SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK AS A PRACTICE FIELD IN SOCIAL WORK*

Sosyal Hizmetin Bir Uygulama Alanı Olarak Okul Sosyal Hizmeti

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses school social work as an practice field of the social work profession and discusses its necessity in Türkiye. Social work is a discipline that supports individuals' and groups' adaptation to society by enhancing their social functioning. Within this scope, school social work collaborates holistically with family, school, and community systems to enable students to utilise their educational potential to the fullest. The study is based on the ecological systems approach, emphasising the importance of the interaction between the individual and their environment. According to this approach, the school social worker assesses the student's psychosocial, academic and environmental problems from the perspective of the "individual within their environment". They not only provide direct support to the student but also establish cooperation and coordination between the family, teachers and school management to produce multi-faceted solutions to problems. School social work in Türkiye have not yet become an institutionalised practice; however, findings in the literature indicate that this practice is urgently needed. The existing guidance system is inadequate in addressing students' problems such as absenteeism, academic failure, behavioural disorders, and family issues. School social workers specialists play a critical role in preventing these problems, strengthening family-school-student relationships, and ensuring equal opportunities in education. Consequently, the inclusion of school social work in the Turkish education system is considered an important requirement for students' psychosocial development, academic success, and social integration.

Keywords: Student, school social work, ecological systems approach, education system

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, sosyal hizmet mesleğinin bir uygulama alanı olarak okul sosyal hizmetini ele almakta ve Türkiye'deki gerekliliğini tartışmaktadır. Sosyal hizmet, bireylerin ve grupların sosyal işlevselliğini artırarak topluma uyumunu destekleyen bir disiplindir. Bu kapsamda okul sosyal hizmeti, öğrencilerin eğitim potansiyellerini en iyi şekilde kullanabilmeleri için aile, okul ve çevre sistemleriyle bütüncül biçimde çalışır. Çalışmada, ekolojik sistem yaklaşımı temel alınmış; birey ve çevresi arasındaki etkileşimin önemi vurgulanmıştır. Bu yaklaşıma göre okul sosyal hizmet uzmanı, öğrencinin psikososyal, akademik ve çevresel sorunlarını "çevresi içinde birey" anlayışıyla değerlendirir. Öğrenciye doğrudan destek sağlamakla kalmaz, aynı zamanda aile, öğretmen ve okul yönetimi arasında iş birliği ve koordinasyon kurarak sorunlara çok yönlü çözümler üretir. Türkiye'de okul sosyal hizmeti henüz kurumsal bir uygulama haline gelmemiştir; ancak literatürdeki bulgular, bu uygulamanın acil bir ihtiyaç olduğunu göstermektedir. Öğrencilerin devamsızlık, akademik başarısızlık, davranış bozukluk-

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ları ve aile içi sorunlar gibi problemlerinin çözümünde mevcut rehberlik sistemi yetersiz kalmaktadır. Okul sosyal hizmet uzmanları, bu sorunların önlenmesi, aile–okul–öğrenci ilişkilerinin güçlendirilmesi ve eğitimde fırsat eşitliğinin sağlanması açısından kritik bir rol üstlenmektedir. Sonuç olarak, okul sosyal hizmetinin Türk eğitim sistemine dâhil edilmesi; öğrencilerin psikososyal gelişimi, akademik başarısı ve toplumsal uyumu açısından önemli bir gereklilik olarak değerlendirilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Öğrenci, okul sosyal hizmeti, ekolojik sistem yaklaşımı, eğitim sistemi

INTRODUCTION

Social work is a discipline that produces solutions to the problems experienced by individuals and groups in accordance with scientific methods, techniques and principles, supporting their integration into society by developing their social functioning capacities (Tomanbay, 2012; Duyan, 2014; Zastrow, 2015). Furthermore, social work is a profession that helps individuals, families, groups, and communities overcome the inequalities and injustices they encounter in social life by improving their well-being (Yolcuoğlu, 2014).

