Re-Imagining School Social Work: Insights from a Tri-Country Study

*Prospera Tedam**

Author information

* Department of Social Wellbeing, United Arab Emirates University, United Arab Emirates. Email: p.tedam@uaeu.ac.ae

Re-Imagining School Social Work: Insights from a Tri-Country Study

Prospera Tedam

Abstract: School social work is an important and growing specialist area of practice in many parts of the world as it involves practitioners working to ensure that children and adolescents navigate and overcome obstacles that might impede their academic and social success. Social workers in schools undertake a wide range of tasks to ensure that children, adolescents, their families and communities are empowered and supported to achieve to the best of their abilities. These roles include improving school attendance, monitoring and offering support for behaviour, assessing and addressing risk of harm, working to improve children's overall health and wellbeing, supporting families facing financial difficulties and engaging with the other services in the community, to mention a few. This paper presents the findings from a 2- year funded research project examining the role and purpose of school social work in the United Arab Emirates, England and Ghana. Drawing on data generated from 37qualitative semi structured interviews, a significant finding is that school social workers can contribute to the realisation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals by undertaking daily social work tasks within education, school settings and with families.

Keywords: Children, school social work, intervention, SDG's

Introduction

Cross-cultural research has the aim of seeking 'explanations for similarities and differences or to gain a greater awareness and a deeper understanding of social reality in different national contexts' (Hanrais, cited in Bryman, 2004, p. 53). The study found similarities and differences in the experiences of school social workers (SSWs) from the three countries. For the purposes of this paper, only one key similarity which is their contribution to meeting some of the sustainable development goals will be discussed. Significantly, the findings also indicate that a more robust approach to the practice curriculum is needed to sufficiently prepare social work students for qualified practice in schools and the educational system more broadly.

The impact of the covid-19 pandemic was captured in this research and highlighted the need for a systematic and sustained protocol for social workers in schools that perhaps extend beyond the 'normal' situations to include pandemics and other crisis situations. This means that social work programmes will need to ensure that they deliver teaching that is relevant and that enhances the knowledge and skills base of their graduating practitioners. The case is also made for post qualifying specialist training in the area of school social work.

All three countries (United Arab Emirates (UAE), England and Ghana) have adopted the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) which are designed to 'leave no one behind'. Clearly, these ambitious goals are important for the social work profession and this research unearthed new knowledge which if implemented would contribute to strengthening social work pedagogy and practice. In particular the paper will focus on how the goals of reducing poverty (Goal 1); zero hunger (Goal 2); good health and wellbeing (Goal 3); quality education (Goal 4) and reduced inequalities (Goal 10) were met through school social work and will examine how teaching about SDG's can be effectively incorporated into the social work curriculum.

This paper is divided into three main parts. Part I- The Context (comprising the literature review, methodology and study limitations) Part II- shares the discussion from the findings of school social work and alignment to a few sustainable development goals. Part III outlines opportunities for future practice through a reimagined school social work agenda.

The Context

Literature Review

Given that this paper examines findings from three countries, the review of literature will broadly examine school social work and the sustainable development goals. There is a plethora of research and literature in the United

States of America about social work in schools, mainly because school social work has a longer history with public schools employing social workers from as far back as 1906 (Bland & Esmail, 2012). According to Huxtable and Blyth (2002) traditionally the role of SSW was to support children and young people to enroll in and successfully complete school and that while roles and methods have been developed based on 'national cultures and educational traditions', they were shared between different countries (Huxtable et al., 2012, p. 236). There is a general lack of research about social work within school and educational settings, according to Isaksson and Sjöström (2017) which makes this research all the more relevant especially as it relates to three countries.

In the United Arab Emirates, School social work began between 1972 and 1973, when the then Ministry of Education appointed two Egyptian social workers to work in UAE schools (Al-Grenawi & Graham, 2003).

