The Role and Challenges of School Social Work: An Examination from Practice in Osaka

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This article describes the development of school social work in the Osaka Prefecture of Japan. The article focuses on micro, mezzo, and macro levels of school social work and documents the growth and development of school social work since 2005.

Keywords: international social work, Japan, Osaka, school social work

The Status of School Social Work in Osaka

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology introduced a school social work project in Osaka in 2008 (Yamano, 2009). The project started with full funding in 2008 but transferred to partial funding in 2009. Table 1 indicates the allocation status of school social workers. With the budget cuts, multiple municipal governments retreated from the project, resulting in fewer school social workers in the field. The 2008 project was implemented right after the decision and school social workers were tentatively hired. Therefore, there were few qualified professional school social workers available. As Table 1 shows, however, more than half of the allocated workers had qualified professional certificates in social welfare as of 2009. Presumably, this is because the 2008 project achieved recognition of the need for school social work. However, there are still a large number of workers who only possess a teaching degree. Also, the allocation type in Table 1 has been changed...
Table 1. Allocation Status of School Social Workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total school social workers</td>
<td>552</td>
<td>994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certified social worker</td>
<td>183 (19.4%)</td>
<td>188 (25.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychiatric social worker</td>
<td>88 (9.3%)</td>
<td>93 (12.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Licentiate related to other</td>
<td>72 (7.6%)</td>
<td>59 (7.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>social work categories</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching credential</td>
<td>449 (47.6%)</td>
<td>240 (31.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>License related to psychology</td>
<td>186 (19.7%)</td>
<td>100 (13.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Licentiate of skills related to</td>
<td>41 (4.3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other social work tasks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No license or credential</td>
<td>151 (16.0%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Assigning location

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prefectural board of education</td>
<td>109 (11.5%)</td>
<td>142 (25.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(including educational office)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipal board of education</td>
<td>233 (24.7%)</td>
<td>194 (35.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary school</td>
<td>348 (36.9%)</td>
<td>111 (20.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle school</td>
<td>270 (28.6%)</td>
<td>136 (24.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education support center</td>
<td>43 (4.5%)</td>
<td>20 (3.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>21 (2.2%)</td>
<td>14 (2.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


from school based to municipal board of education based. The reason for
the shift is possibly due to the budget cuts. Schools could no longer afford
to provide for school social workers within their budgets. The municipal
board of education took the position of employing workers and sending
them to each school.

Given those points, the status of school social work in Japan is at the
very beginning. The responsibilities of social welfare researchers and
practitioners are important in completing a system of school social work
as well as developing the future direction of school social work.

The challenge now is to articulate the environmental barriers surround-
ing children and to provide space other than the Child Guidance
Center and child consultation facilities in their communities. It is critical
to address the meaning of school social work in the broader education
system. Social work in Osaka is progressive and worthwhile in examining
the role and challenges of school social work, now that six years have
passed since the project began. Simultaneously, the study addresses
progress and continuing challenges that Osaka faces since the introd uc-
tion of school social work in 2005.

Modern Challenges Affecting Children

There are various social problems in Osaka such as a rapid decline in
birth rate, numerous child abuse cases, and juvenile delinquency. The
environment surrounding children is dangerous in a sense. However,
some people still have a strong misconception that those social problems
relate to only certain groups of children. However, are they really rele-
vant only to a specific group of children?

The incidence of school violence in 2008 exceeded 60,000 cases,
which has increased by thirteen percent from the previous year (Ministry
of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2009). The Min-
istry of Health, Labour, and Welfare (2000) conducted a nationwide sur-
vey through independent living support facilities for children. The results
showed that approximately sixty percent of the residents experienced
some type of abuse. In addition, a study by the Research Department of
the Research and Training Institute of the Ministry of Justice (2000)
reported that approximately seventy percent of juvenile inmates had
experienced either physical or sexual abuse. The data suggest a relation-
ship between a child abuse history and delinquency.