Social work is a discipline that conducts study and implements practices at micro, mezzo, and macro levels in numerous fields such as poverty, disability, ageing, criminality, education, family, and child welfare (Zastrow, 2015). School social work constitutes a specific practice field of this discipline within schools. In this context, school social work is an interdisciplinary practice that supports students' family and school life by intervening at various levels in any obstacles and problem areas they encounter, enabling all students to maximise their educational potential without discrimination (Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 2018; Yeşilkayalı, 2021).

School social work support students in addressing issues specific to their developmental stage, psychosocial difficulties, and problems arising from family, environment, and living conditions, ensuring that their needs are met (Özbesler and Duyan, 2009). It also supports students in primary and secondary education in maintaining healthy education and teaching processes (Duman, 2000).

School social work was first implemented in the United States to support immigrant children and children from poor families, to resolve their problems and to ensure that they grew up to be individuals who were compatible with society. During this period, the first people to work in this field were known as 'visiting teachers'. Visiting teachers focused more on environmental problems than on children's individual problems. This practice continued until World War I, after which professional teachers continued school social work practices until 1965 (Sedlak, 1981; Dupper, 2022).

Looking at the historical development of school social work worldwide, it can be seen that this service has been implemented in the United States and the United Kingdom for approximately a century. The relevant literature indicates that school social work programmes have been ongoing for more than half a century in many other Western countries. In contrast, school social work is still in the planning stage and has not yet been implemented in some countries in the Mediterranean and Middle East, as well as in Turkiye (Aktan, 2016). In this context, school social work, which have a history spanning

over a century worldwide and are currently implemented in 49 countries, were defined as one of the objectives in the 'National Child Rights Strategy Document and Action Plan' published in the Official Gazette in 2013. In line with this objective, it was decided that school social work would be established within the education system by 2016 to ensure the necessary cooperation and coordination between students, families and school management in schools and to provide psychosocial support to children (Yeşilkayalı, 2016).

However, as the application in question has not yet been implemented, it is not possible to speak of the 'supportive' effect of school social work (Aktan, 2016). Therefore, it is necessary to promptly implement the school social work programme, which is expected to be effective in solving many existing problems in educational institutions in Turkiye and to have a preventive function against potential problems, at all levels of the education system (Reçber, 2020).

The Importance of School Social Work Practice from an Ecological Systems Perspective

The ecological approach is one of the most valid approaches in school social work practices, emphasising the importance of the relationship between the individual and the environment by addressing the child, family and environment together (Karakaya, 2012). This approach was first introduced in 1978 by Urie Bronfenbrenner, who emphasised the importance of the mutual interaction between the child, family and environment (Pınar, 2006). The ecological systems approach is a model based on the relationship between the individual and the environment and consists of interdependent systems. All systems are made up of smaller subsystems, and higher-level systems encompass the subsystems. This approach focuses on the environment and attempts to explain the mutual interaction between the individual and the environment. Furthermore, the ecological systems approach does not treat the individual and the environment as separate entities; rather, it considers them as a whole, in line with the principle of 'the individual within their environment.' It evaluates the individual in terms of both internal and external factors, conducting this evaluation at micro, mezzo, and macro levels (Duyan, 2014).

In the early days of social work practice, the psychoanalytic perspective dominated, based on the belief that individuals' problems stemmed from mental disorders. However, with the introduction of the ecological approach, it became clear that problems arise not only from internal factors but also from external factors. Therefore, social workers professionals have sought to produce professional solutions to problems by evaluating people's relationships with each other and their environment within the framework of the ecological approach (Özkan and Kılıç, 2014; Duyan, 2014). Furthermore, the ecological approach, which is frequently used in social work practice, focuses on the interaction and functioning of the individual and all the systems surrounding them, rather than on a single part, system, or individual situation (Yeşilkayalı, 2016). For example, the city, neighbourhood, village or

apartment block where an individual lives has a significant impact on the development and shaping of their social life (Kahraman, 2016). Therefore, humans come into the world as biological beings; however, over time, they become social beings as much as biological ones and are in constant interaction with their environmental systems throughout their lives (Güney, 2008).

