

Den kritiska gästen.

En professionsstudie om skolkuratorer

Cristine Isaksson

Akademisk avhandling

som med vederbörligt tillstånd av Rektor vid Umeå universitet för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen framläggs till offentligt försvar i Hörsal C, Samhällsvetarhuset
fredagen den 29 april, kl. 10:00.
Avhandlingen kommer att försvaras på svenska.

Fakultetsopponent: Professor Kåre Heggen,
Avdelning for Samfunnsfag og Historie. Høgskulen i Volda, Norge.



Organization

Umeå University
Department of social work

Document type

Doctoral thesis

Date of publication

8 April 2016

Author

Cristine Isaksson

Title

The Critical Guest. School social workers as professionals.

Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to examine the professional role of school social workers in Sweden from the perspective of profession theory, with particular focus on legitimacy, jurisdiction and discretion. The aim has been divided into four research questions, which are examined in four separate studies:

1. How has the school social work profession emerged and developed?
2. How do school social workers experience boundaries to their professional discretion?
3. How are theories of social work practice applied in school social work?
4. How do school social workers and teachers perceive their cooperation with regard to the wellbeing of pupils?

The general area of interest concerns professionals operating in organizations where they are the sole representatives of their profession. In addition, these professionals typically have a peripheral position in relation to the core professions in the organization.

The four different studies build on empirical material from qualitative interviews with school social workers and teachers, and also from policy and regulatory documents. The theoretical framework guiding the analysis draws on theories from the sociology of professions (Abbott, 1988) and about human service organizations (Hasenfeld, 1983, 2010).

A key finding is that school social worker has a specific technology based on well-established practice theories in social work, where a systems approach appears as the most prominent. Although, it was possible to discern such practice theories from the interviews, the school social workers did not explicitly give reference to them and generally struggled to describe their practice in a professional language.

A second key finding result is the lack of clarity with regards to the school social worker's role. This is evidenced in regulatory documents, as well as among social workers themselves and teachers. In theory, this provides school social workers with a high degree of discretion. However, due to legitimacy problems they feel limited in performing their work unless they can rely on support from other sources such strong support from headmasters.

A third key finding is that the cooperation with teachers is all-important to school social workers. They spend a considerable proportion of their time working with teachers rather than pupils, not the least by providing informal consultations to teachers. On a rhetoric level, teachers agree with social workers about the value and need of school social work. However, they tend to disagree about the role of school social work when they talk about concrete practice.

As an overall conclusion the school social worker appears as a critical guest, drawing on a professional foundation in social work theory that contributes uniquely to pupil health care. This distinguishes the school social workers' role from other professionals in the school setting.

The findings in this thesis indicate the need for both education and research in the discipline of social work to start paying attention to social work in schools and other settings where social workers represents a minority occupation peripheral to the host organisation.

Keywords

social work, school social work, legitimacy, jurisdiction, discretion, practice theory

Language

Swedish and English

ISBN

978-91-7601-341-0

ISSN

0283-300X

Number of pages

83 + 4 papers