The author is based at the United Arab Emirates University where she received a research grant to explore the role and purpose of school social work over a two-year period. There are two main institutions which provide social work education in the United Arab Emirates- namely Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) which offers an undergraduate degree and the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) which offers both an undergraduate and postgraduate qualification in social work (Tedam at. al 2021). Although schools are the largest employer of social workers in the UAE and all first placements for social work students at the UAEU is undertaken in schools, (Tedam, 2020) there remains a lack of clarity about the role and purpose of social workers in schools.

Research by Pulla and Kay (2017) found that in Dubai, the perception of social work was that it is something a person does when participating in charitable and humanitarian activities. It was also found that the title social worker was often not used in schools, but rather 'counsellor'. Such a view contributed to the lack of clarity about the social work role within schools in the UAE.

From an English perspective, social workers in schools is not common (Doel, 2010) however there have been individual schools funding the presence of social workers in their schools, leading to a growing awareness of the value and importance of their presence in schools and other educational establishments. The Education Welfare Officer (EWO) a role which was created by the Forster's Education Act (1870) gave local authorities the power to make school attendance compulsory in Britain. The scope of the role was developed further by the Education Act 1944, to include the provision of support to children, young people and their families to in the area of school attendance, behaviour management and general welfare issues (Henderson, et. al 2016). The EWO did not require a social work qualification to practice although some also have social work qualifications.

In 2020, the Department for education (DfE) funded the Social Workers in Schools (SWIS) project. 'What works for children' project placed in schools in Lambeth, Southampton and Stockport as a pilot study. The findings indicated that social workers in schools can positively influence the relationships between school staff and students while intervening at an early stage to minimise risks to children.

In Ghana, social workers in schools is not common, and where there are school social workers, their roles have been unclear and resulted in blurred boundaries with other staff in the school. Research in the area of school social work is limited due to schools more likely to have Guidance and Counselling officers who have historically undertaken elements of what could be perceived as the school social worker role. It is therefore safe to conclude that as an area of practice, school social work in Ghana is not recognised. Dzang-Tedam and Gaisie-Ahiabu (2018) in their evaluation of a school social worker pilot project, found that there was the need for child protection social workers in boarding schools in Ghana. Their study concluded that school social workers were needed to support young people in the areas of bullying and peer on peer violence, online exploitation, academic challenges, sex and sexualized behaviour, anti-social behaviour, development of self-esteem and identity; to mention a few.

In summary, social workers in schools engage in tasks aimed at minimising the effects of economic disadvantage for children while proactively promoting their holistic wellbeing and development. For children who are most at risk, school social workers can encourage regular attendance, address substance abuse concerns and encourage environmental awareness which all contribute towards the achievement of SDG's.

Methodological Considerations

This study is based on primary data that were collected through semi-structured interviews from United Arab Emirates, England and Ghana. The countries were chosen based on the researcher's knowledge and convenience in having access to respondents for data collection. Given that it was a funded project, the aims of the project aligned with the funding body requirements.

The call for participants in England and Ghana was made on social media platforms (Twitter, LinkedIn and for the UAE, a school social worker database was used to reach eligible participants by email. Quickfall (2022) suggests that social media is an effective advertising and recruitment tool for researchers and the global pandemic with its associated restrictions made this strategy all the more valuable.

The UAE study recruited 53 (n=53) respondents to a qualitative online survey between June 2020 and June 2021, although only about 11 of these

completed the survey in full. In addition, 7 (n=7) participants in the UAE were interviewed. In England, ten (n=10) school social workers who had experienced working in schools were purposively selected and interviewed using semi-structured interview guide. The Ghanaian sample comprised of twenty (n=20) school social workers also purposively selected and interviewed. This paper reports the findings from the semi structured interview data of **37** participants.

Research aim and objectives

The aim of this research was to understand the role and purpose of school social work in the United Arab Emirates, England and Ghana to inform the future of school social work. The objectives of the study were:

1. To understand from the perspective of each participant what they perceive to be the role and purpose of school social workers.
2. To enable learning and the generation of new knowledge in the area of school social work.
3. To identify areas for change, development and improvement of school social work in the three project countries.