The ecological approach enables the individual, who is in a dynamic relationship with their environment, to focus on the environment as well. With this perspective, social workers focus primarily on the individual when developing plans to address problems; they enhance the individual's capacity to solve problems and cope with them. In the second stage, they focus on the relationships between environmental systems and connect the individual with available resources and services. Finally, they explore ways to change the systems so that the individual's needs can be better met (Zastrow, 2015). In this context, the primary goal is to find solutions to the student's behavioural, learning and psychosocial problems and to develop their ability to cope with these problems. Subsequently, the aim is to resolve problems arising from the student's school, family and peer environment and to bring about change in these systems (Özkan and Kılıç, 2014). For example, the student's environment is an important factor in truancy and school avoidance behaviours. This situation may stem from internal factors (individual problems, school phobia, learning difficulties) or external factors (family or teacher pressure) that alienate the student from school (Mishna, 2003; Dağ, 2018). Therefore, school social work address issues that hinder the student's school life, adaptation to school, attendance, and academic success with a holistic approach (Webber, 2018). It evaluates problems from a multi-faceted perspective based on the logic of 'the individual within their environment,' identifies needs, and intervenes through teamwork at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels (Yeşilkayalı and Meydan, 2017).

The social worker specialist advocates for the comprehensive addressing of problems within the education system, involving students, families, teachers, guidance counsellors, school administration, and the student's social environment. The resolution and prevention of problems experienced or likely to be experienced in the school environment highlights the importance of school social services in enhancing student well-being and success (Özada, 2017). In this context, the ecological perspective-based work, assessment and intervention process in school social work consists of seven stages (Nadir, 2011):

1. System entry: Conducting initial interviews, establishing a relationship of trust and gathering the necessary information at the initial stage.

2. Drawing up an ecological map: Examining and mapping the relationships between all the systems that play a role in the individual's life and between the individual and these systems.

3. Evaluating the ecological map: Identifying the systems that are functioning and those that are not.

4. Creating a vision for change: Identifying needs and preparing an intervention plan together with the family.

5. Coordination and communication: Implementing the necessary interventions with the family in line with the ecological map and intervention plan.

6. Evaluation: Reviewing the applications made throughout the process.

7. Conclusion: Completing the work when the set goals are achieved.

Consequently, various studies have indicated that teachers, school guidance counsellors and school administrators are inadequate in finding quick and effective solutions to many problems encountered in schools. Therefore, it is emphasised that there is a need for social worker specialists who can produce solutions by bringing a holistic perspective to the problems encountered in schools, based on the logic of the 'individual within their environment' (Özada, 2017).

The use of an ecological approach by a school social worker when working with a problematic student provides both a theoretical foundation and significant practical advantages. For example, in case studies, the inclusion of the individual, family, and environment within the school's ecological system offers considerable benefits (Nadir, 2011).

The importance of the ecological approach in school social work practice can be evaluated from three perspectives:

1. Understanding the behavioural dynamics of the individual: It provides a general perspective in terms of evaluating the individual in all aspects.

2. Seeing the network of relationships and interactions: It reveals the interactions between the individual, family, group and society.

3. Increasing problem-solving and adaptation capacity: It strengthens the individual's responsibility for solving their own problems and their adaptation skills (Danış, 2006).

The Importance of School Social Work Practice in Resolving Student Problems

The family, school and society are structures that influence each other. The root cause of violence or other problems exhibited by children in school and society is often found in difficulties experienced within the family environment. Children who grow up in violent family environments may become adults who use violence within their families and communities in the future. Therefore, the needs of children, who are the most vulnerable members of society, must be met in a healthy family environment (Bilgin, 2008). Children who grow up in a healthy family environment can express themselves comfortably, be constructive and productive, cooperate, and develop a personality with high social functionality that can overcome the problems they encounter (Erürker, 2007).

The quality of communication and relationships between the family, school and student directly affects the student's psychosocial development and academic success (Babahanoğlu and Başer, 2017).

