



International Network for School Social Work

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

Contact mhuxtable@olympus.net

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Editor: Marion Huxtable

News from Iceland:

We need social workers in the school system for better services and policy making.

Guðrún Helga Sederholm

Iceland is a sparsely populated Nordic country of 340,000 people, of whom more than half live in the capitol Reykjavik. The egalitarian social life, social welfare system with universal health care and education and a strong economy made for social stability until the financial crisis of 2008 hit the country hard. Families and individuals lost their savings and their overall financial status deteriorated. Little research has yet been made into the effect on children but it is an ongoing thing. It seems however that the financial effect is greater than the social effect. The population urgently demanded change and the result is an ongoing push for a new Constitution as the economy slowly recovers. Political discussion continues as to the future shape of Icelandic institutions including education.

The school system

Children in Iceland start kindergarten at the age of 2 and then go to elementary school from 6 to 16, followed by grammar school or high school for 4 years and then many continue at University for special fields. Some choose technical studies in a job related field after elementary school.

Children with special needs

If a child is in need of accommodations because of disability, a teacher, parent or counselor refers him or her to a psychologist who evaluates the need for support. If the child shows the need for academic help, it is provided in a regular classroom in the elementary school, with only a few pupils going to special schools. Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Asperger's Syndrome, dyslexia and physical disabilities, who are able to study with others but need special assistance, receive help in the regular classroom or sometimes go to special teachers for some of their lessons. Students with personal problems mostly receive help from the school social worker who sometimes works with the whole family. If the problems are more serious they may be referred to a psychologist or a doctor.

The options for students with special needs are few after elementary school and this can create a problem for these students who are then more likely to drop out. A new reform law came in 2008 with emphasis on children with special needs but the society and the University are slow adjusting so the reform can take place. The law is one thing but the practice is another. There is a lack of emphasis on special needs in the education of teachers at the University and that is a problem. They do not get the tools or the knowledge to meet children with special needs except up to a certain point. There is therefore no policy making concerning these children that is based on an overall view of the situation as it is. The 2008 law for educational reform focused on curriculum with specific targets for each year and evaluations. However the Ministry of Education and society in general have not given adequate consideration to those students who have learning problems or personal problems that interfere with their ability to benefit from the normal learning environment and to reach the targets. We need social workers in the school system to meet the needs of the children and for policy-making based on a holistic view. This goes for all children and students, both in elementary and secondary school.



Few of these students with learning problems further their education up to an A level degree. The A-level refers to an Icelandic student exam that gives the student the right to attend University. A wider array of choices and individualized opportunities are needed to retain students with learning problems past primary school with courses that keep them motivated to continue in school.

We are happy to announce that a social worker recently completed her doctoral research into how students that need special teaching are getting on in the educational system and the responsibility of the government and society in that matter. In June of this year Sigrún Hardardóttir was awarded the first Ph.D. in social work from the University of Iceland in Reykjavik. Sigrún's work has provided the foundation to fight to obtain the help and services these students need, including the services of a school social worker. Her findings were that after elementary school there are little or no opportunities within the school system for students with special needs. It seems we concentrate on the "normal" student all the time, and this has to change because the law of 2008 requires equality for all students.

School social work

The school social workers are however in a fighting mood, so we are keeping at it until we secure the services the students need. At the moment only about 15 school social workers are stationed in schools in Iceland. Although we have the BA and MA in social work from the University of Iceland, all are working under the job title of study counselors, and that limits the scope of our work so that we are not able to provide the wide range of services that a social worker can offer, such as a holistic view of the students' situation, learning difficulties and personal problems, plus parental guidance and policy making for the overall welfare of the students according to the law of 2008. Even though we are few we hold lectures and meetings and invite other groups that work in schools to have discussions with us about the school environment all in the name of better services.