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School social work: An emerging area of professional social work

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Abstract

School Social Work is emerging as an essential part of Professional Social Work. School life is considered as the most vital part during the course of an individual's development. The current changing social and economic scenario has brought several challenges to the social and cultural situation of an individual, often leading to maladjustment of individuals within their socio-cultural settings. Children are often the most vulnerable in such conditions which hamper their overall growth, academic performance and wellbeing. In such a situation school social workers are sometimes the only professionals who provide their services to reintegrate them with the mainstream and improve their academic performance. The following paper brings out the importance of school social work as a specialised area of theory and practice and the services that they provide to the society.

Keywords: School social work, counselling, student support services

Introduction

Professional social work as a discipline and as a practice has been gaining widespread recognition due to the specialised services and scientific methods employed by its practitioners. School Social Work has been developed as a specialised branch of Professional Social Work to cater to the growing needs of school going children. School Social Workers are trained mental health professionals with a degree in social work who provide services related to a person's social, emotional and life adjustment to school and/or society (NASW, 1992). School Social Workers act as the link between the home, school and community in providing direct as well as indirect services to students, families/guardians, school personnels and the community at large to promote and support students' academic success and to bring about a greater cohesion between the students and their social surroundings.

School social workers serve as the primary mental health providers for students and provide professional counseling services to students and their families to identify and provide interventions for various issues and problems faced by the students in their personal and academic spheres.

Children today are becoming victims of many social forces that negatively affect their role as students. The family is in a state of transition and till the time it becomes stabilized, children's unmet physical and emotional needs will continue to interfere with their ability to learn and adjust in school. School Social Workers have special expertise in understanding family and community systems and linking students and their families with services essential to promote student's welfare.

School social workers' training includes specialized preparation in cultural diversity, systems theory, social justice, risk assessment and intervention, consultation and collaboration, and clinical intervention strategies to address the various needs of students (NASW, 1992). They work to remove the barriers to learning which are created as a result of poverty, inadequate health care, and unsupportive environment. School social workers often focus on providing support to vulnerable populations of students who are at a high risk of truancy and dropping out of school. They work with teachers, administrators, parents, educators and other stakeholders to provide coordinated interventions and consultations designed to keep students in school and help families access the support needed to promote and improve their academic performance as well as their integration with the society at large.

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School social workers are responsible for designing and implementing the school-based programs to provide a positive school environment. They are also engaged in working to identify students in need of more intensive interventions and refer such students to additional services provided by the state. School social workers serve as a resource to the school authorities and other educators, by providing consultations on various matters. They also provide training on various aspects of mental health needs and identify such students for the referral process. School Social Workers work in close cooperation with individual students and their families and in the process create a bridge between the school and the community. This coordination is critical for building a successful partnership between the school and the community for optimizing the use of limited resources, facilitating better service delivery, and maintaining communication between partners.

Values of school social work

Florence Poole in 1949 described School social worker as a skilled worker who determines the types of needs within the school which can be met through school social work services. School social worker should be able to develop a method of offering the service which will be appropriate to the general organization and structure of the school. They must be able to define the service and their contribution in such a way that the school personnel can accept it as a service, which contributes to the major purpose of the school.

Thus, the Values of School social work according to NASW (1992) are:

- Each pupil is valued as an individual regardless of any unique characteristic.
- Each pupil should be allowed to participate in the learning process.
- Individual differences should be recognized; intervention should be aimed at guiding pupils' goals with educational support to train them to the life to which they look forward.
- Each child, regardless of race and socio-economic characteristics, has a right to equal treatment in the school.

Theoretical framework and services

School social work is based around a number of ever expanding practice models.

Traditional-clinical model

John Alderson first described the traditional-clinical model in which school social workers give their services primarily through casework method which is often supplemented by group work method practiced with students and their family members. A greater emphasis is placed on evidence-based practice and intervention methods that are supported empirically.

Home-school-community relations model

The second model used by later school social workers is based on an approach that draws on components of the existing multidisciplinary models - Social interaction model, which focuses on working with students faced with social and emotional difficulties. This model is grounded on systems theory and transactional systems perspective. It was an answer to organize the methodological diversity inherent in the role, rather than limiting to individual change or systems change.

School-community-pupil relations model

Lela B. Costin developed this model in 1973 which focuses on the school, community, and students and the interactions among them. In this model, school social workers serve as mediators, negotiators, consultants, and advocates for students and school personnels. They also set up informal groups for students, teachers, and other school personnels. This model also focuses on evaluation of the needs of the students, the school, and community conditions along with their relational affect on the availability and quality of educational opportunities to specific target groups.

Clinical and environmental interaction model

This model is based on the ecological systems theory which was developed by Frey and Dupper (2005) and Germain (2006). This model promotes the view of individual and environment as a unified interacting system in which each constantly affects and shapes the other. This model attends to the complexities of the environment and the person by engaging progressive forces in people and removing the environmental obstacles for promoting growth and adaptive functioning.

