



International Network for School Social Work

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Students Care Service and School Social Work (Singapore)

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Where, and What is Singapore?

Singapore is a republic in Southeast Asia, off the southern tip of Malaysia, north of Indonesia, on one main island surrounded by 63 islets. Some refer to her as a ‘tiny red dot’ on the world map. Established as a trading post in 1819, the small sea town of Singapore soon attracted migrants and merchants from China, the Indian sub-continent, Indonesia, the Malay Peninsula and the Middle East. Now, the city-state of Singapore boasts a population of about 5.6 million people, with English as the main language of instruction, and a mother tongue for each major ethnicity. Coming together as a society living in harmony, there are four major races, namely the Chinese (majority), Malay, Indian and Eurasian. Each community offers a different perspective of life in Singapore in terms of culture, religion, food and language.

Migration and colonisation shaped Singapore’s history. It became a Crown Colony, attaining self-government in 1959. After two years as part of the Malaysian federation, Singapore declared independence in 1965.

In one generation, the republic underwent a major program of economic restructuring, achieved by expanding technology and computer education, offering financial incentives to industrial enterprises and launching a productivity campaign. Lacking natural resources, people became the country’s best assets and education grew into one way for Singapore to develop human capital and build its economy.

Beginning of School Social Work in Singapore

Against a backdrop of a growing awareness of student-related problems faced by children in the 1960s, a pilot scheme for school social work was introduced in 1965. The Anglican Church Schools Counselling Service was officially established where it became the first institution solely dedicated to provide social services to schools. These included school based counselling services, professional casework, groupwork, academic support and financial assistance.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) also set up its first Social Work Unit in early 1970s in support of the school’s efforts to help children in need of counselling. In the 1970’s the MOE gave more prominence to pastoral care and career guidance and as awareness of children’s issues and the importance of school climate has grown, there has been a proliferation of school social work services and other support services to schools.

In 2005, MOE launched a full-time school counsellor scheme and placed a school counsellor in every school by 2008. During this period, Allied Educators (Learning & Behavioural Support – previously known as Special Needs Officers) were also placed in every mainstream primary school to support children with mild special educational needs. Additionally to better support students with difficult family circumstances, MOE piloted a scheme in 2015 where social work-trained Student Welfare Officers, trained and supervised by Students Care Service, were deployed to 10 schools identified as having high needs.

Responding and Developing as a Social Service Organisation

As a result of these developments, Students Care Service (SCS), a Social Service Organisation formed in 1976, found itself taking on the role of a community partner to schools in fulfilling the ministry’s mission, delivering social work and educational psychology services to children, youth and their families, in communities, schools and service centres. The services are based on research, systemic theories, practice wisdom, and guided by agency’s core values. In the last 5 years, SCS served at least 6500 children and youth annually.

Community-based approach is one of two key approaches which SCS experimented with and evolved in recent years involving growth-enhancing possibilities between the school and the community, such as the two programmes briefly described below.

(a) Youth COP, which stands for Youth Community Outreach Patrol, is an award-winning school-based programme for students who present at-risk behaviours or factors. It aims to develop youth-crime prevention leaders in the community to serve, to protect and care for the community. It is a joint programme by SCS, partner schools and Neighbourhood Police Centres to tackle youth crimes and juvenile delinquency. What sets Youth COP apart from existing programmes is the conscious avoidance of grouping these students as “problematic”, “delinquents” or stamping any other negative labels on them. By positioning it as a prestigious programme, Youth COP becomes a programme which students feel honoured, instead of embarrassed or annoyed, to be associated with.

(b) Integrated Care Project (ICP). Aligned with principle behind the proverb “*It takes a village to raise a child*”, ICP aims to build a strong and integrated support network for children undergoing difficult life situations e.g. parents who are incarcerated or families facing multiple challenges, to enable them to be supported in order to navigate through the different challenges and complete their Primary School education. This project is implemented in partnership with three primary schools which are selected based on the needs of their student population, them belonging to the same local community cluster and no pre-existing school social work services. The ICP uses a two-prong approach to establish an integrated support network consisting of a school social work system within schools and close partnership with community-based organisations and support services (e.g. Community Development Council, Family Service Centres). Services provided include individual casework and counselling sessions, family sessions, home visits, case discussions and consultations with school teachers and case referrals and discussions with community partners.

Emerging challenges

From its beginning to the present, the delivery of social work services in SCS has been shaped by the socio-economic contexts, funding, policy changes and emerging needs of children. Now with technology advances, growing diversity and population will continue to demand school social workers to be responsive, creative and in anticipating the effects of the changes on the students and families.

For more information, see www.students.org.sg or email melissa_lim@students.org.sg