process will involve a child's bio-psycho-social development, new friendships, achievements, pleasures and so on. However, only good things will not be involved in this life and school would be the place of and reason for pains, sadness, disappointments, victimhood, offences etc. Problems as an inherent part of life that bother human beings at schools as well.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +90-312-297-6364; fax: +90-312-297-6365.

E-mail address: n.calis@hacettepe.edu.tr

When considered that a student spend a large part of his or her daytime at school, we can understand that how important the school is in students' life. As an education and study place, schools has an important role in process of socialization by equipping children with knowledge, skills and values for their future.

Education process indeed is established on a base of some expectations for students. It is expected by Turkish national education system that education process make individuals stable and healthy, freethinking, open world-viewed, respectful for human rights, responsible for society, creative and efficient persons (National Education Basic Law, 1973). These are some aims of education and list can be extendable. Is this possible to make such a 'well-designated' person in a world full of problem?

Problems inevitably arise in school life because students keep growing biologically, psychologically and socially as an individual. When problems that faced are solved, the consequent experience will contribute person's development. However, when problems are not solved and the number of people who share similar problems increased, we can understand we face a social problem.

It can be mentioned that a student would face lots of problem in his or her education. These problems can be school-related or not. Family relationships, bad friend groups, low motivation for courses, low self-esteem, bullying, peer pressure, health issues, drop-out of school... All these matters may be the factors of undermining student's education process. Parents, health institutions, social service agencies and of course educational institutions are in the position of taking responsibility for such a young person's development.

Studies conducted in recent years have indicated that most of problems especially in primary and secondary schools need to come up with a solution. In this respect, it is needed to constitute multidisciplinary approach based practices to tackle students' bio-psycho-social problem and to provide them with supportive services inside and outside the school. Based on this conceptualizing, this study pursuits possible acquirements of social work practices in school settings in Turkey. Yet, Turkey has not a formal social work system and this can be addressed as a new horizon for the years ahead.

2. School social work

School social work is a subfield of social work which is specialized for school settings. It focuses on biological, psychological and social factors that impact students' academic performance and general well-being. Solving student problems and giving them supportive services in a teamwork perspective aim to make students' education consistent and progressive (SSWAA, 2014).

School social work practices have a broad perspective on student problems to focus on their social life circumstances as well as their school based conditions. This perspective arises from social work's theoretical base which addresses 'person-in-environment', systems and ecological systems. A person is a whole of different aspects of his or her life. For example, a female student is not only a student as a person. She is also a women, maybe an adolescent who is getting her sexual identity. She may have two siblings and have lost her father. She can be a good learner but may be an average student. Perhaps, she have low self-confidence although she can be good at public speaking. Person in environment requires to assess people in all their aspects. Systems (or system perspective), explain that human being, for example, is a system whose parts operate coordinately. Therefore, a non-functionality of a parts of system impacts whole system. For instance, if a student has a mental or psychical health problem, this would affect his academic performance or social relations in a negative way. At last, ecological system perspective says that systems are interrelated. In this point, we can define persons, schools, families, peer-groups, neighborhoods as systems. According to ecological system perspective, all these systems which a person interact with are interrelated and influence personal well-being. An accordance is required amongst systems the person touch (Zastrow, 2004; Duyan et al., 2008).

What kind of student issues does social work concern with? In a conceptualization, it can be stated as following (Buyuktopcu, 1989, cited in Aykara, 2010, p. 67):

- *Home/family related problems*: Disliking family environment, cultural conflicts, being abused or neglected, doing housework, poverty and so on.
- *Incompliance with school requirements*: Irresponsibility, absence, lack of interest, low-academic performance, delinquency, bullying, fighting, sexual harassment and so on.
- *Psycho-social problems*: Fears, anxiety, depression, dyslexia, conduct disorders, behavior disorder, anti-sociality, drug use and so on.
- *Psychical and mental issues*: Psychical impairments, chronic disease, mental health problems etc.

2.1. Social work practices in school settings

A school social worker seek solutions for students' school related problems by taking account of his or her all life conditions. Regarding this goal, social worker employs several professional approaches and techniques. Working with individuals, families, groups and community in social work are basic working levels which have their own special practice techniques.

School social workers give consultation to students about their education life. However, this consultation does not substitute the practice carried out by school 'psychological counseling and guidance teacher'. In current practice, teacher titled as psychological counselor and guide give support to students for their academic achievements, personal development, orientation, school-related problems, education activities etc. When school social worker is involved in this area, he or she will bring additional promotive approaches to enhance school's supportive services. In this regard, it is expected that social worker and school counselor will come together in a team.

Unlike school psychological counselor, school social worker is more interested in students' social life outside the school as well as school based circumstances. Therefore, when psychological and social aspects is considered together better results could be obtained.

