



International Network for School Social Work

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School Social Work in the State of Victoria, Australia Chris Barrett, Paul Jameson, Lorraine Osborne and Liisa Tuisk

School social work was represented at the *Joint World Conference on Social Work, Education and Social Development* in July 2014, through a paper prepared by four members of the Australian Association of Social Workers (Victorian Branch) School Social Work Practice Group, which celebrates its 20th anniversary this year. The writers have been school social work practitioners for between 5 and 25 years, in city, regional and rural areas of Victoria, the second most populous state in Australia.

School social work has an unbroken 65-year history in Victoria, mostly in multidisciplinary visiting teams in the government school system, but also in individual government and non-government schools. The conference paper drew on research, practice wisdom and communal knowledge to demonstrate school social work as specialist practice. It is uniquely defined by its particular approach to the pursuit of social justice for children and young people, through the removal of barriers to their education, and the facilitation of personal potential and best learning outcomes. Victorian state education policy over three decades has increasingly recognised that social inclusion and school engagement are impacted by personal, family, cultural and socio-economic factors. School social workers provide programmes in the school environment in order to help achieve student wellbeing, and access and equity in terms of learning outcomes.

The Australian practice standards were drafted by the AASW (Vic) School Social Work Practice Group, ratified by the AASW after nation-wide consultation with members via the web site and published in 2011. The standards specify the essential nature of school social work, with its: *focus on the student in the school environment in order to facilitate successful learning outcomes through the relief of distress and removal of barriers or inequities. Students within schools have diverse abilities and needs. All students are entitled to a quality educational environment which:*

- *promotes the total development of the child - intellectual, physical, social, creative, emotional; and*
- *creates learning outcomes which enable the young adult to take a satisfying role in this society and to have fair access to its resources.* (AASW, 2011)

With access to students, their families, schools and neighbourhoods, school social workers are able to develop creative and responsive practices for prevention, early intervention and intervention.

Prevention. Most school social workers devote the majority of their time to intervention, but the lesser time spent on prevention has high impact. School social workers are often members of the school Welfare Committee, where welfare policy, programmes and referral practices are developed and evaluated so that

they remain responsive to student wellbeing and learning needs. In consultancy roles, school social workers support the development of school cultures and specific programmes inclusive of the rich student diversity in Victorian schools, including gender, sexuality, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (First Nations) background, migrant, refugee or asylum-seeker status, religious and cultural backgrounds, poverty and social marginalisation. School social workers provide whole school, class and group programs in health and wellbeing, social and emotional literacy, personal safety and programs to combat sexism, racism and bullying, parenting information and education, consultation with principals and school leaders on student and staff welfare provision, and school and community collaboration and networking. School social workers provide professional supervision for social workers and others in student welfare roles, and teacher professional development on topics including the educational needs of vulnerable or traumatised children, the impacts of poverty and family background on learning, and responding to challenging student behaviours. School social workers support teaching staff personally and professionally as needed. Some school social workers conduct research into student, school climate and engagement issues, and others would like to do more research and evaluation than workloads and service management currently allow.

Early intervention and Intervention. Visiting school social workers in the course of their work will at times make recommendations, but in most cases it is teachers and welfare staff who are in a position to identify students for targeted **Early Intervention**, hopefully providing skills and supports, and reducing the need for more complex **Intervention** at a later stage. Schools, school social workers, child protection and family support agencies are increasingly collaborating early by way of “care teams” to support children and young people in out-of-home care, or who have suffered family and relationship trauma, abuse or neglect.

School social workers are called upon where students’ ability to learn is impacted by family transience, health and mental health issues, changing circumstances, grief and loss, financial hardship, housing difficulties and social marginalisation. Personal factors such as social, emotional and problem-solving skills, severe behavioural issues, peer and sub-cultural pressures are also focal points for school social worker attention. Non-attendance is often the first sign of poor school engagement and increasing student distress. School social workers identify possible learning difficulties, advocate for curriculum or program modification, consult with teachers about classroom organisation and behaviour management plans, and promote positive home-school-community links. School-based Student Support Groups bring together school staff, the school social worker and other professionals, the parents, sometimes the child, and often the older student, to construct curriculum, learning and behaviour management plans.

Early Intervention and **Intervention** typically include classroom observations, bio-psycho-social educational assessment, behavioural and risk assessments, group work, development of innovative programs, teacher consultation, parent/carer consultation and support and establishing and maintaining student supports. These may include adult mentors, older buddies, friendship groups, breakfast programs and homework clubs, counselling, casework, referral, liaison, mediation and advocacy. School social workers are increasingly involved in critical incident management, which might be related to bush-fires or floods, serious accidents, conflict or deaths within the school community.

The social work values of respect for diversity, inclusion and equity are particularly relevant to practice with children and young people who are often society’s least empowered, especially at a time of rapidly increasing Victorian youth unemployment. While upholding the best interests of the student, school social workers navigate competing interests, and need to be willing to challenge school structures and practices and to examine the management, delivery and effectiveness of their own school social work services.

Australian Association of Social Workers (2011). *AASW Practice Standards for School Social Workers*

<http://www.aasw.asn.au/document/item/814>

Barrett, C.A. (2014). *School social work in the state of Victoria, Australia: 65 years of student wellbeing and learning support* (PhD thesis), University of Melbourne

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