A child's education begins at home and continues in the school environment. Research indicates that families spending sufficient and quality time with their children is of great importance in terms of the child's psychosocial development, school success and social adjustment (Ereş, 2009; İbrahimoğlu, 2024). Students' level of social relationships and functioning depends on the type of relationship in the family environment and the family's school functioning. Students from dysfunctional families tend to have lower levels of social interaction, while students with high academic achievement and motivation also have better family relationships and family functioning (Çalış, 2019). In this context, the family and school are two indispensable elements in the formation of a child's personality and outlook on life (Constable, 2009). Since children spend a large part of their time in the family and school environment, the solution to their psychological and social problems can only be achieved through family and school cooperation; this is also important for the student to develop a positive self-image and personality (İkiz, 2000).

Establishing a healthy relationship and bridge between school and family has a positive impact on the student's psychosocial and academic development (Karakaya, 2012). Cooperation between the school team and the family during the student's education process and the continuous functioning of communication channels are of great importance in terms of solving student problems and receiving a quality education (Yıldırım and Dönmez, 2008). Studies emphasise that healthy cooperation and coordination between the student, family and school is a prerequisite for the student's success at school (Çelenk, 2003; Yıldız, 2017).

The family and school should collaborate in resolving the student's psychosocial and academic problems. It is important that this collaboration and coordination be carried out on the basis of school social work in order to find solutions to student problems in a short time (Acar, 2004; Gökgöz, 2014). This is because certain negative behaviours can disrupt education both inside and outside of school; to prevent these behaviours from escalating, measures must be taken at the micro level (student), mezzo level (family and school), and macro level (social environment) (Aktan, 2016). In this context, school social work aim to ensure the student's adaptation to school and their environment, and to prevent truancy and violent and aggressive behaviours. Furthermore, by enhancing the social functioning of students, families, and teachers, it ensures the effective coordination of the power balance between students, schools, families, and society (Astor, et al. 1998; Aykara, 2010; Jarolmen, 2017).

School social work aim to increase families' knowledge and awareness, resolve their problems and remove the obstacles they encounter, in order to enable families and children to play a more active role in education and school life. Research on school social services emphasises strengthening the relationship between families and schools; it reveals that school-based psychosocial services, carried out in cooperation and coordination with families, schools, and other institutions, are important in the solution process (Çalış, 2019). Furthermore, the aim of the work carried out with students and families is to increase academic achievement by ensuring the child's school discipline and attendance

(Turner, 2005). In this context, according to a study, the ability of social workers to work with family-school-community systems was found to be adequate at a rate of 94.4%. Another finding of the study indicates that social workers undertake important roles and responsibilities in ensuring cooperation and coordination between children, families, schools, and communities (Özkan and Kılıç, 2014).

In Turkish schools, it is becoming increasingly difficult for staff working within the current system to respond to the growing and diversifying range of school problems. Therefore, it is necessary to incorporate school social work, which is an important tool in solving these problems, into the school system (Özkan and Kılıç, 2014). According to a study, the current system is inadequate in helping students overcome problems in the school environment related to friends, environment, economic, social, migration and cultural issues. The lack of support staff indicates a shortage of school social workers at a rate of 80.5%, according to the data obtained, highlighting the need in this area (Babahanoğlu and Başer, 2017; Cebeci, 2023).

In the school environment, students' individual problems are generally addressed by school guidance counsellors, and solution-focused interventions are implemented. However, there are noticeable shortcomings in resolving students' family and community-related problems. This situation highlights the importance of school social workers (Babahanoğlu and Başer, 2017). Studies show that school guidance counsellors are knowledgeable about social work practices but lack sufficient training in the field of school social work. Guidance counsellors tend to focus more on students' individual problems and are inadequate in addressing family and environmental problems. In contrast, school social services play a more effective and comprehensive role in solving problems by providing a bridge for relationships and communication between students, families and schools (Kuli, 2018; Akyüz, 2018).

In order for social workers employed in schools and guidance counsellors working in the guidance service to work effectively and efficiently and to prevent professional conflicts, their job descriptions must be clearly and precisely defined (Agresta, 2004; Abay and Keleşoğlu, 2014). In this context, a psychosocial team should be established to carry out interdisciplinary cooperation activities in schools. The job description of this team will be as follows: Psychological counsellors and guidance specialists will provide academic counselling and career planning services to students; psychologists will administer psychometric tests to guide students towards suitable professions; school social workers will carry out school-family-community-focused work through protective, preventive and remedial interventions, providing direct services to families and adolescents (Gibelman, 1993; Ceyhan, 2018).

