



International Network for School Social Work

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Contact mhuxtable@olympus.net

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Editor: Marion Huxtable

School Social Work In South Africa: *Partner in Psycho-Social Support in Education*

Mollie Kemp

Independent consultant on school social work and social issues in education

Twenty-two years after the end of apartheid, the inequalities of the past have left a legacy of harm to the educational system that affects the majority of our school children. Social work is becoming an important player in addressing the barriers to their education and the social and emotional challenges that hinder their development.

What are the barriers to education?

Systemic barriers in the system are overcrowded classrooms, policies and curriculum that do not address the needs of children and environmental problems.

Societal barriers are the high levels of poverty, child labour and continued inequality between provinces and between urban and rural schools. In some areas, families lack basic services such as access to running water and electricity, child abuse, violence and crime, bullying, early marriages, teenage pregnancy, HIV infection and AIDS, and substance use and abuse all have an impact that makes it hard for children to learn.

Pedagogic barriers such as inappropriate teaching and assessment methods, and insufficient support to educators are also a heritage from the past that impacts on the lives of children.

As everywhere, **intrinsic barriers** such as neurological, physical, sensory and cognitive barriers mean that children need extra help to succeed.

The adoption of the inclusive education framework in 2001 was an important step taken to address barriers in the education system through screening, identification, assessment and support (SIAS process) of learners and to provide for relevant support structures, such as District Based Support Teams and School Based Support Teams which include social workers.

The need for social work services

The South African Council for Social Services Professions (SACSSP) identified school social work as a possible specialisation area in the field of social work in 2009. An *Indaba* (Zulu term for a conference) on Specialisation in Social Work in July 2010 also confirmed the need for School Social Work and recommended the prioritisation of the process to the SACSSP.

The need for School Social Work services within the South African education system had been confirmed by various South African researchers since 1977. The first social workers were appointed in the Department of Education in 1983 and since then, school social work slowly expanded. Currently 7 of the 9 provinces in South Africa have School Social Workers employed as part of the educational support services. However the total number is only about 223 for a population of 53 million people, with 30% of the population under 15.

Institutionalising School Social Work

To address the need for school social work, the National Association for Social Work South Africa (NASW SA) has established a National Committee for School Social Work Education and Practice (NACOSSWEP). The need for a working committee was identified by the September 2013 Sandton NASW SA Conference Resolution on School Social Work. Social Workers who attended the specific sessions on School Social Work were invited to a consultative meeting after which the NACOSSWEP was established. It consists of practicing school social workers as well as academics in the field of school social work. The terms of reference of the Committee were developed and adopted and are available on request. The goals can be summarized as promoting the specialisation of school social work, supporting school social work knowledge development, and facilitating development of a school social work model and practice standards.

The committee researched and prepared an application on School Social Work as a specialisation area for the NASW (SA) and submitted it to SACSSP. The outcome is currently awaited with great expectations. The following definition was developed and will guide the future practice of School Social Work in South Africa:

" School Social Work is a practice-based profession within the school setting. School Social Work services address social, emotional and behavioural barriers to learning experienced by learners at an educational institution from an ecological systems theory and strengths-based perspective. These services are aimed at supporting learners, parents, educators and the school as a community. One of the core functions of the School Social Worker is to ensure that learning and development take place through early identification of psychosocial barriers and appropriate intervention. Through preventative and developmental service delivery, care and support for teaching and learning (CSTL) are enhanced by providing all learners the opportunity to access applicable resources to reach their full potential. School Social Work forms an integral part of the education context and contributes towards the academic performance and overall wellbeing of learners within a healthy, safe and secure school environment. One of the unique contributions of the School Social Worker is to bring the family (home), the school and the community perspectives to the multidisciplinary team process to facilitate better understanding of the social context of the child (Avenant; Kemp, R; Kemp, R.J; Pretorius, 2015). "

Implementing policies to address social and systemic ills that prevent educational success is an ongoing challenge in South Africa. School social work is becoming recognized as one of the main role players for solving these challenges.

This article is based on information from the "Application for School Social Work as a Specialisation Area, a National Association of Social Workers SA Submission to the South African Council for Social Service Professions". For further information please email Mollie Kemp, Convener of NACOSSWEP at molliekemp@yahoo.com.