



International Network for School Social Work

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Contact mhuxtable@olympus.net

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Editor: Marion Huxtable

Development of School Social Work Curriculum in Sri Lanka: An experience

Mrs. Varathagowry Vasudevan,

Director of Training, National Institute of Social Development (NISD)

gowrynisd@gmail.com

Sri Lanka's population, estimated to be 20,675,000 in 2014, has a growth rate of 0.9 % per year (Statistical Pocket Book 2015). Its population is multi-ethnic, consisting of Sinhalese (73.9%), Tamils (12.7%), Indian Tamils (5.5%), Moor (7.1%), Burghers (0.3%), Malays (0.3 %) and others (0.2%) (Population Census 2012). Sinhalese and Tamil are the official languages. Sri Lanka is predominantly agricultural with a growing industrial sector. Sri Lanka has a remarkable achievement in the literacy Rate (93.3 %) of which the male literacy rate is 94.2 % and female literacy 92.6 % (Labour Force Survey Annual Report, 2014). These unusual high rates are attributed to the establishment of free education for all and early welfare service delivery. The educational system has played a significant role in the people's lives and thereby in the development of the country. However it is generally recognized that tertiary education needs to be developed and diversified to accommodate more students and new areas of study such as professional social work. The National Institute of Social Development is the provider of social work education. It now includes a course in school social work as a new specialization in the BSW programme.

School Social Work

Today's children, living in a complex society, face varied problems of growing up that prevent them from benefiting fully from their education. There are major problems affecting children including poverty and lack of educational materials, the trauma of the war, gaps in implementation of the policy of free education, the impacts on children of addiction to computer games, social media and mobile phones, and the absence of mothers who are working in domestic labor in the Middle East. Classroom teachers do not have the time to help children deal with these issues.

BSW and MSW students now have field placements in selected public and private schools. There are very few trained school social workers and so we appoint and train selected teachers and principals to assist and guide the social work students who are doing a field placement at the school. Social work students fulfill some of the school social work service with the following services based on a needs assessment.

- Working with children with economic problems by linking them with materials, resources and referral to agencies
- Improving the school attendance among the children
- Working with children who have dropped out of school
- Working with groups with special needs to promote inclusive education
- Helping to find resources for infrastructure facilities of schools
- Developing harmony-building programmes among the school children and
- Empowering children regarding issues such as child abuse, children's rights and responsibilities.

These prevailing issues prompted NISD to develop specialized course units in school social work to address these issues and to provide technical know-how in the BSW curriculum.

School social work curriculum

The school social work curriculum was developed by a faculty member of school social work at the National Institute of Social Development under purview of the Ministry of Social Empowerment and Welfare in Sri Lanka. It was developed with support from the International Network for School Social Work and with consultation from national and international experts in school social work in 2010. It was reviewed by Michelle Alvarez (Social Work Professor at Minnesota State Mankato University) and Randy A. Fisher (then School Social Work Program Coordinator at Aurora University, Illinois).

This course unit was developed to give social work students the skills needed for school social work. The first course unit is based on knowledge of school social work and the educational system of Sri Lanka and the second course unit provides functional knowledge on teaching and learning activities, plus assessment for learning outcomes. Randy A. Fisher's 2010 feedback was "The only thing I might add would be an assignment where the students visit a local school to observe educational practices in general or observe special classrooms. Then they could report on what they have observed and how having a school social worker in the school might make a difference for the school teacher and student." Feedback and support from the International Network and overseas contacts regarding resource materials on school social work helped develop the school social work curriculum.

After some delays it was successfully included in the BSW curriculum as an optional course unit for those students interested in specializing in school social work. At present 26 students take the skills courses to enhance their ability to work with school children, teachers and parents. "A skills course is very important so I am excited to see this course. Research is telling us that when we implement strong prevention programs at the school-wide level we can decrease the issues that students face. We call it Response to Intervention." (Michelle Alvarez, 2010)

Lessons Learned

We learned that curriculum development is a team effort and the initiator is the leader of this process. The International Network for School Social Work helped to network with international school social work professors, and the National Institute of Social Development consulted with local school social workers and academics whose contribution was immense in developing a new curriculum tailored to suit the local multi-ethnic society. Since the curriculum is implemented only for the BSW programme of NISD, school social workers have asked the National Institute of Social Development to offer a certificate course on school social work as continuing professional development for themselves and to train school teachers.