

International Network for School Social Work

<http://internationalnetwork-schoolsocialwork.htmlplanet.com>

Contact mhuxtable@olympus.net

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Editor: Marion Huxtable

My Career Journey Working for School Children in Sri Lanka, Part 2 **Sanjeeva de Mel, Coordinator of the Social Work Unit of S. Thomas' College, Mount Lavinia** **and Executive Director of SERVE, <https://www.servelk.org>**

SERVE, the social work project serving school children

In 1999, together with a group of dedicated professionals including social workers, I founded SERVE, a Sri Lankan non-profit social work organization designed to empower children. With the partnership of Save the Children a pilot project was launched in 2000 to promote school social work as a tool for child empowerment. I gave the leadership to this team as the Executive Director.

Our objectives were:

-  To support students to enhance their problem solving and coping capacity.
-  To protect children from abuse and violence.
-  To sensitize the school social work concept in the school community.
-  To strengthen the network with government, NGOs and other institutions.

In 2001 we started the program in ten schools, having one school social worker per school. This has included 8 Provincial Level Government Schools, a private boy's school and a private girl's school in Colombo. Most of these schools cater to lower and middle class students and they are not the most popular and resourceful leading schools in those communities. In 2002 each social worker covered two schools and the project was expanded to 18 schools. The peak of this project was in 2005-2007 with a total of 27 schools having 15 school social workers. This project also served students who are visually and hearing impaired as well as students under the care of certified schools based on a court ruling.

The 2004 Tsunami

In 2004, there was massive destruction from a tsunami in several countries including Sri Lanka. SERVE quickly organised relief efforts for families, including a completely equipped temporary shelter, a new resource center for children's after-school activities, basic equipment for resettlement, school uniforms and supplies, guidance for psychosocial problems and emotional

uplift through many activities and material assistance. Local and international donations made all this possible. The arrival of the Covid pandemic and the impact on schools since March 2020 signals the need for renewed efforts by social workers to serve the changed needs of school children during this new crisis as was done effectively following the tsunami.

Struggling to Develop School Social Work in Sri Lanka

In spite of successes in providing services, we had very limited literature and local experience and technical know-how for developing school social work. SERVE joined the International Network for School Social Work to bridge this gap. I was fortunate to take part in the International School Social Work Conferences held in Stockholm, Sweden (2003) and Busan, Korea (2006) as well as an Asian School Social Workers Conference in Tokyo, Japan to learn and share knowledge. However, due to lack of funding the school social work project was not continued, aside from some limited programs, such as a girl empowerment project in 8 schools.

In the 2013/2015 period I followed a Master Degree in social work at the National Institute of Social Development (NISD) and my thesis was on “Opportunities and Challenges in Promoting School Social Work In Sri Lanka”. I outlined the need for school social work resulting from various social issues such as poverty, family breakup, the violent background of war, child abuse, peer problems and problems in the school system itself. The results in terms of dropouts, school attendance and behavioral problems were described. The thesis showed how a range of social work activities in schools could address these problems and indicated the need for training and a commitment from the Ministry of Education and others to support an initiative for school social work. School social work should be considered a must in all schools whether private, international or public to ensure that students are given a voice, they are listened to, opportunities provided for growth, their basic needs met to realize their growth potential and their rights are safeguarded. Preference should be given to disadvantaged schools and communities in the selection of schools.

What Comes Next?

The National Institute of Social Development as an academic institution, plus SERVE can collaborate in taking this up with The Ministry of Education and I/NGOs to obtain required resources. NISD and SERVE can design a training programme especially targeting teachers in schools with an interest to help students with needs.

As at now I still continue happily providing leadership to SERVE and also working at the Social Work Unit of S. Thomas’ College and acting as a field supervisor for Sri Lankan and International Social Work students. This work I did using school social work for the last 25 years is definitely challenging, but also very rewarding. Once again I conclude, ‘Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life’.



Addressing local political leaders