Child abuse related incidents are tragic and never end as a critical
social problem. Although the Child Abuse Prevention Law of 2000 was
passed, the number of cases of maltreatment in 2008 was about 2.5
times higher since the passage of the law (Ministry of Labour, 2009).
Furthermore, underlying factors of child abuse, from the survey (Taka-
hashi, 2004) result for the household with child abuse cases, resulted in
immaturity of parents, conflicts between relatives, parents' social isol-
ation, parents' mental instability, and a large amount of family debt,
although the causes of abuse were not limited to these factors. In addi-
tion, the survey reported that 67.2 percent may be experiencing undiag-
nosed mental illness, personality disorders, or alcohol dependence.

Truancy appears to have either declined or remained stable. Consi-
ering the total number of students, however, truancy has increased in
the past ten years from 0.55 percent in 1993 to 1.15 percent on 2003
(Takahashi, 2004).

Some surveys on school performance and life style for high school stu-
dents have reported that they are improved by external factors such as
parents purchasing recreational materials for their children and parents' expectations for their children's future. In other words, the key for suc-
cess is whether parents raise their children with future prospects. The
data also demonstrate that parents' financial ability affects those assets
(Nabeshima, 2003).
Regarding the financial status per household in Osaka, the rate of using financial aid in 2007 through the Education Expense Subsidy Program, noted a national average of 13.74 percent. This aid is provided by law through the educational support system within the school. In addition, single parent households account for nearly one-third of elementary school students who receive the academic financial aid in the prefectures that have a relatively high rate of aid (Yamano, 2006). Moreover, the poverty rate among children was 13.7 percent as of 2004, which means about one in seven children live in poverty (Abe, 2008). These results show that it is not uncommon for children to have unreliable financial resources, which narrows their career options due to the family’s socioeconomic status.

Child behaviors perceived as problematic are caused from different background reasons. It is not an exaggeration to say that those child behaviors send children’s voices outward from their hearts. Their families struggle with various life obstacles. Feelings of caregiver burden related to child rearing have rapidly increased in the past twenty years in comparison with the rate twenty years ago. Parents report twice as much isolation and three times more anxiety. Thirty to fifty percent of parents report those feelings (Harada et al., 2005). This means that child abuse closely relates to these data (Yamano, 2005). A current trend is for parents to report frustration toward schools and governmental agencies (Onoda, 2006).

Thirty percent of families struggle financially or have limited social connections. Problematic behavior or situations are an easy target, but it is harder to understand environmental influences such as poverty and social isolation. Considering the relations among poverty, social isolation, child abuse, and delinquency, it is obvious that the problematic cases are not only limited to some children.

Value of School Social Work

Given the above discussion, schools in Japan have powerful reasons to develop a school social work system. There are two reasons: First, compulsory education through elementary and middle schools allows educators and related service providers to monitor and recognize the status of all children. Second, schools are closely related to children and families’ daily lives, much more related than other special agencies.

To explain the first point, a certain group of children receive services from the Child Guidance Center, child consultation centers at municipal levels, and child welfare facilities. However, schools can identify problems at an earlier stage because they oversee all children.

Public health department and healthcare centers are the only entities that file records of all children. These facilities can provide services from a developmentally appropriate paradigm. Although the data are passed on through each developmental stage, it becomes difficult to provide services and grasp the status of all children once they grow out of the infancy period, which requires frequent medical examinations. After this stage, children are identified when problematic behavior occurs in a school setting. For instance, schools pay attention to the increasing child abuse problem. An introduction of school social work in the system has a potential to build a system from the social welfare perspective to notice problems earlier. Outreach, one of social work’s techniques, enables social workers to become actively involved in those cases even when involved parties do not request services (area 4 in Figure 1, but also area 3 depending on a situation; Yamano, 2007).

First, school social workers actively listen to teachers and get them involved in the cases when needed. With their detailed assessment, school social workers can elicit financial or health-related problems surrounding children and families. This makes schools realize the need to respond to children and families in crisis. School social workers point out the need for an intervention in each case in the child’s best interest when schools struggle to respond or are uncertain about the severity of the problems. The intervention does not mean compulsory and legal support.