School based social work practices bring some advantages from different points of view. Therefore, the works which would be carried out by school social worker can be pointed out as (Yildirim, 2007, p. 440):

- Support students to increase their academic accomplishment,
- Support students psychologically and socially,
- Work with families to get them involved with their children's education,
- Work with families who are in need of economic support, psychological support, better family environment etc.
- Work with community to make better school environment,
- Deal with bullying, peer-pressure, violence and anti-social behaviors in school,
- Deal with tobacco, alcohol and drug use amongst students,
- Conduct group works with students on different issues (e.g. group counseling, group therapy for students show harmful behaviors)
- Carry out extracurricular courses (e.g. training courses, personal development, communication skills, awareness)
- Enable an effective child/young protection approach (preventing child abuse and neglect, unwanted pregnancy, improper sexual behaviors etc.)
- Organize social, cultural, sportive and vocational learning activities.

List can be extendable. Social workers serves every single students and care about them. On the other hand, some specific groups of students such as those who have low academic performance, those who are in need of special education, those who come from low socio-economic background, those who live in an institutional care facility, those who are prone to violence or offence etc. are prior to be made functional. All these works are vital to

be practiced at school in these days Turkey is going through. However, these psycho-social aspects of education are undermined or ignored for many years (Duyan et al., 2008, p. 170).

Families are important targets of social work intervention as well. Because a child's world is largely shaped by his or her family. Some families may need to receive social services. Some may have lack of interest in their children's education. Some may be overprotective whereas others are abusive. In this regard, some important works such as giving courses, seminars, home visits, regular meetings, individual interviews would be carried out with families.

3. An overview of Turkey's case

Although school social work is a widespread efficient practice in schools over the European Union and the United States, there is no available services provided by social workers in schools in Turkey. National Education Ministry does not employ social workers for public schools.

There were some efforts to do social work in school settings in the past. In the year 1961, in Istanbul University, students' health, social, cultural and economic problems which was related to their academic and personal development were remarked and some solutions were looked for. From this point of view, a medical-social service unit were established in university in 1966. Psychologists and social workers had been employed in that service unit and service areas had been broadened in time (Tan, 2000 as cited in Ozbesler & Duyan, 2009). Medical-social service facilities were established other universities as well over the years. Nevertheless, this was not actually a school social work practice specialized for school settings.

In the Fifth Five-year Development Plan, which was announced by State Planning Organization in 1983, it had been proposed that guidance and psychological counseling services would have been provided by a school social service unit consisting of psychologist, doctor, counselor and social worker (Duman, 2000, p. 49). However, this planning was not put into practice.

In the year 2001, National Education Ministry put a new legislation into force and stated that social workers will be employed in Counseling and Research Centers over the country. Nonetheless, social workers still were not employed in schools. The limited number of social workers all over the country were an important handicap to be employed in school settings because vast majority of social workers were already employed in other state institutions. Today, social workers are still not involved with school practices.

School social work courses are generally placed in curriculum of social work departments in universities. And also, some of social work undergraduate students do their mandatory final-year internships in a school if they desire.

The latest document that will indicate the establishment of school social work is The Strategy of National Children Rights and Action Plan which comprise the years between 2013-2017. According to this strategy plan, which is announced by Family and Social Policies Ministry, social service units are planning to be set up in all public schools by the year 2016. The rationale for this is stated as "providing needed collaboration between child, family and school management and detecting children who have violence history and support them in a psycho-social way." This projection is the most tangible step so far to make social workers enabled in school settings.

3.1. Postgraduate studies about school social work

Academic research studies about school social work in Turkey is really limited. They can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Duman (2000), in her doctoral thesis, focused on school gangs and studied on students who have risks of joining gangs. She reported that some student groups are potentially tend to join such gang groups in terms of certain risk factors. She underlined school social work practices to deal with students' anti-social behaviors. This research report is the only doctoral level study till now.

Aykara (2010) studied on socialization issues of physically handicapped students for her social work master thesis. She researched socialization problems of handicapped student in schools and reasons for these matters. In her report, she addressed school social work for efficient school environment for such students.

In another social work master study, which was carried out Karakaya (2012), it is studied on parent participation in student's education. It is determined that many parents do not involve their children's education and there is no encouraging mechanisms to get them involved. Therefore, she addressed a necessity of social workers in schools as well.

4. Conclusion

Existing conditions in Turkey requires school social work policy and practice. Social work comes into prominence with its comprehensive assessment perspective about problems, ability to work outside the school (with families, other institutions, and community), different practice approaches and techniques, predisposition towards co-operation and teamwork, adopted roles (such as mediating, facilitating, advocacy, and mobilize). The aim of social work practices in school settings is to make students' education better in all aspects related to their life. To conclude, it is expected that school social workers will begin to work for students' improvement in a close future.

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