

February 2022

## A Global Picture of School Social Work in 2021

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### Recommended Citation

Huxtable, Marion (2022) "A Global Picture of School Social Work in 2021," *International Journal of School Social Work*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2161-4148.1090>

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## A Global Picture of School Social Work in 2021

### Abstract

The article provides a global picture of school social work in 2021 using data gathered by the International Network for School Social Work. School social work is a growing specialty around the world. There are school social workers practicing in more than 50 countries. School social workers support students' educational success, especially those who are marginalized by poverty, oppression, disability and other personal or social problems. Ideally school social workers practice within a multi-disciplinary team to address wide-ranging barriers to education and participate in preventive programs for all students. The article describes the growth of school social work around the world, various models of practice, the role of specialty professional associations, training and standards, and the growth of school social work literature. Changes in the role and practice of school social work since the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020/2021 are included. International communication among school social workers has grown via publications, conferences and the International Network for School Social Work, and continues to assist expansion of the specialty around the world. Implications for the future of social work in education are discussed, a list of national school social work associations is provided and references include literature on school social work from various countries.

### Keywords

school social work, international

### Cover Page Footnote

Acknowledgement This article constitutes an update on the report A Global Picture of School Social Work in 2013 (Huxtable, M. 2013). Parts of this article have been adapted from previous work by the author in the following books and book chapters: Huxtable et al. in Lyons et al. (Eds.) (2012); Huxtable & Blyth (2002); Huxtable in Bye & Alvarez, (2006); and Vyslouzil & Weissensteiner, (2002).

## **A Global Picture of School Social Work in 2021**

### **Introduction**

School social work has evolved for over a century. It changes to meet changing needs and adapts to serve school children from many cultural traditions. It will continue to change. The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020/2021 demonstrated that school social workers have to adapt what they do very quickly when situations demand it. Fast transformations will be the norm as the global society reacts to new crises that rapidly are following the pandemic, including the impacts from climate change that will affect the lives of the current cohort of school children and all the generations to come. The pandemic crisis has created opportunities for societal change. The educational system is one of many institutions that will change along with others, creating new roles and opportunities for school social work.

This report is an attempt to update what we know about school social work in 2021. It builds on the report *A Global Picture of School Social Work in 2013* (Huxtable, 2013). It includes changes that have occurred in the field since 2013, summarizes recent changes affecting global education (mainly due to the pandemic), describes old and new roles for school social work, outlines professional issues such as training, licensing, professional associations, and looks to what the future holds for the profession.

Social work has much to contribute to schools. While teachers develop the potential of learners through transmitting knowledge, skills and values, social workers can provide support for learners' well-being so they are ready to learn. Social work provides special attention to those who are marginalized by problems such as poverty, oppression, or disability, mobilizing the strengths of family, school and community to overcome obstacles to educational success. Using ecological systems theory to evaluate and solve problems, social work is well suited to supporting schools by helping learners benefit from education.

Social workers have a key role as partners with schools in guiding children and youth to their reach their potential intellectually, emotionally, and socially. Schools everywhere must include all children, whatever the challenges presented by children with different abilities, diverse backgrounds, and wide-ranging problems. Schools are also charged with preparing youth for life in an increasingly complex and changing world. This has been highlighted by the 2020/2021 pandemic. During the continuing pandemic, schools are finding it necessary to employ a more flexible approach. Schools must teach creative thinking, problem-solving, social skills, communication skills, and decision-making skills in addition to the old core curriculum. These challenges increasingly require a team approach with support personnel bringing various expertise into schools so they can reach expanding educational goals.

School social work is well established in many countries, and is being introduced in others to help schools handle barriers to education such as disabilities, physical and mental health problems, drug use, adolescent pregnancy, and learning problems; family problems including domestic violence, divorce, child abuse, homelessness, and family illnesses; and problems within the school system such as discrimination, bullying, and inappropriate discipline by staff (International Network for School Social Work, 2016). School social workers can also join with communities to work on community-wide problems that negatively impact school performance such as violence, crime, decaying neighborhoods, lack of community services, racism, and poverty. As they work on resolving the problems that interfere with learning and helping all to reach their potential, school social workers defend and advocate for the right to education that respects the dignity, worth and culture of the individual. 2021 is a moment in history when schools have been compelled to reset goals and strategies of education. In the process they can leapfrog old barriers and find new ways for children to learn and thrive.

### **Education as a Universal Right and Barriers to Educational Success**

Since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 (United Nations, 1948), the international community has refined Article 26, The Right to Education (UN, 1948), in an ongoing series of declarations and conventions (UN, 1976, UNICEF, 1990).

In 1990, the World Conference on Education for All, with delegates from 155 countries, strengthened the Right to Education by establishing a framework for child, family and adult education with goals and specific targets (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1990). The Millennium Development Goals for primary education and gender equity paralleled the EFA goals. In 2000 targets were set for 2015, with specific objectives for early childhood education, free and compulsory primary education, youth and adult education programs, eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education, and improving the quality of education with measurable outcomes (UNESCO, 2000).