**Figure 1. Areas of Support System**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area 2: Indirect Support Techniques</th>
<th>Area 3: Prevention Techniques</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community work</td>
<td>Intervention with schools/ teachers through outreach, advocacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.g., voluntary group support, community development</td>
<td>e.g., Case consultation meetings, training, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area 1: Establishment of consultation relationship Techniques</td>
<td>Area 4: Intervention Techniques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case work, group work, team approach, etc.</td>
<td>e.g., consultation for truancy, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Families asking for support

Families not asking for support

such as the Child Guidance Center. Rather, it should be the basic social work intervention to build trusting relationships with children and families for further discussion and providing necessary support. This approach will be one of the strategies to react to child abuse cases, which are often found late. The difficulty of teacher interventions and the presence of delinquency or truancy may hide the fact of child abuse.

The role of outreach is to identify a true problem hidden by explicit problems and to connect children to support. The process is meaningful because school social workers can encompass the entire child. The function of a school social worker to find problems is important in the approach toward today's challenges such as child abuse, delinquency, and truancy. As school social workers are currently assigned to less than one per school, it is essential to connect through teachers who can then help to work with children's situations and monitor children on a daily basis.

Second, schools with school social workers can be a stronghold in communities because schools are already accessible to children and families. Many children, families, and teachers do not know where to go for consultations with their problems, or they feel uncomfortable visiting the Child Guidance Center or local consultation facilities. Given these barriers, school social work can expand the range of services by providing consultation and case management within the daily system of families. The benefit is to respond to problems broadly at school and also at community levels rather than relying on community agencies.

In addition, the utilization of community resources via non-government organizations may lead to the prevention of problems as well as facilitation of active communities. One successful example is the child rearing circle, which provides an opportunity for middle school students and high school students to interact with babies and infants. The program is intended not only to support mothers in raising their children, but also to improve adolescents' delinquent behaviors. These approaches can improve students' abilities to solve problems and to cooperate within communities. Thus, school also requires the perspective of community work.

Given that poverty and social isolation lead to children's problematic behaviors, which involve more than thirty percent of all students (Harada et al., 2005; Yamano, 2006), it is significant to approach children in the school system where prevention services should also occur. Follow-up support after problems occur does not help prevent child abuse.

By understanding the value of developing a school social work system in Osaka Prefecture, school social work can be a resource not only to schools but also to communities. The importance for school social work is to understand systems in villages, towns, and cities as well as consultation systems for children and families.

**Development of School Social Work from Practice in Osaka**

School social work is developed as a school-based system. School social workers challenge social justice and human rights and promote social changes to improve human relation issues. Specifically, the characteristics of school social work are to cooperate with teachers in assessment, planning, and monitoring process. This means that school social workers simultaneously perform in the field where values and human resources are based on school culture and education (Shimizu, 2006). The practice is classified into micro, mezzo, and macro levels: approach to individual cases including environmental perspective, approach to school structure and reform, and approach to build a system and make policy planning, respectively (Yamano, 2006). The following section explains the development of micro, mezzo, micro school social work practice primarily in Osaka.

**Micro Practice**

Micro-level practice targets individual cases regarding environmental factors and by using resources such as institution, services, and laws. The purpose is to facilitate an improvement in the relationship of children between the people surrounding them and related service providers. School social work is not just to face children's mental health, but it aims at making a change and improving people's lives based on the principal of reality within the principal of social welfare (Okamura, 1983).

As mentioned in the previous section, teachers began to have different perspectives since social work practice has revealed that children's backgrounds such as child abuse and financial stress are related to overt children's behavioral problems, such as delinquency and truancy. School social workers used to be assigned at a counseling room in school. Currently, however, school social workers visit classrooms and educational agencies as well as accompany teachers in visiting other schools and service providers. This indicates that schools are gradually beginning to understand the role of school social work.