This paper reports findings which address all three aims and specifically around new knowledge about how school social work can assist meeting SDG's.

Ethical Considerations

This research was granted ethical approval in April 2020 from the and received internal funding from Startup Grant Number G00003331

Data Analysis

Qualitative interviewing techniques were employed to collect data for the England and Ghana studies. Interviews were conducted in English, recorded and transcribed verbatim. Due to the covid-19 pandemic, the interviews were undertaken either by phone or online via zoom or MS Teams. Recordings were manually transcribed and analysed for themes. This paper focuses on the data in relation to Sustainable Development Goals. The UAE data were administered and collected through survey monkey. The survey was available in English and Arabic with only 3 participants completing the English version. The other eight participants accessed the Arabic version which was later translated to English by a bilingual research assistant and 7 participants undertook semi-structured interviews. In total, 37 interview transcripts were analysed for this paper. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step process in thematic analysis the transcripts were read and re-read to familiarise myself with the data, the next step was to generate initial open codes, identify and refine patterns within the data and finally to begin the write up in the form of findings. For example, where participants explained the role of school so-

cial workers as supporting families living in poverty, helping with payments for school trips, providing uniforms for children, the theme eventually given was 'Supporting families in poverty'. By the end of the process the themes were found to align with the specific SDG's reported in this paper. The use of verbatim quotes from participants also serve the purpose of strengthening the credibility of the interpretations while enabling the authentic voice of participants to be heard (Yin, 2011).

Study Limitations

This study was undertaken in the United Arab Emirates, England and in Ghana using different data collection methods. In the UAE, an online survey deployed in Arabic and English was administered, resulting in 53 overall respondents but only 11 fully completed surveys. A further 7 school social workers were interviewed. However, in England and Ghana only, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted by phone or through Zoom or MS Teams. The period during which this data was collected is particularly significant in that it was the height of the covid-19 pandemic and protocols were in place to minimise contact between the researcher and participants. The findings are therefore not generalisable outside of the jurisdictions where the research was undertaken but provide useful practical, theoretical and conceptual evidence to further extend this area of research.

Discussion of Findings

This research which aimed to explore the role and purpose of school social work in the United Arab Emirates, England and Ghana identified themes which could be readily linked to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals as discussed in the section to follow.

The broad findings from this research indicate that school social workers supported children and families in poverty, enhanced children's wellbeing, encouraged and supported them to engage with education and facilitated inclusion and equity. These micro and mezzo level interventions by school social workers offer opportunities for the realisation of SDGs.

School Social Work and the Sustainable Development Goals

The SDGs set goals for all countries, and allow for adaptation on a national/local context which has been hailed as progressive and bold. However, they have also been heavily critiqued in relation to their use of indicators, described by Mair et al, (2018) as being unquantifiable, consequently any success will rest on how they are implemented.

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) recognise and articulate the professions commitment to the SDG's through achieving sustainability and development through partnership working (IFSW, Online).

The right to education is guaranteed through domestic and international legal frameworks and states clearly the fundamental right of all children to education, yet research suggests this does not happen consistently around the world. Education systems are designed with a wide range of children in mind however access to education by some children remains problematic in many parts of the world. According to Beck and Hamalainen (2020) children are confronted with issues such as violence and neglect in school, at home and within their communities and this is regardless of where in the world they live consequently it is possible to consider cross-national solutions to addressing some of these issues through schools. Cordoba and Bando (2021) suggest that there is a clear role for social workers in addressing urgent global challenges. The SDGs build on the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which were not achieved and seeks to reach the most vulnerable in our communities around the world by 2030 (UN, 2015). Muleya (2020) argues that there is the potential for the social work profession to contribute to the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and it is the aim of this paper to explore reimagined school social work as being able to contribute to SDG's 1, 2, 3, 4 and 10. The extent of the contribution is captured using participant quotes to illuminate social workers practice and experience.