Consequently, students require support to cope with individual and social problems (Karakaya Ş., 2018). In this context, a student's individual and social problems can negatively affect their social relationships and academic success in the school environment. The school social worker carries out the necessary work related to the student, their peer group and their family; they provide direct services to resolve psychosocial problems (stress, anxiety, behavioural disorders, peer relationships, etc.), school problems (school adjustment, academic achievement, absenteeism, etc.), family prob-

lems (divorce, domestic violence, economic problems, etc.) and other problems (health, physical problems, bad habits, etc.). School social workers work in harmony and cooperation with families, teachers, school management and school counsellors to protect and support students and prevent risks, and intervene early. Therefore, school social work practice is an indispensable practice in the interconnected services between students, families, and schools (Cameron, 2006; Şeker, 2009; Özkan and Selcuk, 2016; Yeşilkayalı, 2017; Arslan, 2018).

School social work is situated at the central intersection of the student, family, and school relationship (Figure 1). Its position at the centre of the relationship between these systems demonstrates that school social work practice is an important discipline. Yeşilkayalı and Bölükbaşı's (2017) placement of school social work at the centre of cooperation and coordination between students, families, schools and society also supports this view. Furthermore, school social work practice is consistent with the ecological theory's understanding of the 'individual within their environment.' This is because support is provided by establishing relationships and coordination among the student, family and school triad. Therefore, as stated by Özkan and Kılıç (2014), a holistic approach is necessary to address the multiple dimensions of problems in schools and resolve them in a healthy manner. This approach is only possible through the discipline of school social work conducted from an ecological perspective.

Figure 1: The Relationship Spiral Demonstrating the Importance of the Student, Family, School Relationship and School Social Work Practice from an Ecological Perspective
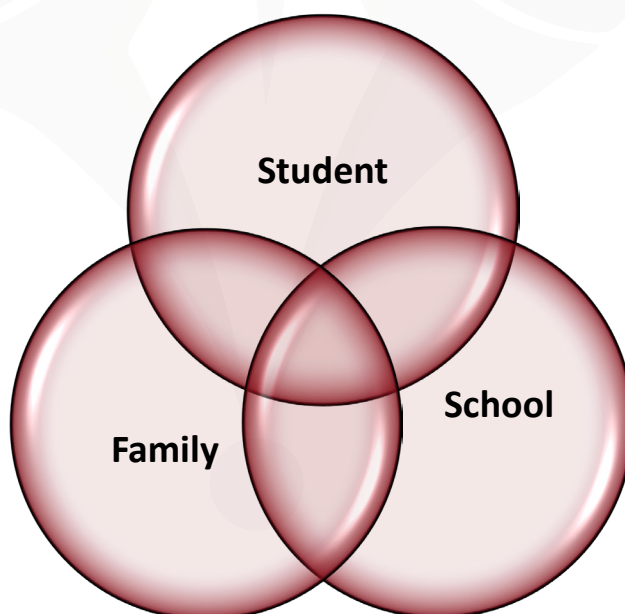
Source: Compiled by the author.

The school social worker assesses issues related to the student's psychosocial, family, environmental, and living conditions (Özbesler and Duyan, 2009) using a multi-dimensional approach based on an ecological perspective. Subsequently, they prepare a planned roadmap for solutions by discussing

these issues with the student's guidance counsellor, teachers, peers, school administration, and family. They then intervene in line with the protective, preventive, and supportive roles of social work by establishing coordination and cooperation with the family and school environment. In this process, they work with the school administration, teachers, guidance counsellor, and family to try to find solutions to the students' problems (Duyan et al., 2008; Tokuroğlu, 2023). The aim here is to support the student in continuing their education and learning in a healthy manner, as stated by Duman (2000). However, when the school social worker is unable to resolve the student's problems alone, they contribute to the solution process by seeking support from relevant public and community organisations or by referring the student to them.

