

The Role and Effectiveness of School Social Workers in Addressing Bullying in China

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Abstract: The Chinese government has been working hard since 2006 to professionalize and legitimize social work, especially in schools. The occurrence of school bullying and the insufficient reaction from educational institutions and guardians are factors that lead to the inefficient implementation of social work interventions. Comparing with the United States, Chinese social workers face a number of difficulties, such as poor pay, little prospects for professional advancement, and social undervaluation. Through a detailed analysis of intervention strategies and outcomes, the article highlights the contributions of social workers in creating safer school environments. It also identifies the barriers hindering their effectiveness and offers recommendations for enhancing their roles within schools. Future research is suggested to focus on gathering first-hand data from diverse geographical regions across China, with an emphasis on longitudinal and comparative studies to better understand the impact of social work in varying educational and cultural contexts.

Keywords: Mental health, School social workers, intervention strategies, China, US.

1. Introduction

In the past years, the Chinese government has pulled their weight to ameliorate the shortage of professional psychological social workers among Chinese schools. Law and his colleague mentioned in their article that the Chinese government has put in plenty of efforts in promoting the establishment of social worker as a formal vocation since 2006 and provide social worker institutions and associations enough funding to help them make their best for helping students [1]. This policy was expected to have social workers who are well-educated in psychological tuition be trained to provide student mental-target service at school. To be more specific, development of social worker could be divided into three stages [2]. Before 1950, only a few higher education institutions in China, such as Yanjing University, had social workers dedicated to addressing mental health issues. After the introduction of the "open-door" policy, the first formal social work system in schools was implemented in select cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen, which helped revive the social work profession in China. The real nationwide development of social worker started from 2008. A great amount of psychological social workers with more professional knowledge and practical experience start working at school. Registered social workers are required to complete at least 90 hours of educational lessons and practical training, while assistant social workers must complete 72 hours of training every three weeks before working directly with students. Moreover, Since the summer of 2012, a total of 58 higher education institutions in China have offered Master of Social

Work (MSW) programs [3]. Despite the government's efforts to improve the training of social workers for students, some educational institutions and families tend to focus more on the physical harm caused by bullying rather than the psychological impact. In Chinese secondary vocational schools, the overall detection rate of students being bullied was 8.08%, while the rate for students bullying others was only 3.59% [4].

In many cases, schools overlook the underlying causes of bullying, leading to insufficient attention from teachers and government education departments. This lack of focus is a key reason why social workers and psychology professionals are seldom involved in bullying interventions. Additionally, the limited resources available to social workers often prevent them from offering adequate support to students who have been bullied. Therefore, this article aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the current role and effectiveness of social workers in addressing school bullying in China over the past five years. Through a situation analysis, it will examine the interventions and strategies social workers have employed, evaluate the outcomes of their involvement in preventing and resolving bullying incidents, and assess how their contributions have influenced the overall school environment.

2. Analysis of Social Worker in Bullying Situation

Occurrences of school bullying have increased dramatically over the past five years in China, with middle school children being the primary target [5]. There are plenty of cases on the official China News website like forcing classmate to eat something disgusting, verbally abusing and beating their classmates with a dozen teenagers together, and even sexual violence, especially to girls. In most of these incidents, the first response from school authorities and parents is often to involve the police. As expected, the focus during investigation tend to center around legal procedures or financial compensation. While it is important to use appropriate methods to defend one's rights and recover any losses, this approach often overlooks other critical aspects of addressing the issue. Nevertheless, few parents pay attention to their children's mental health condition, even when they exhibit clear symptoms like prolonged depression and social anxiety. Many Middle Schools in China do not educate students about what school bullying is or how to protect themselves away from it. The lack of awareness regarding the importance of bullying prevention and the severe mental health consequences that follow often results in social workers being absent both before bullying incidents occur and during the post-bullying investigation process. A qualified school social worker can play a crucial role in this situation. They are responsible for promptly identifying any abnormal expressions or behaviors in students and notifying parents when appropriate [6]. Consequently, the lack of school social workers has resulted in many students experiencing severe post-traumatic stress disorder due to years of enduring school bullying. One study conducted in 2022 found that there was a strong correlation between students' learning avoidance and campus bullying experience. Furthermore, students who have received suitable mental health therapy after being bullied had significant improvement in their learning avoidance symptoms [7]. Apparently, mental health care in multiple forms from the school social workers can make strong difference on helping the students build a healthier mental environment in the future and eliminate as much negative effects from bullying.

In general, professional school social workers play a vital role in providing timely and effective mental health interventions for students who have experienced bullying, which is essential for many Chinese students. However, many middle and high schools in China lack dedicated social work departments. While some schools do have medical staff, they often fall short of employing qualified mental health professionals, limiting their ability to offer effective support to students. In cases where schools do employ social workers with expertise in psychotherapy, their ability to implement intervention measures is hindered by the indifference of schools and parents to the negative consequences of bullying. The following sections of this article will specifically analyze the various roles and impacts of school social workers both in China and US.

