

Title

A school social worker's perspective on the need for social workers in Zimbabwe's schools

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Abstract

Social work is a profession that is concerned with enhancing social functioning at family, community and societal levels. School social work is not a common service in most Zimbabwean schools, though some schools have been providing the services informally. This article looks at the need for social workers in schools and reasons schools do not hire social workers. The article is largely based on an interview with a school social worker who has experience from practising social work in Harare schools. Some functions of social work which are to help people enhance and more effectively utilise their own problem-solving capacities, establish initial linkages between people and resource

systems and contribute to the development and modification of social policy (Siyachitema, 2013). In line with these functions of social work, social workers play an important role in capacitating people to be able to identify their own problems and also to be able to solve their problems through linking them to available services which they may not be aware of. It is recommended that government should provide part time social workers to public schools. Further, provision of school social work services may be aligned to the department of social services. The other option is to train teachers so that they gain some social work-related skills.

Key words

education, child protection, school social work, teachers, Zimbabwe

Introduction

School social work is not a common service in most Zimbabwean schools, though some schools have been providing the services informally. This article looks at the need for social workers in schools, why schools do not hire social workers, and strategies to make schools child friendly. The article is largely based on an interview with a school social worker who has experience from practising social work in Harare schools. The article will start by defining social work and its role in schools. It will then elaborate the formal education system in Zimbabwe focusing on the different levels of education, socio-economic status of children and improvements that have been made to the education sector. A discussion will then follow about the need for social workers in schools, ending with recommendations.

Social work: an overview

The National Association of Social Workers Zimbabwe (2001) defines social work as a profession that seeks to promote social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. The above definitions note that social workers work with a broad clientele system that includes individual, groups and communities, hence the need for social workers to have a broad knowledge base. Another distinguishing characteristic of social work according to these definitions is that the social work profession seeks to empower people in various settings. Social work can be practised in settings such as child and family welfare institutions, medical and psychiatry institutions, correctional settings and more recently in schools.

The rationale for schools social work

Schools social work refers to the various social work interventions at an educational institution. At that level, the primary role of the social worker is to ensure that the social environment of learners is conducive to their learning. With the dynamic changes in societies brought about by HIV and AIDS, poverty, use of drugs, teen pregnancy, child abuse, and diaspora parents, there is need for professional social workers in schools who understand the influences of living conditions, socioeconomic status, poor health, family and community on academic performance, behaviour, and attendance of children at school. In Zimbabwean schools, the involvement of social workers in schools is a new phenomenon which has only been embraced by a few schools in the low-density suburbs, whilst most schools in the high-density suburbs that have been equally affected by the dynamism of the society have not yet embraced the idea of engaging school social workers.

In Zimbabwe, although schools are largely classified as private, government or mission, they can also fall into categories based on socio-economic status of pupils. At the top are what are traditionally termed Group A schools. These are mainly former white schools. These schools offer better facilities, are mostly private and are expensive. After this class we have middle level schools. These are mainly run by councils, missions and other private institutions. They are often affordable. At the lowest level there are what are traditionally termed Upper Tops. These are mainly found in rural communities and they lack basic services and amenities required for successful learning.

In most public schools there are senior teachers who are given the responsibility to identify pupils who face challenges which hamper the proper learning of pupils. The teachers are commonly referred to as guidance and counselling teachers (Siyachitema, 2013). In the well-resourced schools, they have a well-developed psychosocial support system. At one school, they have a team composed of a social worker and psychologist. At most well-resourced schools they have psychologists and counsellors.

The Zimbabwe education system

Upon gaining independence in 1980, the new government of Zimbabwe sought to rectify the inequalities in the education sector among other sectors in Zimbabwe. The government built more schools, phased out school fees for children in rural areas and blacks began to enrol in former Group A schools as most whites had migrated to their countries. However, these gaps which were created by the migration of whites could only be filled by those blacks who were of a higher socioeconomic background. The former Group A schools therefore continued to be hives for children of the rich and famous. The Government continues to make strides in the education reform. According to the Government of Zimbabwe (2010) in the Country Analysis Report for Zimbabwe 2010, the government seeks to ensure that disadvantaged and marginalised groups of children such as orphaned and vulnerable children, children with disabilities, those affected by the economic recession, children facing various abuses and young people who are likely to drop out of school prematurely for various reasons are assisted to have access to school.

Children are enrolled into primary education at 5 years of age. They start at Grade Zero which is the equivalent of pre-school. In the second year they start Grade 1. Primary education ends at Grade 7 where a certificate examination is undertaken. Primary education is offered by public and private schools. Public schools include those run by government and local authorities whilst private schools are made up of those run by private companies, churches, private individuals and associations. Upon completion of primary education, children in Zimbabwe proceed to secondary schools where they engage in 6 years of learning from Form 1 up to 6. At form 4, they undertake an ordinary level examination. Those who pass this examination with at least 5 subjects proceed to Forms 5 and 6. Forms 5 and 6 constitute advanced level. At this level again, there are both public and private schools. Most secondary schools do not offer advanced level. After ordinary and advanced level, pupils may proceed for tertiary education at polytechnics, universities, colleges, vocational training centres and apprenticeships.

The potential role of social workers in schools

In schools, students are taught languages, mathematics, science, history and a number of other subjects. They participate in sports activities, socialize with their peers and learn how to adapt themselves in different social situations. However, an impediment in the path of the child's development at school may come by way of the various social issues which may plague the child's education life (Siyachitema, 2013). In the past, top challenging problems in schools included gum chewing, noise or talking out of turn, littering, walking on undesignated areas and daydreaming in class among others, says Moore (2006). With the advent of HIV and AIDS resulting in child headed households, children nursing their sick parents, divorcing parents, parents living in the diaspora, drug use and teen pregnancy, poverty among others, these problems are simply too much for teachers to address alone (Siyachitema, 2013). There is need for social workers in schools to provide both preventive and remedial welfare services to pupils.