Goals for education are now captured in UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goal 4 of the 2030 Agenda, which ensures inclusive and equitable quality education by 2030. UNESCO issues a Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report annually. The GEM reports provide information about significant gains in the targeted goals. Each year the report focuses on a different aspect of education. In 2020, the GEM report covered the topic of inclusion (UNESCO, 2020).

While progress is being made in global goals overall, it is uneven. The 2020 report shows some wide gaps remain in access to education between countries and among various populations, while other countries are making rapid progress. For example, the percentage of primary school children out of school by 2020 was 8% worldwide, but in Sub-Saharan Africa it was still at 19%. For children who are one year below primary school age, 67% were in pre-school education, with fast progress in some countries such as Laos where pre-school enrollment has increased

to the global average of 67%, up from 38% in 2011. Gender parity (Target 4.5) has improved. Globally there is parity through secondary school. Within countries there are still gender disparities usually based on wealth, but also on other indicators (UNESCO, 2020).

The Education for Sustainable Development goals are the basic challenge, especially in developing countries. Even in developed countries where education is universal and free, there remains much work for schools to ensure equal access to education. Once children are successfully enrolled in school, especially children from socially marginalized groups, they often do not reach a satisfactory level of literacy or numeracy. Pupils with disabilities, ethnic minorities and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans & Intersex (LGBTI) pupils are examples of groups who are often marginalized in the education system.

Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006) requires “States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels”. The Global Education Monitoring report for 2020, *Inclusion and Education: All Means All* focuses on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education, meaning all marginalized groups, including children with disabilities as well as those marginalized by poverty, ethnic group and other factors. The 2020 GEM report is an in-depth look at the complexities of inclusion, already stagnating prior to 2020 and now exacerbated by the disruption of school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic (UNESCO, July 2020).

Countries are gradually adopting the inclusion goals and are in various stages of implementing them. For example, a detailed study of the situation in Mongolia shows the country has adopted a strong legal and policy framework for inclusive education, but implementation and capacity are lagging (Schelzig & Newman, 2020).

Rapid social change presents an array of ever-changing obstacles that prevent children from successfully completing their schooling, even for those pupils who are solidly in the social mainstream. These obstacles include personal and family challenges, systemic failures in schools and societal problems. Personal obstacles include physical and mental health problems, drug abuse, and teenage pregnancy. Family problems, such as domestic violence, poverty, divorce, child abuse, homelessness and various family trauma affect large numbers of children in the course of their schooling. Systemic school problems, such as inadequate teaching, poor facilities, ineffective classroom management, bullying and prejudice also affect large numbers of children at some point in their education. Many of the problems that affect children’s success are remarkably similar all over the world, and school systems are searching for ways to reduce the impact they have on children’s learning.

Students’ problems are multi-faceted and have complex contributing factors that combine together to hinder successful learning. The problems typically manifest themselves in poor attendance, low achievement, behavioral problems, or

dropping out of school. These are the common problems faced by school systems everywhere. Schools must change to meet the new challenges. Multi-disciplinary teams of professionals working together with teachers are increasingly needed to help children succeed in school. Within the multidisciplinary school team, each profession is equipped to handle different aspects of the barriers to learning, so that all contributing factors are addressed. School nurses are needed to assist pupils with medical problems such as diabetes, AIDS and cancer, and school psychologists can evaluate learning problems. Social workers use the wide lens of systems theory to evaluate every part of the pupil's life that interferes with learning and to develop plans with multiple supports to promote success in school. The school social worker is likely to work at a minimum with the pupil, the teacher and the parents, and may seek out other supportive people and programs within the school and the community to maximize progress.

### **The School Social Work Role**

I have gathered information about the role and administration of school social work since the 1990's using the platform of the International Network for School Social Work. The latest survey was conducted in 2016 and contributes recent information used in this and subsequent sections of this article (International Network for School Social Work, 2016).

School social work brings knowledge, values and skills that are well suited to tackling the wide range of human problems that impede pupils' educational progress and support the goal of equal education for all. Social work skills are distinct from and complement those of other professions such as social pedagogy (a holistic child development profession that is well established in many European countries, where school social work is in many cases a later addition) and school counseling (common in the United States and functioning there alongside school social work). While school social work is distinct from other roles such as school counseling, there can be a blurring of roles in some cases. For example, in Germany school social work developed from social pedagogy and offers a blend of social work skills and skills derived from social pedagogy (Wulfers, 2002). School social workers and other school professionals have many concerns in common and use such a wide range of skills that their roles may at times overlap. For example, a school counselor in the United States may do home visits on occasion, especially if there is no school social worker available. Some school social workers in the United States do preventive work in classrooms, a role that is more typical of school counselors.

A variety of models for school social work are used, each having its advantages. For example, in the United States, Sweden and Finland, social work services are an integral part of the school staff and practitioners are typically part of a multidisciplinary school team (Andersson et al., 2002). In some countries, such as Hong Kong, the service is provided through non-governmental organizations (Chiu & Wong, 2002), while in others such as Germany, school social work is a collaboration between youth welfare agencies and the school system (Beck, 2017).