The role of school social workers is an ever expanding domain which is further affected by the knowledge-base, recognition of opportunities to address the level of student needs. Some of the specific services that the School Social Workers can provide have been discussed below:

Services provided to students

School social workers are responsible to work with those problems in a child's environment that affect the child's adjustment in school, home and community. They provide Counseling services to the target groups (group, individual and/or family). The school social workers are responsible for mobilizing the family, school, and community resources to enable the child to learn as effectively as possible. They also assist in developing positive behavioral intervention strategies for children with behavioral issues. School social workers plan intervention strategies to increase the academic success of students. They are also responsible for assisting with conflict resolution and anger management. They help the child in developing appropriate social interaction skills for better social adjustments and effective communication. They also facilitate better understanding and acceptance of the situations faced by the children.

Services to parents/families

The school social worker is responsible for working with families to assess the problems impacting the child's educational adjustment and performance. They work with parents to support in facilitating their children's school adjustment. They help to alleviate family stress to enable the child to function more effectively in school & community. They assist parents to access programs available to students with special needs. The school social workers also facilitate parents in accessing and utilizing school and community resources to overcome their various problems.

Services to school personnel

School social workers provide the staff with essential information for understanding the various factors (cultural, societal, economic, familial, health, etc.) which affect a student's performance and behavior. They facilitate the development of staff training programs. They help the

teachers in understanding various aspects of behavior management.

School-community liaison

The school social workers assist in coordinating with the community in mobilising its resources to meet the various needs of the students. They help the schools in receiving adequate support from various state and non-state agencies. They also advocate for new and improved services for students and families. The school social workers assist the system to respond effectively to the requirements of the children.

They are responsible for developing and implementing educational programs for children. They also facilitate the development of alternative programs for school drop-outs, children with special needs and children in conflict with the law. They are also responsible for identifying and reporting cases of child abuse and neglect. They provide consultation regarding the school's rules and regulations and school policy. Finally, they provide case management for students and families requiring multiple resources.

Thus, the roles of a School Social Worker are multiple. They act as an advocate in promoting child's rights, as a manager, as a collaborator, as a consultant, as a coordinator, and last but not the least as a facilitator. School social workers bring unique knowledge and skills to the school system. School social workers are instrumental in furthering the purpose and objectives of the schools. School social workers are hired by schools to enhance the institutional abilities to meet its academic mission, especially where home, school and community collaboration is the key to achieving that mission. Historically, the foremost role of the school social worker has been that of a home-school-community liaison. Although the field of school social work has evolved considerably with the dynamic changes of society, school social workers function as change agents more so than ever before and they continue to serve as the vital link between home, school, and community.

School social work in India

School social work in India was officially recognized by the Government of India only in the 21st century. Primary education has recently been made as the Constitutional Right of every child in India. Thus, this makes the concept of school social work all the more relevant for schools in India. This is particularly important since the children come from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and contexts. The education system in India is faced by a plethora of challenges including poor infrastructure, high dropout rates, absenteeism, lack of trained teachers, and low girl child enrolment due to gender bias among others. These challenges make the school social work services all the more important.

However, the concept of school social worker is yet to gain ground in India. The governments, both at the centre and the state are yet to recognise school social work services as an integral part of the education system (Gandhi, 1990). There are very few cities in India who have formally recognised the importance and the need to appoint school social workers/Counselors in the schools.

There is a dire need to rethink and respond to the emerging needs of the school going children, especially in the current scenario of fast changing societal conditions and growing challenges as a result of these changes. Though, this

situation is fast improving with the school authorities and the parents associations, both recognizing the importance of school social work. However, a great deal needs to be done to popularize and expand the school social work services to provide the need based services to the students.

Conclusion

Throughout the world, schools are becoming the main public institution for social development. Schools are working to include those who have been previously excluded from the opportunity of education. They are raising standards for educational outcomes to prepare citizens to participate in a multinational world, bound together by communication and by economic and social relations. The school social worker is becoming a useful professional to assist children who are marginalized—whether economically, socially, politically, or personally—to participate in this. Social workers work to make the education process effective. To do this, their central focus is working in partnership with parents on the pupil in transaction with a complex school and home environment. Education has become crucial, not only for each person to cope with the demands of modern living, but also for national economic survival. Thus, the role of a school social worker has become all the more critical for the overall wellbeing of the students as a whole.

While concluding all, it may be stated that school social work has a great potential to make the school system conducive for all the children, and make the education process more meaningful. It has the capacity to realize the Right to Education (and quality education) for all. Hopefully, the social planners and policy makers soon recognize the value of school social work and make provisions to ensure their presence in each and every school of the country.

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