



International Network for School Social Work

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

Contact mhuxtable@olympus.net

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Editor: Marion Huxtable

A year of global grief, loss and trauma School social work has a mission to restore children's well-being

Our global family is experiencing chronic trauma from the Covid-19 pandemic. Loss of life, health, jobs, food security and homes has triggered widespread emotional problems. After almost 18 months, coronavirus continues to disrupt every aspect of our lives. School children are growing up with a changed definition of normal that holds both danger and opportunity for their development.

During the pandemic schools everywhere have reinvented themselves to give the children the support they need, and in much more than academics. The school community has united to teach, counsel, nurture, feed and protect the children. Meanwhile news reports from May and June show that schools face day-to-day uncertainty and must make frequent adjustments in how they function. Complex Covid protocols, pupils' reluctance to return to school, locating missing pupils, child protection, supporting pupils who need extra instruction, and handling parents' fears are daily fare for schools everywhere. Restoring children's well-being is an urgent need and presents a mission for school social workers. The list of tasks includes locating missing pupils, restoring gender equity, fostering resilience, improving attendance and supporting teachers.

Locating missing pupils

By April 2020, 188 countries had closed schools from pre-primary to tertiary education institutions, and 91.3% (about one and a half billion) of total enrolled learners were affected (UNESCO, 2020). Although school systems developed ways to reach students, not all could be contacted and the number of students enrolled in school has declined during the pandemic. Disruption of school schedules and lack of data has made it impossible so far to calculate the extent of the decline and even to track students who are missing. Vulnerable children such as children in care, immigrants, homeless and children with disabilities are among those who are likely to be missing. Over a hundred years ago social workers were employed to seek out and enroll children in school and work with families to promote their regular attendance. School social workers in many countries will need to return to this historical role.

Restoring gender equity

It took decades to achieve gender parity in education in developing countries. Returning to school may now be difficult for girls due to social and economic problems resulting from the pandemic, with a return to inequality in education. Girls will again face greater risks from gender violence, early marriage and unsafe working conditions. Locating girls who have dropped out of school and finding

ways to re-enroll them is another urgent task for school social work. Yet many developing countries have no school social work services. The pandemic crisis challenges countries to introduce school social work service in the effort to revive the Millennium Development Goal 3 for gender equity in education.

Fostering resilience

Children's development has been badly affected by the pandemic. School fosters children's healthy development by fostering their ability to learn, both academic and emotional and social skills. The relationships, resources and opportunities that schools provide are a key part of how children develop resilience. School systems everywhere are acknowledging that the pandemic has taken a toll on mental health and that the school needs to address this. This provides an opening for school social workers to help schools refocus this awareness on promoting well-being and resilience, without resorting to a disease model. For more on this see <https://www.jscimedcentral.com/Psychiatry/psychiatry-8-1147.pdf>. While some pupils will need services for emotional problems, the majority must be steered towards healthy coping skills without labeling, while the school system itself is steered towards healthier educational approaches. School social work is needed to help schools identify how they will change for the better, incorporating comprehensive well-being.

Improving attendance

Improving attendance is a traditional role for school social workers in many countries. When schools switched to distance learning during the pandemic, the digital divide between rich and poor meant that many pupils were left out and some dropped out. School attendance habits changed during the pandemic with many pupils cycling back and forth between online learning, face-to-face classes, periods of quarantine and systems of hybrid instruction. Family work habits also became more flexible as parents switched to distance work or lost their jobs. In spite of the many difficulties that families coped with during the pandemic, some countries continued to threaten prosecution of families whose children missed school, even those missing classes through distance learning. Poor school attendance is the result of a complex set of situations requiring sensitive and intelligent handling. Prosecution is a weak approach and unlikely to increase a child's chance at educational success. Improving attendance is a cornerstone for school social work services. It is important that school social work leadership claims the role and that school social workers take the lead in improving attendance as in-person classes resume.

Supporting teachers

Teachers are frontline essential workers. They responded to the pandemic creatively and generously, while dealing with their own fears, losses, personal health and family issues. Many have experienced severe stress from coping with the unprecedented demands of teaching during the pandemic. This has pushed many towards burnout and to considering leaving the profession. School social workers are ideally placed to understand the needs of teachers and to provide support as they grapple with varying emotions of anxiety, fear and anger. The holistic social work approach of focusing on strengths, problem-solving and empowerment is ideal for this time and situation.

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The pandemic is not the only crisis for schools. Schools need to be ready not only for more pandemics but also for the ongoing crises of resource depletion and climate change. It is youth who are most affected by the rapid destruction of ecosystems. The UN's Decade on Ecosystem Restoration 2021-2030 links the well-being of youth with restoring ecosystems. The role of youth in the UN's plan, inspired largely by advocacy of young people such as Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg, is seen as key. Schools must help prepare them for life-long engagement in protecting the planet. As many countries are taking a fresh look at their vision for education following the pandemic, school social workers need to be part of the team to help schools engage students in new endeavors to restore ecosystems. Active involvement in ecosystem restoration is resiliency at work.