A major role for school social work in countries where widespread poverty and the accompanying child labor contributes to under-enrollment in school is to support Education for All targets by reaching out to families to enroll children, providing for basic needs such as school meals and maintaining school attendance. In countries where education is free and compulsory and children are not prevented from attending school by the necessity of working, there are many issues in schools that call for the expertise of social workers. Reducing absenteeism, whether caused by truancy, school phobia, dropping out, or poor health, is often a major part of the role. Other narrowly focused roles may be handed to school social workers depending on the current needs of the school system, source of funding, political pressure, or preference of the administration. However, the ideal role is broad and flexible, allowing the social worker to tackle any problem that interferes with school success and using a systems approach with school, family, and community to resolve problems. A toolkit of consultation with school staff, individual and group counseling, referral to agencies, advocacy and outreach to parents is the mainstay of school social work. Ideally school children will have easy access to a school social worker, so that problems can be resolved early before they become chronic. School social workers need to interpret their role to decision-makers in the school system so that their services are made available to the whole school population in ways consistent with social work values and standards.

Schools are charged not only with resolving the problems that interfere with learning, but also with developing preventive programs to address various social and health problems that affect the school population, such as child abuse, bullying (including cyber bullying), drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, and discrimination of all kinds. Preventive programs for developing cultural sensitivity, communication skills, decision-making, ethics, and conflict management are also needed to prepare students for fulfilled lives in a multi-cultural society. While the social work role is ideally suited to program development for these activities, practitioners are often steered toward solving immediate problems on a case-by-case basis with limited time spent on prevention. It is important for social workers to maintain control over the role definition and to be involved in policy making in order to balance intervention with preventive activities.

Another role for school social work in the policy arena concerns joining with indigenous advocacy groups to foster education among the indigenous peoples of the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, and Africa who are still suffering from the after-effects of European imperialism. The Roma have experienced similar outcomes of culture loss and marginalization throughout their centuries of migration. Educational efforts are also needed to prevent loss of native cultures and languages resulting from colonization and globalization. School social workers can support development of educational programs that include indigenous world views and empower threatened cultures.

The role of school social work with its wide range of activities was dramatically challenged during the pandemic of 2020/2021. 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). Throughout the remainder of 2020 and continuing in 2021 school systems everywhere were struggling to provide education using distance learning, partial opening of schools, re-opening, then closing again when the infection surged in new phases and in 2021 attempting to re-open for face-to-face learning, even while the pandemic continues. School social workers as well as other school personnel had to maintain social distance, largely working from home while struggling to find ways of reaching students and families. While an accounting of how school social workers adapted their practice during the pandemic remains to be done, reports of some of their efforts reveal considerable ingenuity.

***A report from Finland, Maija Jones (International Network Newsletter, April 2020)***

“There are approximately 50 school social workers in the city of Espoo. Most of the social workers seem to work from home, which means contacting pupils and students via phone, text messaging, e-mails, Skype, and various online meetings. The same applies to working with the parents, teachers, school welfare groups and other coworkers, such as social welfare, psychiatric units, etc. The school social workers have felt that providing service at a distance, for example the Skype-meets, has brought a brand-new dimension to their “tool box”. Many of the usual activities can be done online. For example, one school social worker plays online games with small groups, such as scribbling with the computer mouse while the rest of the group guesses what it is. Discussion of “feeling cards” can easily be done online. Now students have been able to “invite” the social worker to their private environment. For example, introducing their dear pets, their room and other things meaningful for the children. That has created a whole different connection between the student and the school social worker. Some students have found it vital to meet regularly face-to-face with the social worker. Because of the restrictions, some social workers have organized their work so that they can meet with the students outdoors. That has always included permission from the parents, and also keeping social distancing in mind. These outdoor meetings have taken place in parks, woods, gym parks etc. Apparently, those walks have been very good. Some students who wouldn’t normally exercise or go outside, now get to have some physical activity AND talk about things that are on their mind”.

***A report from Korea 2020, Kyunghyun Park (International Network Newsletter, May 2020)***

“Social workers at the schools, district Offices of Education and Community Education Welfare Centers (CEWC) are busy coping with this crisis. At first, many of them worked at home or took turns to work. Even now, only about one-half to two-thirds of them work in offices and the rest work from home to maintain social distance. But they try not to lose touch with the children in need. They meet children on the phone or Social Network Services or visit homes. They are helping children stay safe and healthy during their stay at home by connecting them to information and resources. Some workers provide interesting activities that

children can do at their homes to share positive and hopeful energy. KASSW (Korea Association of School Social Workers) developed and offered a guideline for school social workers along with the translation of UNICEF materials.

Each district Office of Education continued to communicate with teachers and social workers to understand the current situation. At first, social workers made friendly phone calls to students and their parents conducting a general assessment of how students are doing and how families are managing. A social worker sent messages to the students through Social Network Services with pictures of the empty school as an ice breaker prior to their actual meeting and to show students how essential students are for a lively school.

Based upon the assessment, social workers find information or connect families to resources such as crisis allowances for housing, food, and medicine in community networks for families in need. In this process, some companies and charitable organizations not only raised relief funds but also donated food, masks and hand sanitizers, and locally grown agricultural products for school social workers doing home visits.

