



International Network for School Social Work

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Contact mhuxtable@olympus.net

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Editor: Marion Huxtable

My Career Journey Working for School Children in Sri Lanka

Sanjeeva de Mel, Coordinator of the Social Work Unit of S. Thomas' College, Mount Lavinia and Executive Director of SERVE, <https://www.servelk.org>

‘Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life’, Confucius once said. I chose to help and empower people, especially children, by becoming a social worker, focusing on school social work in Sri Lanka.

On completion of my secondary education I opted not to enter university due to the disruptive situation of the ongoing civil war that prevailed in Sri Lanka in 1990s. Upon starting work at the age of 20 years, as a project officer working for economic empowerment through small and micro businesses and micro credit, I realized that helping and empowering people is a much more complicated, systematic and a scientific process which needs professional intervention. After 3 years of work it was obvious that I had to obtain the right knowledge, skills and attitudes to make a change among the needy. This led me to read for a Bachelors Degree in Arts as well as to enroll for a Social Work Diploma course at the School of Social Work which was the only course available in Sri Lanka at that time. Acquiring new knowledge was interesting, but field practice much more interesting.

As a social work student I intervened in 1996 when a student known to me stopped going to school. This child had been abused by a neighbour and was undergoing trauma after this incident. I worked with his parents and spoke with the school management, teachers and counsellors to obtain assistance. I personally accompanied him to school as he was hesitant to go alone and I also provided guidance and counseling. Thereafter he was back



Counselling at S.Thomas

on track and continued his schooling and completed his studies. This was the time I got interested and started reading and exploring about school social work. There were very limited books about school social work available in Sri Lanka. Since the late 1960s, social work students of Sri Lanka School of Social Work (SLSSW), presently called the National Institute of Social Development (NISD), have implemented projects in school social work as a partial requirement for their social work studies. Sadly these projects have all ended on completion of the students' courses without any continuity.

In January 1997, I started my field practicum focusing on school social work based at S. Thomas' College, Mount Lavinia which is also my 'alma mater'. This is a fee-levied private Christian boys school with around 3000 boys in the age range of 5-17 years engaged in primary and secondary education. During an eight-month period I was successful in helping many needy children as well as the school system bringing in positive results. This led the school management to establish a school social work unit in December 1997. Initially, this was co-sponsored by the school, parent-teacher association and the old boys' association. At this time we developed a few programmes to address the felt and expressed needs of the students and the system. The first was the **Student Counselling and Development Programme** to help and empower students to face day-to-day psycho-social problems related to school, family and community living. A **Student Extra-Curricular Programme** promoted holistic education through sports, clubs and societies as well as other activities beyond classroom education. **The Student Financial Assistance Programme** identified and assisted students with financial constraints to cover their school fees, expenses related to studies as well as to facilitate to be engaged in sports and other extra-curricular activities. **Staff Training and Development Programme** identified staff training needs. It organised and coordinated a recognition and reward system for teachers and a **Parental Awareness Programme** to help awareness and sensitization for parents to obtain their maximum contribution towards their child's betterment and impart new knowledge for handling children of the modern day.



SERVE has been working since 2000 to protect children from abuse and support them in their education together with non-profits and other agencies

At the end of 2000 I left this job and with other professionals including social workers founded SERVE, a non-profit social work organization to protect and 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 as the Executive Director of SERVE.

In the February newsletter we will continue the story of how SERVE is empowering school children in Sri Lanka.