3. Comparative Analysis of How School Social Workers Address Campus Bullying in China and the United States

The first appearance of American social workers was earlier than Chinese. John Addam, who is known as “The Mother of Social Work”, established the first settlement house for the very first batch of social workers to provide sincere and warm help to people who were needed [8]. American social workers operate within independent departments, well-established policies and training systems. Their responsibilities include proactively identifying individuals in urgent need of assistance. For instance, they often conduct timely home visits for victims who have called the police due to domestic violence, ensuring that the victim’s psychological well-being is supported and safeguarded. It is their basic duty to help everyone they feel needs help. They have strong support from the federal government that the percentage of the gross national product (GNP) that the federal government spent on social security climbed from 3.7% in 1950 to 11.5%, and went from 26.2% in 1950 to 54.4% in 1980 [9]. In contrast, Chinese social workers often find themselves in a more passive role, waiting for victims to request specific assistance. Furthermore, the lack of clarity regarding their responsibilities leaves many Chinese social workers uncertain about the types of services they should provide to those in need.

In the United States, school social workers play a crucial role in addressing issues like school bullying, functioning as proactive mental health advocates for students [10]. They are expected to initiate initiative intervention and collaborate with other safety guards like school police officer to help students get away from the psychological shadow caused by school violence like bullying. American social work van Gils mentioned that other than students’ internal personality features, family attitude, school intervention, and also peers can have innegligible influence on further mental health development of students who have experience campus bullying [11]. Chinese school social workers have similar assigned roles for assist to deal with campus bullying; they are responsible for addressing students’ academic difficulties rising from psychological crisis, helping students to adapt with post-traumatic syndromes like after campus bullying, and communicating with students’ parents about their later life and academic strategies based on their current mental health conditions [12]. However, they often do not actively respond to incidents of school violence. The ongoing neglect of mental health issues has resulted in social workers prioritizing academic support over mental well-being.

4. Reasons that hinder the development of school social workers in China

The challenges hindering the development of school social workers in China stem from societal, familial, and educational factors. From a societal perspective, despite the official implementation of the national social worker qualification examination in June 2008, the overall salary levels in the social work industry remain lower than those in other fields. There is a significant demand for social workers, yet opportunities for growth are limited, and social recognition is low [13]. Consequently, the lack of interest among students in pursuing social work has impeded many schools from establishing social work departments. Additionally, some school social workers have expressed disappointment with their roles, feeling a lack of respect and a diminished sense of mission that society expects from them [13]. Family factors also play a crucial role. Many Chinese parents hold conservative views regarding their children's education and perceive campus bullying as a "family shame." This belief often discourages children from seeking help or discussing their experiences with others, depriving them of necessary psychological intervention and support. Finally, the educational system in China is characterized by intense academic pressure, particularly related to the college entrance examination. Each year, fewer than 50%, and sometimes as low as 40%, of high school students gain admission to university [14]. To improve their school's college admission rates,

institutions prioritize test scores, often viewing school social workers as unnecessary for academic progress. This perception may contribute to the reluctance of Chinese schools to invest in establishing professional social work departments.

5. Discussion

From the current problems of China's school social worker industry and the comparison with other country, it is noticeable that Chinese school social workers have not got the deserved attached importance from the society and did not receive enough feedback like a fair salary to support themselves continue contributing to this field. Hence, if the government could offer higher salaries or additional benefits for school social workers and their families, it might attract more professionals in social work and psychology to pursue careers in school social work. Furthermore, increasing awareness of social worker associations and providing appropriate material support could enhance the appeal and effectiveness of social work within educational settings.

Given that school social workers in some areas are still viewed as unprofessional and not fully trusted by students and parents, universities could enhance social work programs by increasing the number of practical classes and hours. This approach would allow students to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world situations, engage with a diverse range of clients, and gain specific, targeted experience from unique cases. For students who hesitate to seek psychological therapy due to parental resistance, it may be more effective to facilitate direct conversations between the students and their parents. Encouraging parents to recognize that their children are struggling and need professional support can be more beneficial than solely guiding children to communicate their needs. A stable and healthy mental state can significantly enhance a student's academic performance and overall well-being.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the development of school social work in China has faced numerous challenges, despite government efforts to improve the situation. While significant progress has been made since 2006, including increased funding and training programs, societal, familial, and educational barriers continue to hinder the effectiveness and recognition of school social workers. The limited focus on mental health issues, coupled with low salaries and inadequate support, has led to a lack of interest in social work careers among students and has prevented schools from establishing robust social work departments.

Moreover, the conservative attitudes of many families towards mental health and the overwhelming academic pressure placed on students further complicate the situation. To address these challenges, it is essential for the government to offer more competitive salaries and benefits for school social workers and to raise awareness of their importance within educational settings. Additionally, enhancing practical training opportunities in university programs can better prepare future social workers to meet the diverse needs of students.

However, since this data is not derived from first-hand sources, the development trends and conclusions drawn from it may not be entirely accurate and cannot be generalized without caution. Additionally, geographical limitations mean that the data and development status primarily reflect conditions in southern China. Consequently, the findings of this article may not be applicable to broader regions across the country. Future research should focus on gathering first-hand data from a diverse range of geographical areas in China, particularly northern and western regions, to create a more comprehensive understanding of the role and effectiveness of school social workers. Longitudinal studies could provide insights into how these professionals adapt to various educational

and cultural contexts, while comparative studies across different provinces could highlight regional disparities in the implementation and impact of social work services in schools.

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