As the no-school period extended, students felt down and dull. Some didn't answer the phone. So social workers began to visit homes. To make home visits happier, they prepared books and snacks with hand-written notes. Sometimes they have to put the boxes or bags with presents at the front door. Students find a letter from a social worker and a mission note. Students and parents open the box and follow instructions in the mission note and send photos of them in action to the social worker.

Some workers gave their students board-games to play with family members. The parents send thank-you messages that the game helped the family get along well and get closer with one another. Some workers organize on-line singing and dancing events with groups of students. Others give on-line lectures on children's rights, child abuse, love, future jobs and so on. A school social worker visited a student in the hospital. Because hospital visitation is restricted at present, the student felt lonely. Social workers also try to help and encourage single parents and grandparents who are in stressful situations.

Though we are in unexpected and trying times, we witness the bond between social workers, children and families, teachers, and communities stronger than ever before. Social workers are being more appreciated than they were before".

### ***Reopening Schools in 2021***

As of March 2021, when vaccination for COVID-19 had begun, school systems are examining ways to safely reopen schools, even while the pandemic enters new phases. There are many needs that school social workers can meet and opportunities for them to step in with expertise to solve new problems that have appeared.

## **Evolution of School Social Work Around the World**

School Social Work Worldwide (Huxtable & Blyth, 2002) documents the development of school social work in 13 countries and regions, providing baseline data used in this section alongside other sources. Several countries have developed school social work literature furthering the historical narrative. A sampling of the literature is found later in this article.

School social work was introduced at the end of the 19<sup>TH</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>TH</sup> century as part of the universal education movement in several countries. The initial role of attendance officer evolved into a social work role. While a focus on reducing absenteeism remains important in many countries, school social work has developed new directions to serve varied national priorities and changing needs. The spread of school social work around the world reveals that roles and methods are often imported from countries where school social work already exists, while independent pathways also develop to meet local priorities. The following summary of the development of school social work shows some of the different interpretations of the role and how this is reflected in the title given to the role. The widespread placement of social workers in schools shows how school systems in many different cultures around the world have recognized the need to address factors that interfere with successful learning and that social work skills can help.

In the United Kingdom, school attendance officers were recruited in the late nineteenth century as an enforcement service (Blyth & Cooper, 2002). The role developed into the present position of education welfare officer in which attendance work is still a major function. In 2010 there were 2,214 education social workers employed (International Network for School Social Work, 2016, pp. 62,63).

In the United States, private agencies placed visiting teachers in schools in three East Coast cities in the early part of the twentieth century (Costin, 1969). The goal was to provide contact between home and school to promote school attendance. Early on, visiting teachers started to use social work methods, using knowledge from the mental hygiene movement, and also attending to the child's environment. The role has been transformed repeatedly, reflecting changing theories and needs. Most school social workers in the United States have a master's degree in Social Work (MSW) and use the title school social worker, which was introduced in the 1930's. The School Social Work Association of America estimates there are about 30,000 school social workers employed (International Network for School Social Work, 2016, pp. 64,65)).

School social work started in Canada in the 1940's, growing out of earlier truancy and school attendance work, but evolving into a complete social work service, in which improving school attendance is still a major function. School social work services vary across the country, both in extent and in the way they are organized, since each of the 10 provinces has autonomy in how education is administered. The greatest concentration is in Ontario, where there are 450 school

social workers to serve a population of 10 million people. The majority of Canadian school social workers have the Master of Social Work degree (International Network for School Social Work, 2016, pp. 12,13).

School social work developed in the Nordic countries between the 1940's and 1970's without the emphasis on school attendance, but rather on social care to help all children reach their potential. There are about 1,500 – 2,000 school social workers (skolkuratorer) in the Swedish school system (International Network for School Social Work, 2016). The role of the skolkurator (one who cares) includes both social work and guidance/counseling, encompassing a broad range of prevention and intervention and emphasizing teamwork with other specialists. Finland, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland have a lower social worker to student ratio than Sweden, but the services provided are similar. In Finland the new Child Welfare Act requires municipalities to provide services of school social workers and school psychologists (Personal communication, Hanna Gråston-Salonen, July 28, 2010). The Nordic countries require school social workers to have university training in social work (Anderson et al., 2002).

School social work was started in the Netherlands in the 1940's. For some years, it provided services chiefly in the area of special education, but currently provides a comprehensive service as can be seen in numerous web sites on *schoolmaatschappelijk werk*.

There have been attendance officers in Malta since 1946. The Education Act of 1974 stimulated a movement to change attendance enforcement into education welfare, in which the workers could pay adequate attention to the reasons for poor school attendance, and help families keep their children in school. Further changes came with the change in the title from welfare officers to social workers and efforts to expand the role beyond a focus on absenteeism (Pace, G., 2002).

School social work started in Argentina in the 1960's in the Buenos Aires Province. Rapid social change and economic fluctuations limited the development of the profession, which lacks the status and resources to fulfill its potential. Change of the title from school social worker to social assistant and regulations that permit non social workers to fill the role were felt to undermine a clear professional identity (Tonon, G., 2002).

