



International Network for School Social Work

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

Contact mhuxtable@olympus.net

Electronic Newsletter March 2015

Editor: Marion Huxtable

School Social Work in Cyprus: prospects and challenges

Christos Panagiotopoulos, Associate Professor at the University of Nicosia

Cyprus overview

Cyprus is the third largest and third most populous island in the eastern Mediterranean, and a member state of the European Union since 2004. It has a population of around 838,897 people. Cyprus gained its independence from Britain in 1960, and after the Turkish invasion in 1974 the Republic of Cyprus was divided into two parts, the non-occupied area under the control of the Republic, comprising about 59% of the island's area, and the occupied area under Turkish control.

Cypriot Welfare System in brief

The Cypriot social welfare system includes guaranteed minimum income and categorical programs for specific vulnerable groups such as the disabled, the elderly, single parents and the Greek Cypriot refugees. The State exercises close monitoring by financially supporting Non Governmental Organisations and by controlling the majority of services provided. Services have been generous for many in specific categories such as mental health patients, alleviating the burden to both the patient and the care-givers. It might be argued that although it was effective in the past, currently there is a general dissatisfaction with the quality of service provision and limitations in handling effectively cases that do not fit the common stereotypes of 'need'. The categorical programs include the following forms of protection:

- Community care and residential care services with associated benefits
- Monetary provisions for basic needs of the beneficiaries as well as for their social and economic re-integration, e.g. rent subsidy
- Personal social services focused on specific needs.

The formalisation of Social Welfare Services, as they are known today, was established in 1952 and originally consisted of a small group of five Probation Officers. These Officers, who were not social workers, were initially appointed in the mid 1940's to monitor the activities of minor offenders and to supervise the function of the Lampousa Reform School. The need for creating the first social service programme in the island came from the lack of caring and nursing for children who were deprived of a normal family life. In 1951 the program was expanded to supervise adult offenders and to implement a program for post-institutional care of ex-convicts to promote their social inclusion. This was an innovative community programme for that time, but

the Turkish invasion in 1974 disrupted the development of Social Welfare Services including the programme with the Reform School.

School Social Work in Cyprus: first steps

In 2009, SWS participated in the National Action Plan for preventing and combatting youth delinquency. Part of this Action Plan was the allocation of social workers in schools for the first time in the history of social work practice in Cyprus. In 2009 a protocol was signed between the Ministry of Education and SWS in order to allocate social workers to 10 high schools: 3 in Larnaca, 4 in Limassol, the second largest district, 3 in mainstream high schools in Nicosia, the capital district, and 1 in a Technical High School in Nicosia.

The aim of this new and innovative scheme was to find preventive mechanisms to reduce the school drop-out rate by supporting pupils who have emotional and behavioral problems that might lead to them to drop out of school. The school social workers are required to have at least a bachelor's degree in social work and they carry the title *Σχολικούς Κοινωνικούς Λειτουργούς*.

The duties of the school social workers are:

- Assessment and individual counselling with pupils
- Work with the extended family and home visits in order to assess the pupil's family socio-economic status and to ameliorate family situations affecting the pupil in school
- Collaboration with the school staff in multidisciplinary teams in developing the action plan for pupils who truant, have learning difficulties and/or emotional problems and may be abused
- Participation of the social worker in school meetings wherever it is necessary
- Participation in community services in order to support pupils and their families.

This scheme is under the auspices of the SWS. However in Strovolos, the second largest local authority, the Ministry of Education has collaborated with the local authority to provide a social worker for 2 technical schools. It is important to say that these types of schools are considered by educational professionals to be difficult schools, as pupils who attend them have low grades and sometimes their behavior is challenging. Despite the fact that this initiative has been running since 2009 on a pilot basis, no official effort has been made to measure its effectiveness.

However in 2012, a public social worker doing her master's thesis looked at the role of the social worker in school units and the attitudes of the rest of the educational professionals towards the school social worker. The sample was 4 High School Principals, 4 School Counsellors, 4 Educational Psychologists and 1 Social Worker. In-depth interviews in which the participants described their experiences with school social workers showed that school social workers play a significant role in the school community by being a bridge between the community, the school and the family.

The Challenge for School Social Work in Cyprus

During the time of writing this article, the Republic of Cyprus is under severe austerity economic measures following the economic crisis of 2013. Thus it is not expected that the number of school social workers will increase and the whole project might be at risk. The allocated school social workers may have to return to SWS to meet the increasing need for services that is arising due to deteriorating economic conditions. Despite this situation and based on the findings from the above study we hope that the increased antisocial phenomena in schools in the last few years will lead national and local authorities to recruit school social workers due to their ability to work in interdisciplinary settings and liaise in a unique way between schools and communities.