In Osaka, there are only fourteen local communities that launched the school social work project in 2005. With their efforts to become role models, forty-one local communities integrated school social workers into their school systems. Although the number of truant cases were the
majority at the beginning, child abuse and delinquency have become the consultation focus, which corresponds to today's needs. As a result, area 4 in Figure 1 now has increased numbers of consultations, with teachers' "concerns" reported the highest (Yamano, 2008b). Outreach functions raise awareness of these issues in school.

In addition, compare the frequency of linkages between related agencies between 2008 and 2005. Approximately half of agencies are social welfare related in both years. The link between the Board of Education declined from 4.3 percent to 2.2 percent. In contrast, the link between preschool to elementary schools, police and hospitals increased from 4.9 percent to 24.4 percent. The approach toward environment has become further active and promoted activities within communities (Osaka Prefectural Board of Education, 2009). As in Table 1, the allocation of school social workers was limited within schools in any prefecture at first. However, as clearly seen in the table, the number of school social workers who are assigned to a municipal board of education has grown by 24.7 percent in 2008 to 35.1 percent in 2009. This means that the municipal board of education shifted its role from that of a linking partner to becoming a collaborative partner.

Research was conducted by Yamano (2008b), where data were collected from 6,626 teachers in elementary and middle schools in Osaka, with a response rate of 35.81 percent. Among all the respondents, 784 respondents (25.4 percent) worked with school social workers (thirteen workers at that time), and 86.9 percent of those respondents answered that school social workers were effective. Considering the fact that just thirteen social workers were available to 784 teachers, school social workers seemed to be expected to have flexibility and mobility. In addition,

62.2 percent of the 86.9 percent who responded that school social work was effective indicated their effectiveness specifically toward individual cases. The results support success in micro practice (Yamano, 2008b).

Mezzo Practice

Mezzo practice aims at introducing social welfare perspectives into the school system as a whole and at innovating the school structure. Training at school has a model case conference to gain understanding from participants. There are three patterns of case conference after the role of school social workers is understood: request of school social workers participating in a case conference, a case conference with an actual problematic case, and a trial cooperation of a supervisor or a chief school social worker who has long experience in the field. The number of case conferences has increased every year. There were 442 meetings in 2005 and 965 meetings in 2008 (Yamano, 2005).

The effect of the conference, based on the study by Yamano (2008b), is that 25.5 percent of respondents who answered that school social work was effective simultaneously agreed that school social work was effective in restructuring the school system. Also, some cities, which employ four social workers in addition to those who are sent from the prefecture, conducted a survey to compare schools that have or do not have school social workers. The results demonstrate a difference in the school organization category as indicated in Table 3. Both studies indicate that school social workers have introduced the idea of exchanging information and making changes within school organizations.

It has been quite difficult to intervene with educational institutions because education is another professional field. However, school social workers' main arena of practice is at schools and that makes it possible to intervene with the children. They see schools as linkage, but also view them as opportunities for innovation with social justice based perspectives such as the Principal of Social Welfare Support and the Principal of

Table 2. Transition in the Number of Cases that School Social Work Responded and Topics of Consultation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cases to which school social workers responded</td>
<td>417</td>
<td>567</td>
<td>731</td>
<td>984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child rearing</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child abuse</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child care and protection</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child development</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delinquency</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on data from Osaka Prefectural Board of Education (2009).

Table 3. The Effect of Assigning School Social Workers in a Sample City

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schools with school social workers</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools without social workers</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on data from Kato (2010), percentage of schools whose teachers as a whole share the goals of educational achievement.
Sociality (Okamura, 1983). Social work perspectives consider that the change in school organization brings about prevention and an early detection of today's problems regarding children.

**Macro Practice**

What effective changes has school social work brought into the system? One of the effective approaches is to have made school social work an essential component, collaborating with existing systems and projects. Examples are collaborations with school counselors who specialize in mental health, a part of the support team that responds to child delinquency, or a special support team (Osaka Prefectural Board of Education, 2009) and with leaders of a child rearing support team (Osaka Prefecture Promotion Council of Community Family Education, 2010). Instead of competing with each professional entity, mutual collaboration strengthens the school's capacity to respond to problems and to deal with cases functionally. Thus, school social work proceeds to practice as a team and with a theory of collaboration (Jhinson & Yanca, 2002; Yamano, 2008a).