The Ghana Education Service started a school welfare program in the 1960's to provide help with school attendance and to ensure that children's needs are met so that they can benefit from school (Sossou, M-A. & Daniels, T., 2002).

School social work (Schulsozialarbeit) originated in Germany in the 1970's as an extension of social pedagogy, a traditional profession in much of Europe. The number of school social workers varies greatly from state to state, with especially large numbers in the former West Berlin and the state of Nordrhein-Westfalen. However, the Child and Youth Welfare Law (1990) which supported the idea of providing services to youth in the natural environment has set the stage for greatly

increased services through collaboration between youth welfare agencies (Jugendhilfe) and schools (Wulfers, 2002).

Hong Kong started a school social work program in the 1970's in collaboration between government and private agencies. The program continued after Hong Kong was restored to the People's Republic of China and made a Special Administrative Region (Chiu, & Wong, 2002).

The United Arab Emirates have implemented school social work *تصاوي اجتماعي* in schools since 1972, providing a comprehensive range of programs. The Ministry of Education and Youth had placed 419 male social workers in boys' schools and 575 female social workers in girls' schools, for a total of 994 social workers in 744 schools, averaging 1.34 social workers per school. To be placed in a school setting, social workers must have a university degree in social work with four years of experience in an educational field (Mohamed Ibrahim El Walily, personal communication, July 7, 2003).

The Ministry of Education in Poland established the profession of social pedagogy (*pedagog szkolny*) in 1975. Services offered are the typical social work services of assessment, material support, collaboration with agencies, casework, group work, and services to disabled students. Social pedagogs must have a master's degree in pedagogy, sociology or psychology (SSWAA, 1999).

Social work services have been introduced to schools within the last 5 decades in Australia, Korea, Japan, Norway, Austria, Switzerland, New Zealand, Russia, Latvia, Hungary, Lithuania, Estonia, Saudi Arabia, Luxembourg, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Mongolia, China, India, Singapore, Pakistan, Liechtenstein, Vietnam, Trinidad and Tobago, Curacao, Iceland, India, Nigeria, France, and South Africa. Social work students in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia have piloted school social work as part of their social work training (International Network Newsletters, 2007).

School social workers and their professional associations find much needs to be done when school social work is first introduced to the education system and in the early stages of its development. It sometimes happens that the bureaucracy that administers the program does not understand the role. Advocating for a comprehensive and accurate job description and ensuring that it is implemented is necessary. Adequate staffing, working conditions and salary also need to be worked on, otherwise the program may be unsuccessful or even detrimental. Steps to ensure that school social work becomes institutionalized with appropriate standards calls for training, professional standards, a professional association that can accurately represent the field, certification, and ideally legislation that validates that social work has a legitimate place in schools. The countries listed above are in various stages of such steps toward incorporating social work into their school systems.

There is little information about services to children in schools in many other parts of the world, including much of Africa, Asia, Central and South America and the Mediterranean.

There is interest in developing school social work in some of these areas. For example, a needs assessment was done in Sierra Leone (Bulanda & Sulaiman, 2017) by interviewing teachers and administrators regarding the socio-emotional needs of children, concluding with a recommendation to employ school social workers. The possibility of introducing school social work in Turkey has been explored in published articles since 2015. A study published in the *Journal of Academic Science* (Yeşilkayali & Meydan, 2017) showed that school social service should be initiated, especially in disadvantaged regions, in Turkey. Alhajjaj (2017) provides a qualitative study exploring the need for school social work to address challenges among students in Jordanian schools. A school social work pilot project was recently conducted in Uganda and positive outcomes reported (Omona, 2018). Studies such as these can provide impetus for starting programs for social workers in schools.

Elsewhere there are articles frequently published about issues in schools that school social workers could address, such as bullying, poverty, behavioral problems, homeless students, and poor attendance. Often these articles do not include social work intervention among the recommendations, but the documentation of the problem is an indication that social intervention is needed.

### **School Social Work Literature**

The spread of social work services in schools has been accompanied by growth in the literature. Journals and textbooks provide a basis for training social workers and informing practitioners. The challenge is to provide literature that is seen as relevant to busy social workers and challenges them to keep their skills up to date to handle effectively the wide range of activities that will make social work a valued adjunct in schools. Several countries now have school social work journals and textbooks. The following is a sampling of recent textbooks (including new editions of old texts and new texts) and peer-reviewed journals dedicated to school social work.

Chapter 14 in the *Handbook of International Social Work on Education and Social Work* provides information about the relationship between education and social work (Huxtable, Sottie & Ulziitungalag, 2012). *School Social Work Worldwide* (Huxtable and Blyth, 2003) has information about social work programs in schools in 10 countries and two regions. The *International Journal of School Social Work* (<https://newprairiepress.org/ijssw/>), a free online journal and now publishing its 5th Volume, offers qualitative and quantitative research to support evidence-based practice. The monthly electronic newsletter of the *International Network for School Social Work* (<http://internationalnetwork-schoolsocialwork.htmlplanet.com/>) has, since 2006, provided brief practice articles and news about school social work around the world for distribution internationally through national school social work associations.

The *School Social Work Journal* has been published in the United States by the Illinois Association of School Social Workers since the late 1970's, followed by NASW's *Social Work in Education* (now called *Children and Schools*).