The high divorce rate in Zimbabwe as noted in The Zimbabwean Newspaper of 4 April 2012 results in many school going children growing up in single parent families (The Zimbabwean, 2012). The paper states that the High Court of Zimbabwe handled 18, 000 civil cases in 2012 with divorce cases topping the list. Moore (2006) noted that growing up in broken families can adversely affect the emotional health of a student and therefore result in poor performance at school.

As the Zimbabwean economy experienced a melt down around 2008 and beyond, many people fled to the diaspora leaving behind their children still in school. The absence of parents in most homes has led to child headed households and such a scenario exerts pressure on the older sibling resulting in poor performance at school (Siyachitema, 2013). Children have been exposed to a lot of social ills in communities because of lack of supervision as the elder sibling becomes overwhelmed with responsibilities. Drug use and teen pregnancy has been noted in most child headed households resulting in school dropouts and poor performance in school (Siyachitema, 2013).

HIV and AIDS continues to affect the attendance and performance of children in schools as they assume the roles of nursing their sick parents at home and also fending for the family's daily needs (Siyachitema, 2013). Thus, many children mature very early as they find themselves with a load of responsibilities and at the same time having to attend to school. Foster and Makufa (1999) commented that too many responsibilities on the child will make the child abnormal. The performance of this child at school is compromised as they are left with very little time to attend to school issues. This child's load continues as the parents eventually dies and being left with the younger siblings to take care of. Upon the death of the parents, lack of school fees due to the death of the bread winner and issues of inheritance of property by relatives also affect the children left behind. Foster and Makufa (1999) further noted that at school orphaned children are stigmatised by other children and are falsely accused of anything that go missing in class, they are the first suspects all the time because they are not supposed to have many things at school. These issues continue to impede on the performance of pupils at school.

Children with disabilities are another special group that the school social worker also works with in schools (Siyachitema, 2013). This group of children also needs attention in terms of provision of services that suit their requirements. Children with disabilities might feel stigmatised if their needs at school are not catered for. It is the role of the school social worker to influence policy that address the needs of children with disabilities in schools and also networking with other service providers from outside the school system.

Some functions of social work which are to help people enhance and more effectively utilise their own problem-solving capacities, establish initial linkages between people and resource systems and contribute to the development and modification of social policy (Siyachitema, 2013). In line with these functions of social work, social workers play an important role in capacitating people to be able to identify their own problems and also to

be able to solve their problems through linking them to available services which they may not be aware of. Social workers are also intermediators between people and service providers as they identify the needs of people and influence these in the making of policies that affect them (Siyachitema, 2013).

Social workers are the professionals best equipped to address the social, emotional, physical and psychological issues that can block academic progress (Siyachitema, 2013). Social workers are trained to think of innovative solutions to complex problems, their interventions often make a strong difference for pupils at risk for academic failure.

A typical school counsellor is involved in career guidance, college admission, standardized testing and graduation requirements. School counsellors often do not have the time or training to do counselling from a clinical perspective. Social workers are prepared to solve problems, do case management, refer to appropriate outside and internal resources and provide ongoing counselling for specific problems (Siyachitema, 2013; Moore, 2006). Social workers work at every level of schooling - infant, junior and high school. Some school social workers' roles are:

Social assessment
Individual, group and family counselling
Crisis counselling and intervention
Parent and teacher education and skills development
Community liaison and community projects
Influencing school policies
Home visits and follow-up
Career guidance and mentorship
Social assistance
Linking with social services and referrals (social welfare, housing, health, education)
Lifestyle issues and life skills (e.g. promoting abstinence from sex and drugs)
Children with disabilities support

According to Siyachitema (2013) most schools do not have school social workers because of the cost involved. School social workers often face the daunting task of having to legitimize their presence and the services they provide. Social workers often struggle to establish a formal and informal power base within the school as there are other professionals like teachers, psychologists and school counsellors who already had clearly defined expectations before the emergence of the social work profession. Social workers work in a secondary setting and therefore need to explain the presence of their new profession in the education field especially in Zimbabwe, where even after the birth of the profession in 1964; most people still do not understand the purpose and function of the profession. There is still confusion and lack of knowledge among school systems about the role of the school social worker. However, some schools appreciate the need to hire social workers but lack the resources to hire them. These issues continue to plague school social workers, hurting not only the credibility of the profession, but also children and families who would benefit from social work services.

Recommendations

Given the load and responsibility of teachers, concentrating on the psychosocial aspects of their students might be overwhelming (Siyachitema, 2013). It is strongly recommended that all schools that can afford social workers on a full time or part time basis do so. It is also recommended that government should provide part time social workers to public schools. Further, provision of school social work services may be aligned to the department of

social services. The other option is to train teachers so that they gain some social work-related skills. The only challenge with the recommendation is that teachers will be overwhelmed with work and may not be able to perform all the two duties adequately.

Conclusions

Social workers are well equipped to deal with the present social ills prevailing in societies. Social work training prepares the professional to deal with diverse challenges using different social work methods which are client specific. The presence of social work services in schools will not only be beneficial to the students but also to the families and communities as such services will mould a better citizen with better prospects. There is therefore need for social workers through their representative bodies to advocate for the inclusion of their services to be extended to each school in Zimbabwe.

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