Duties and Responsibilities of School Social Workers

School social workers utilise their knowledge and skills within school settings to advance the school's mission. The most important feature that distinguishes school social workers from other staff members is that they play critical roles in cooperation and coordination between home, school and community, and also contribute to policy development processes at the micro, mezzo and macro levels for the benefit and future of society (Özkan and Selcuk, 2016).

In the school environment, students' problems are generally psychosocial in nature, but they can also be related to cultural adaptation and economic factors. In such cases, one of the most important duties of the school social worker is to help resolve the problems experienced by the student, taking into account the characteristics of their developmental stage and family circumstances, to ensure they benefit from the necessary services, and to support the student in successfully continuing their educational activities (Şeker, 2009; Lakshmi, 2014).

The duties of a school social worker can be listed as follows (Özbesler and Duyan, 2009; Kılıç and Özkan, 2015).

1. Conducting individual interviews with students to assess issues such as self-harm, harm to others, behavioural disorders, depression, school refusal, absenteeism, exam anxiety, and attention deficit from a psychosocial perspective and to develop solutions.

2. Using an ecological perspective, assessing the factors affecting students' problems in a multidimensional way; examining family, school and community-related problems and creating an analysis and solution process.

3. Identifying the root causes of family-related conflicts and problems, planning meetings with family members, and involving the family in the solution process.

4. Identifying problems experienced by students with their peers and teachers in the school environment, intervening, and developing solutions.

5. Organising social group activities with children and their families to solve common problems (behavioural disorders, etc.).

6. Identifying obstacles to the student's academic success and developing an intervention plan to remove them.

7. Taking on a protective, preventive and supportive role by ensuring coordination between the family and the school; identifying needs and problems in advance and intervening.

8. Work in collaboration with the school administration, teachers, guidance counsellors and psychologists to ensure that students' emotional and learning needs are met.

9. In cases where student and family-related problems (peer group problems, crisis situations, substance abuse, etc.) are reflected in the student's behaviour, bring the student and family together with relevant public and community organisations.

The duties of a school social worker can be summarised in a broader context under seven headings (Özbesler and Duyan, 2009; Zastrow, 2015):

1. Assessing Student Needs: Identifying and analysing students' academic, psychosocial and behavioural needs.

2. Programme Planning and Evaluation: Preparing, implementing and evaluating intervention programmes and service plans.

3. Direct Service Provision: Contributing directly to the resolution of problems by working with students individually or in groups.

4. Advocacy: Taking on a supportive role by protecting the student's rights and needs.

5. Consultation/Liaison: Providing consultation with teachers, guidance services, and other professionals to support the student's education and social integration.

6. Coordination and Collaboration: Ensuring collaboration and coordination with school, family and community-based systems.

7. Management / Organisation: Organising social work processes, managing teamwork and increasing the effectiveness of services.

As mentioned above, from an ecological perspective, school social services provide a broad perspective on services by facilitating coordination and cooperation between students, families, schools and the community (Özkan and Kılıç, 2014; Özkan and Selcuk, 2016). However, when solutions to problems are insufficient, it contributes to the solution process by referring individuals to different institutions.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a comprehensive analysis of studies conducted in the field of social work and school social work clearly reveals the vital role that social work plays in schools. Schools are critical social spaces that go beyond being institutions for imparting academic knowledge and skills; they are also places where students' psychosocial development is supported and their connections with their families and communities are strengthened. However, school administrators, teachers, and guidance counsellors may be unable to adequately maintain relationships and coordination between students, families, and schools due to their heavy workloads and increasing responsibilities. This situation leads to obstacles in solving the problems faced by students and threatens the sustainability of a healthy educational environment. It is at this point that the importance of school social work becomes apparent. School social services act as a bridge between students, families and schools, enhancing the effectiveness of the education system through early detection of problems, preventive intervention and solution-oriented work. At the same time, it approaches students' psychosocial, family and environmental problems from a holistic perspective, enabling solutions to be produced at both the individual and systematic levels. Research highlights that this discipline directly contributes to students' academic achievement, psychological adjustment, and social functioning. Therefore, the implementation of social work in schools is considered a strategic intervention that benefits not only students but also teachers, families, and society. In this context, the systematic and effective implementation of social work practices in schools is a critical necessity for the success of education policies and the future of children.

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