There are numerous textbooks published in the US since 2000 including new editions of some standard works. Some examples are Rippey et al. (Eds.), (2015); Bye & Alvarez (2007); Dupper (2003); Franklin et al. (Eds.) (2013); Allen-Meares (2015); Openshaw (2007).

There is extensive German language literature on Schulsozialarbeit and Sozialpädagogik. *The Diversity of School Social Work in Germany: A Systematic Review of the Literature* (Beck, 2017) provides a comprehensive account. The development of school social work in Austria has been documented by a contribution by Heimgartner and Sting (2013), providing a baseline and recommendations.

Sweden has an online quarterly magazine *Skolkuratorn* for all members of the Swedish School Social Workers Association and a textbook *Socionomen i skolan* (The Social Worker in the School) (Wester, 2005).

The Korean Society of School Social Work publishes four issues a year of the *Journal of School Social Work*, now in its 53rd issue. The Korean Association of School Social Workers publishes a monthly electronic newsletter. Professor Min-Sun Sung of the Catholic University of Korea, founding President of KSSSW (The Korean Society of School Social Work) and several colleagues have translated Dr. Paula Allen-Meares' 5th edition of *Social Work Services in Schools* into Korean and published it in February 2008. Several textbooks on school social work have been published since 2000 (Kyunhgyun Park, personal communication, March 30, 2021), most recently an introduction to the theory of school social work plus input from 17 school social workers regarding their practice (Park & Im, 2017).

The School Social Workers Association of Mongolia published the journal *Mongolia School Social Work Practice* four times a year. The association also provided research reports and publications that have advanced the progress of the field, such as the *Situation Analysis on School Social Work in Mongolia, Summary of a Research Report* (UNICEF, 2007).

Yamashita (2003), Kadota (2010), Kadota & Suzuki (2010) and the School Social Work Association of Japan et al. (2008) have pioneered publication of books and articles about school social work since the 1990's, contributing to the Ministry of Education's official adoption of the service into the school system. The *Japanese Journal of School Social Work* begun in 2006 opens the potential for more literature on the subject.

As school social work becomes established in more countries, textbooks and various reports provide evidence that the field is becoming institutionalized. For example, in Vietnam where school social work was piloted not long before

2010, the textbook *Introduction to Social Work in Schools* (Nguyễn Hiệp Thương et al., 2020) was published by the Education Publishing House Vietnam around the time of the passage of government circulars authorizing the development of school social work (March 2021 Newsletter, International Network for School Social Work). Activities focusing on school social work such as the International Conference on School Social Work and the 5th Establishment Anniversary of Faculty of Social Work from 25th to 27th May, 2016 at the Hanoi National University of Education (HNUE) (personal communication May 18, 2016, Thu Ha Nguyen) initially boosted development of a national school social work literature through publication of proceedings.

### **School social work standards, training, licensing**

An international 2016 survey of school social work conducted by the International Network for School Social Work found the most common educational requirements are a bachelor's or master's degree in social work. Social pedagogy, practiced largely in Europe, typically requires college training at the bachelor's or master's degree level.

In many countries, to protect school children and maintain standards, the use of the title social worker is governed by statutes that specify licensing, registration or certification. In addition to this requirement, Departments or Ministries of Education may apply additional conditions for social workers to practice in schools. For example, to practice as a school social worker in the United States the most typical requirement is a combination of state licensing as a professional social worker plus a school personnel certificate issued by the State Department of Education. Both require either a bachelor's or master's degree in social work, post-graduate supervision and continuing education credits. Each of the 50 states has distinct licensing and certification requirements. This complexity can be multiplied many times in a discussion of the professional standards of school social work around the world.

### **School Social Work Professional Associations and Unions**

In many countries professional associations have promoted the advance of school social work through advocacy, improvement of professional standards, training, and development of the job description. The experience in countries with large, well-established school social work services was that generalist social work associations provided insufficient attention to the needs of social workers working in schools. Specialty associations for school social work (referenced below with web sites) have been developed in several such countries, including Finland, Ghana, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Sweden, and the United States to provide effective communication with Departments or Ministries of Education and other decision-makers who influence how support services are implemented in schools. The specialty association also facilitates joint activities such as lobbying jointly with professional associations representing other school support staff, such as school nurses and school psychologists. While national associations provide advocacy at

the federal level, provincial or state school social work associations often provide much of the local support and expertise that school social workers need for professional development and advocacy at the local level. Several national school social work associations have effective web sites that provide extensive, free, and accessible resources. A list at the end of the article provides links to some of these professional associations.

However helpful professional associations are in advocating for school social work jobs, they may be unable to help the worker with a grievance stemming from violation of workplace rights, so many school social workers turn to a labor union for such help. In addition to the usual range of grievances that occur, it is clear in many places the administrators misuse the services of school social workers, often because they do not understand the role. School social workers have been used as playground monitors, substitute teachers and clerks, preventing them from continuing their school social work activities. Such grievances may be addressed partly by a professional association, but there is also a role for a labor union. The pandemic of 2020-2021 has given rise to new grievances for public employees as they try to continue their work while protecting their own health and well-being. This also requires professional representation.

