



## **International Network for School Social Work**

**<http://internationalnetwork-schoolsocialwork.htmlplanet.com>**

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#### **School Community Development Project in Sri Lanka**

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#### **Introduction to Sri Lanka**

Sri Lanka is a large tropical island in the Indian Ocean lying just 40 kilometres off the southern tip of peninsular India.

Sri Lanka's population, estimated to be 20,277,597 in 2012, is young and growing rapidly. The country is diverse ethnically (Sinhalese (74.9%), Tamils (11.2%), Indian Tamils (4.2%), Moors (9.2%), Burghers (0.2%), Malays (0.2 %) and others (0.1%)), as well as in religion (Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and Christian) and language (Sinhalese and Tamil with English being used for education and commerce). Sri Lanka is an agricultural country, with a rapidly growing manufacturing sector that is bringing new employment opportunities.

#### **Educational system**

The educational system has played a significant role in the lives of people and thereby in the development of the country. The literacy rate is 91.9% with male literacy at 93.2% and female literacy at 90.8%. This high rate is attributed to the establishment in 1944 of free universal education and a public welfare service.

Common problems among the children are associated with inadequate school infrastructure, problems in parenting styles, poverty and neighbourhood problems such as alcohol and drug abuse. These issues contribute to poor educational achievement, absenteeism, dropping out of school and problems related to discipline and behaviour.

School social work experience reveals that many identified problems in schools stem from environmental factors rather than from the individual child. So, rather than focusing on individual pupils, the school social work students work on resolving school and community problems using supportive relationships among the stakeholders in schools.

#### **The Status of School Social Work in Sri Lanka**

Professional social work education was introduced in the 1960's and continues to expand the social work role. Recently the Sri Lanka School of Social Work has pioneered the introduction of social workers into the schools to support the school community in building caring environments for children. The purpose is to join social work and education in bringing positive social change to the school, home, neighbourhood and community. The Ministry of Education has given permission to place social work students in the schools and we see this as a positive step towards formulating policy for introducing social

work into all schools. School teachers are permitted a duty leave for a two year diploma in social work as their in-service training to work with children in need. Teachers who have entered the social work diploma programme have been successful in schools as they bring their experiences of working with educational settings and the educational needs of children to the social work training.

The schools have accepted social work students doing their field placements. Also a few private schools and government schools have identified the significance of professionally trained social workers in schools and appointed teachers as school social workers in charge of counselling and career guidance. However, there is little public awareness about the role of the school social worker. So the challenge is to extend services to all schools and to train social workers to provide the service.

### **School Community Development Project**

The focus of the six months block field placement for both the BSW and MSW is community development. Social work students who are interested in working with the school system are placed in selected schools to help the school, the families and the community work towards developing the school into a community that fosters the development of children within the changing reality of modern society.

The social workers' role in this project is to build relationships with stakeholders, bring them together, help them unite to identify common school needs and problems and then plan and initiate the school community development project. The School Management, students and parents have been very positive towards school community development with participation of all stakeholders. However, there are challenges to bring them all under an umbrella and to motivate them to feel confident in participating in school development activities with a common purpose. Once relationships among the stakeholders of the school community are established, the school community development project is planned, implemented, evaluated and followed up by the school development society.

For example, in a rural school, lack of protection of school children was the common concern and a wall around the school was built by school development society, which raised the funds for construction from a nongovernmental organization. Moreover, the school development society was able to identify common problems of alcoholism, drug addiction in the neighbourhood of the school and worked with parents to educate them to keep a child-friendly, alcohol-free environment in the neighbourhood.

The student school social workers are key facilitators in these projects. They facilitate by:

- Resolving conflicts among stakeholders and developing cooperation among them
- Identifying common needs/problems of schools
- Identifying strengths/weakness/resources/services in schools and community
- Linking services/service providers with the school development society
- Taking up responsibility to develop, implement and follow-up the action plan
- Evaluating the progress of school community development and action plans

In conclusion, school community development projects include all stakeholders in the process of school development. School community development promotes the understanding that school development includes both stakeholders' concerns and the social responsibility for resolving these concerns to benefit their own children.

### ***Volunteer group working with stakeholders***