As a result, about a half of communities, which means twelve in 2008 and twenty in 2009 out of a total of forty-one local communities in Osaka prefecture, have expanded the deployment of school social workers with their own budget. This is a success of macro practice in Osaka, given that the number of school social workers has decreased nationwide from 994 in 2008 to 552 in 2009.

The effect has not been limited to Osaka, but also expanded to other prefectures in the Kansai area. In addition to the national project, these neighboring prefectures and government-decreed cities have expanded school social work projects by employing school social workers in the social welfare department, planning new projects at local levels, and increasing the number of school social workers, despite budget restrictions. The national government chose to include those successful cases into their practice case study collection directed toward the entire country (Yamano, 2010).

The point of this macro practice is the collaboration of school social work with the government (Yamano, 2006), which was the original purpose of the project. School social work has accomplished the systematic structuring of the five parties of (1) prefectural board of education, (2) municipal board of education, (3) school, (4) school social workers, and (5) supervisors (Figure 2).

**Future Goals**

This article demonstrated the value of introducing school social workers into schools, based on the life status of children and their families and following school social work projects, which started in Osaka in 2005 and was introduced by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in 2008. Through the development of school social work, in the paragraphs below discuss how the original assignments (Yamano, 2006) have changed and lay out the goals that remain and their new destination.

First, the original goals of the school social work project were (1) a collaboration with educational government; (2) response to the need of social welfare; (3) challenge as a consultation entity; (a) the importance of macro approach and (b) the challenge toward community development; and (4) an issue of training. Regarding point 1, school social work has demonstrated the style of collaboration based on the concrete achievement as seen in Figure 3 and sent the outcome of the practice to the broader nation. With point 2, articulated the challenge toward poverty by pointing out the problem. As mentioned in the Micro Practice section, the assessment by school social workers make teachers recognize new findings, which also led to their positive evaluation of the effectiveness of school social work. As well as in the Macro Practice section, point 3a is presented in another booklet (Yamano & Zushi, 2010) that individual
workers perform by recognizing the whole picture of a consultation system and its methodology. Similarly, point 3b shows the importance of prevention, but still is a challenge because workers are not yet able to respond to child's problematic behavior proactively. For point 4, training workers, it is not only a problem in Osaka; therefore, the effort is being made to build a university-based school social work training system in Japanese Association of Schools of Certified Social Workers.

The success in expanding school social work to the Kansai area lies in the fact that the original goals have been amply achieved and these accomplishments have been given to the nation. This demonstrates that the original goals were important in the expansion of the school social work project nationwide.

This article has raised and discussed the role of school social work as a function that was possible because school social workers belong to schools where all children are supervised, and the school social worker is able to reach all children if they need to. School social work also serves a preventive function because schools are closely aligned to children and their families in their communities. The former function has been demonstrated gradually from the data. The latter function, however, has not yet been fully accomplished, although the supportive perspective has increased and the utilization of community to individual cases has been made. This remains to be solved both in Osaka and nationwide in Japan.

For the future challenge, the role of school social work in Japan should continue to be studied (Kato, 2010) even where the practice has been in progress. To move forward, collaboration is the key to the utilization of supervisory functions as evaluators and managers, in addition to the role of case consultation. Collaboration with the prefectoral board of education is important for the administrative work of the project. An evaluation system of the school social work project needs to be structured based on the social work perspective, including the involvement of regional social welfare researchers and Japanese Association of Certified Social Workers.

School, as an accessible environment for social workers, is highly likely to inform social work of community needs. We cannot forget that school social work practice needs to be evaluated as well as criticized by the public rather than remaining self-contained, all of which evokes social debate and contributes to future development in school social work.

References