In the United States, many school social workers belong to teachers' unions for help with grievances, as well as for negotiating salaries and working conditions. UNISON (a public service trade union representing 40,000 social workers) in the United Kingdom provides workplace help and lobbies for members. The 23,000-member Norwegian Union of Social Educators and Social Workers (Fellesorganisasjonen for Barnevernpedagoger, Sosionomer og Vernepleiere) combines a wide range of functions of both a professional association and a labor union for the members who work in schools as social workers (sosionom), social educators (vernepleier) and child welfare workers (barnevernpedagog). Collective bargaining by these unions allows a collective voice for fair pay and working conditions.

### **International Communication**

Social work is organized to solve local problems; however, it is clear the problems school social workers face are often remarkably similar in differing cultures and countries. Children and youth bring many of the same problems to schools around the world; school staffs also face many similar pressures in reaching for the educational goals; school social workers tackle the same local issues that their counterparts across the globe are dealing with. International professional communication has become valuable.

The many products of Information Communications Technology have made it possible in just the last two decades for school social workers to participate in international networks, retrieve information from the internet and use social work resources from many countries to improve their practice. Language barriers limit some exchange of information. However, the growing international use of English

is often sufficient to permit effective communication, and free online services provide approximate translations. There is much practice information to be shared between countries. While English can be a useful tool for sharing information, it should not be allowed to interfere with shaping practice into culturally appropriate models. Recently developed models of school social work in countries where the practice is young can also stimulate new thinking in countries where it is well established.

The increased uses of technology during the pandemic of 2020/2021 have introduced more ways of communicating at a distance and this applies to international communication between school social workers and their professional associations.

The *International Network for School Social Work* (<http://internationalnetwork-schoolsocialwork.htmlplanet.com/>) is one gateway to international communication, providing access to school social work programs and professional associations in more than 50 countries, and facilitating international professional contacts. Monthly electronic newsletters and periodic studies of the status of school social work around the world have provided information and support to school social work programs that are starting up and helped to strengthen those that are well established. The network also offers opportunities for cultural learning for social workers providing services to increasingly diverse client groups, including immigrants.

In the last two years an Asian Network for School Social Work has been started involving leaders from Korea, Japan, Singapore and Taiwan, initially consisting of meetings and a newsletter. This can be extended to include more countries and is a model for future regional alliances.

The pandemic of 2020/2021 emphasized the similarities in the issues that school social work deals with. Schools were closed for extended periods and then experienced another long period of re-opening, closing, and opening again and attempting to find solutions that would make it possible to continue to educate the children. School social workers were isolated by the required social distancing, just as the students were isolated. *The International Network for School Social Work* provided a measure of communication about these challenges through monthly newsletters sent to school social workers in many countries.

International online coursework in school social work has also been proposed and, following a 2011 international survey to determine interest, the School Social Work Association of America and the Singapore Association of Social Workers/Students Care have taken this a step further by opening discussion about development of a school social work credential that would be recognized by international partners. The coursework would include country specific assignments and participants would receive a certificate of completion recognized by their country (Michelle Alvarez, personal communication, May 11, 2012). The pandemic has prompted rapid development of online courses following the closing

of many tertiary education institutions and this can be extended to make training available to school social workers in countries that lack adequate opportunities.

International school social work conferences have been hosted in the United States (Chicago, 1999), Sweden (Stockholm, 2003), Korea (Busan, 2006), New Zealand (Auckland, 2009), Ghana (Accra, 2012), Mongolia (Ulaanbaatar, 2015 and China (Beijing, 2018) bringing together practitioners, students and social work educators from many countries and strengthening international communication. Such conferences have limited benefit for practitioners since few have funding to attend. The content therefore tends to be skewed toward academic topics including research and policy with less focus on practice. It is difficult to assess the benefits of international conferences, journals and newsletters for a profession that functions primarily at a local level; however, it is clear that school social work expertise is spreading via international channels and school social workers are using the professional contacts and information that are available. The potential is great for school social workers to benefit from international communication flowing in all directions for creative problem solving. The challenge is how to make this communication readily accessible and attractive to more practitioners.

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) conducted its conference online for the first time in 2020, when travel was interrupted by the global pandemic. This five-day event was made available to all social workers free of charge. Participants could be involved with setting the global agenda and attend talks and discussions with practitioners, educators, and community leaders from around the world. The clear success of this conference provides a model for school social work conferences that would extend international participation to many who are unable to travel to attend such events.

### **The Future of Social Work in Education**

Schools in the 21st century are tasked with developing skills and values and transmitting knowledge, while preparing learners for a rapidly changing world. Today's school children will live through more social, technological, and global changes than any previous generation, and schools must prepare them for unknown challenges. The pandemic of 2020/2021 provides insights to schools facing unexpected new challenges. Social workers, social pedagogs and other specialists working with educational systems have a key role in assisting teachers and schools to not only cope with the stress that comes with change, but to help them embrace change, adapt to new situations and in doing so enhance resiliency. Schools around the world are increasingly recognizing that they cannot handle alone the issues that prevent the success of their students, and that they must tackle these problems with help from multidisciplinary teams using the expert knowledge and skills of various support personnel, including school social workers.

