

ACA News

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Will School Social Workers be a Panacea for Child Abuse Problem?

With scabs covered all over her limbs and face, bedsores on the soles of her feet and bruises all over her body, a 5-year-old girl died in January from being repeatedly abused by her father and stepmother.

Lam Lam's life was full of sorrow, pain, and tears.

But she was just one of many child abuse cases that happened in Hong Kong. According to government statistics, there have been more than 800 cases of child abuse every year in Hong Kong since 2006.

The data also shows that more than half of the victims were abused by their parents. According to Dr. Louis Kok, Child and Forensic Psychologist of Hong Kong Institute for Children's Mental Health, children tend not to report abuses by their parents because they want to protect and stay with them.

Since 2000, every secondary school has to have at least one social worker. Law Chi-kwong, Secretary for Labour and Welfare has suggested extending the policy to primary schools and kindergartens.

Social workers who work for primary schools nowadays are not only in charge of students' guidance services, but also their activities, according to Emy Law Yee-ming, member of the Reclaiming Social Work Movement and the social worker of a local primary school.

She said that social workers have to spend time on other duties so they do not have enough time for counselling.

"They have to deal with after-class care, arrange extra-curricular activities for students, prepare, contact and make other arrangements as well as to recruit students to join activities," said the social worker Law.



Law Yee Ming, member of Reclaiming Social Work Movement and also a social worker at a primary school, supports the implementation of "one social worker for each school" policy in both primary schools and kindergartens because there are many social problems, such as high expectation of children and difficulty in adapting for Hong Kong living environment (for immigrants), which raises demand for social work services to resolve.

Ip Kin-yuen, a member of the Legislative Council and the vice-president of Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union, hoped that the new policy would help social workers in primary schools to be employed under a new long-term contract system.

Mr. Ip said primary schools tend to hire social workers through the bidding system every year and schools tend to choose a social worker who wants less pay. Most of the social workers leave schools after only one year under this particular system.

He believed that social workers would work in schools for a longer period of time under the new policy, and can gain more trust from students. Mr. Ip said students would be more willing to open up about their problems so that is easier to track down child abuse cases.



Ip Kin Yuen, member of the Legislative Council and vice-president of Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union, believes the "one social worker for each school" policy helps discover the suspected child abuse cases and prevent tragedies.

Ms. Law, the social worker, thinks job stability is important for school social worker. She regarded social workers who signed one-year contracts as "unstable resources".

"We will support the 'one school-based social worker for each school' policy if it provides stable resources to primary schools," Ms. Law said.

The bidding system causes another problem. According to Mr. Ip, social workers in primary schools may not be experienced because primary schools are not willing to spend more on hiring the seasoned social workers.

He expected that this situation will improve under the new policy and there would be training opportunities for inexperienced social workers as well.

"After launching the policy, there will be professional training and supervision systems for giving advice to inexperienced social workers in handling cases of child abuse," said Mr. Ip.

But Dr. Kok is concerned that young children might not want to open up to social workers because of a lack of trust.

"Even if there is one social worker in every school, this still will not help children in need," he said.

Lee Yu-po, the service manager at Against Child Abuse, stated that child protection work is a multi-discipline collaboration. Teachers need to cooperate with social workers to handle child abuse cases.

“Apart from getting the information from the abused children, social workers can understand the children’s family background from their teachers who may easily contact their families,” Lee explained.

She suggested that social workers should be a part of students’ lives as early as possible because students would not seek help from social workers if they only appear when there is abuse.



Against Child Abuse, a child protection organization, which aims to provide child protection services to alleviate child abuse problem. It also provides counselling and therapy services to the abused children, their family and the abusers.

Another concern is that there may be insufficient social workers. “There are graduates from social work faculties every year. Will they become social workers?” Lee asked.



Hong Kong Professional Teachers’ Union and Hong Kong Social Workers’ General Union appeal to the government to provide more resources for the primary schools.



Hui Lai Ming, general officer of Hong Kong Social Workers’ General Union, points out that there is no professional social worker in primary schools currently, which should be considered seriously.

Mr. Ip suggested implementing the policy step by step if there is a lack of social workers. He added that the government should provide more training for social workers in universities if needed.

“The working hours in Hong Kong are too long, the cost of living is high and mortgages are too expensive,” Ms. Law said, “We find that many parents are both working, they are actually undergoing a lot of pressure at work, and they may be impatient or not skillful when handling their children’s problems, which leads to conflicts easily.”

“Child abuse involves a series of social problems like our poor working environment and living conditions. Therefore, we cannot solve this problem from one aspect. We need to fix it entirely,” said Mr. Ip.

Reference:

<http://tyr.jour.hkbu.edu.hk/2018/03/14/will-school-social-workers-be-a-panacea-for-child-abuse-problem/>