During the year 2020, school systems faced a dramatic and unexpected challenge when schools were abruptly closed to prevent infection during the pandemic. 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). Schools attempted to continue the mission of education using numerous creative strategies, largely through distance learning. 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.

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 and is an area that requires renewed attention following the pandemic.

It has taken decades to increase enrollment and achieve gender parity in developing countries. There is a significant risk of losing those gains as schools re-open for face-to-face learning. While schools were closed, many students were not able to access distance education and consequently dropped behind in learning. As schools re-open it is even harder than before for families struggling to recover from pandemic-related losses to send their children to school. Many developing countries have no school social work services. The pandemic crisis provides a chance to introduce the service in the effort to restart enrollment.

Attendance is only one target in the school social work role. The entire well-being of the students, families and school community has suffered on a global scale during the pandemic. School social workers deal with all of it, from food insecurity to psycho-social problems, and their role is crucial for helping children, families, and schools gain back resilience. In the remains of 2021, there are obvious needs for large-scale emotional support for school staffs as well as the children and their families, with many experiencing ongoing stress due to the continuing pandemic and the uncertainties entailed in educating the children, either returning to face-to-face instruction or continuing distance learning. The pandemic constitutes a global trauma, affecting the entire population of the world, and placing all school children at risk. This is an opportunity to engage schools in taking care of mental health, without labeling those who are suffering from stress. This promotes future mental health care that resists labeling within a deficit model and focuses instead on the traditional social work ecosystem framework based on strengths and resiliency.

Although the recent pandemic is dominating current efforts to restore education for the world's children, it is not the only crisis that the world's schools must face. As schools re-examine their mission and how they engage students they

will also be preparing to cope with new challenges in the not-too-far-distant future. Schools will need to be ready not only for more pandemics but also for the ongoing crises of resource depletion and climate change. As these become harder to ignore, school systems must include the causes, consequences, and management of these realities in educational offerings. School social workers need to play a part by focusing not just on the harsh reality that it is youth who are most affected by the rapid destruction of ecosystems, but on advocating for serious change in managing these global issues and thereby providing hope for the current cohort of children and all future generations. The UN's Decade on Ecosystem Restoration 2021-2030 (2019) 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 ready 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 ways in ecosystem restoration endeavors.

Teachers and learners will increasingly use research, technology, and media in newly created curricula to develop skills suited to a changing world. Social professionals in schools have a strong supporting role to play in this vision of education and must themselves innovate to deliver services effectively. Initial and continuing training must prepare them to handle ever-changing situations with new skills and technologies, based on research that supports evidence-based practice.

Social work training that emphasizes problem-solving, resiliency, collaborating with other disciplines and new technologies will prepare practitioners to handle changing problems. As evolving problems call for new skills, social workers in schools need to learn to evaluate their practice to ensure that the methods they are using solve the identified problems. Social workers in many countries lack ready access to information about evidence-based practice. Nevertheless, technology provides opportunities for practitioners to learn to use data to evaluate and improve their own effectiveness. For example, using computer applications to organize and track daily pupil attendance is a necessary part for managing interventions to improve attendance and at the same time generate data to demonstrate effectiveness.

Although schools at all levels and in all countries need social work to help them cope with the diverse problems in the school population and keep marginalized students in school, social work is still a marginal profession in most education systems, and in several countries (in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia) where it is most needed for Sustainable Development Goal 4 for 2030, school social work does not exist. As education everywhere is reset following the 2020/2021 pandemic, school social work professionals and their professional associations have an opportunity to demonstrate how school social work reinforces a renewed educational system, establishing resilience and hope for all children.

### **National School Social Work Organizations**

- American Council of School Social Work. <https://www.acssw.org>.
- Association for School Social Work in Switzerland. <http://www.ssav.ch/>.
- Canadian Association of School Social Workers and Attendance Counsellors.  
<http://www.casswac.ca/>.
- Hungarian School Social Workers Association. <http://www.miszme.hu/>.
- International Network for School Social Work. <http://internationalnetwork-schoolsocialwork.htmlplanet.com/>.
- Korea Association of School Social Workers. <https://www.kassw.or.kr>.
- Korean Society of School Social Work. <http://www.schoolsocialwork.org>.
- National Association of Support Workers in Education.  
<http://www.naswe.org.uk/>.
- Norwegian Union of Social Educators and Social Workers, FO.  
<https://www.fo.no/>.
- School Social Work Network Germany. <http://www.schulsozialarbeit.net>.
- School Social Work Association of America. <http://www.sswaa.org/>.
- School Social Work Association of Finland.  
<http://www.talentia.fi/koulukuraattorit/index.php>.
- School Social Work Association of Japan. <http://sswaj.org/index2.html>.
- Schulsozialarbeit Liechtenstein. <http://www.schulsozialarbeit.li/>.
- Social Workers in Schools New Zealand.  
<https://www.orangatamariki.govt.nz/working-with-children/school-programmes/social-workers-in-schools/>.
- Swedish School Social Workers Association. <http://www.skolkurator.nu/>.

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