Goal 1- No Poverty

The 2030 Agenda recognises that "eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development" (UN, 2015). This is an ambitious goal, according to Mair et al, 2018) who argues that the indicators of poverty for example, represent a limited understanding of poverty and potentially clashes with national understandings (Mair et al, 2018). Children live and grow up in a diversity of backgrounds which include varying levels of poverty and social-economic disadvantage. A report by the End Child Poverty Coalition (2016) found that that children are more likely to live in poverty than adults and that children will also experience more detrimental effects of poverty in comparison to adults. This has been exacerbated by the covid-19 pandemic globally.

The findings from all three countries indicate that that social workers in schools supported students and pupils who were experiencing different forms and levels of poverty.

One social worker from the UAE stated that SSW have the role of:

> *Identifying students with limited income and helping them economically, for example such children are exempted from paying to participate in field trips and other activities. Also directing parents to institutions that can help them (SSW, United Arab Emirates)*

By performing such a role, it could be argued that SSW's are also preventing exclusion of children based on economic disadvantage and facilitating inclusion of all children during educational field trips.

SSW's in England also commented on their role in minimising poverty for children by directly supporting parents through signposting to other services and also providing much needed furniture. They shared that:

> *We looked at poverty alleviation and signpost parents to places where they can get support. Some parents told me their children did not have beds' (SSW, England)*

There was also mention of supporting parents to access government benefits that they could be entitled to through completion of relevant paperwork and processes.

> *'I help parents when they are struggling. I help them complete forms to claim government benefits'(SSW, England)*

The situation in Ghana was similar, with one SSW supporting parents to meet the basic hygiene needs of their children. One SSW shared the following:

> *I was working in a day care center for children 6 months to 4 years and some parents would bring their children to school with very dirty clothes. Our role was to engage with parents who are really poor to see how we could help them take better care of their children. (SSW, Ghana)*

By focussing on the achievement and attainment of children now, SSWs were also supporting the future generation to be free from poverty. For example, a SSW in England suggested that:

> *There is no point helping the student at school when the home conditions are poor. We are developing many schemes to assist parents with basic needs at home. That way there is more hope for the child's future (SSW, England)*

Poverty has contributed to the inability of some parents to meet the basic needs such as clothing. As one school social worker articulated:

> *We would receive donations such as used uniforms, books and other items and we would give these to parents to benefit the children (SSW, England)*

Another SSW in England outlined a situation where during a discussion with a child about school attendance, the child disclosed his inability to join the cadets due to poverty.

> *He also said he was struggling financially, for things that he needed in school, for example, he said that he enjoyed cadets but he could not join them because he could not afford the uniform. (SSW, England)*

Education has many direct and indirect benefits and research suggests that education is one route out of poverty for children. Consequently it is important that children not only attend but also progress through education and one way of ensuring this is through social work services in schools. Whilst there are challenges globally in ensuring children's right to education, the need to meet this goal is perhaps one strategy that will change children's access to education. Writing about poverty more generally, Krumer-Nevo (2015) proposes poverty-aware social work and suggests that it provides a unique paradigm for social workers to understand and address issues of poverty in relation to clients and also assists them to promote social justice.

Goal 2- Zero hunger

Food security is defined as a 'situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life' (FAO, 2002). Eradicating hunger is closely connected to the goal of reducing poverty however there were specific comments made by social workers about how their roles as SSWs facilitated this goal. Talking about the impact of the covid-19 pandemic and school closures, one SSW commented on what some children would be missing stating that during normal school days:

> *'Breakfast and lunch were guaranteed' (SW, England)*

Food security is a fundamental right for all and for children, hunger can hinder physical, psychological and emotional growth and development. Social workers regularly draw upon Maslow's Hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1970) when examining and assessing children and their families. The hierarchy of needs begins at the most basic level and involves having ones need for water, food, clothing and shelter met. It is therefore important that any schools which have a school feeding programme (government or charitably provided) should be encouraged to continue to provide these services for children even when schools are on holiday or shut down as has been the case in the recent past due to the covid-19 pandemic.

For one SSW, the fact that a child brought cold food to school was cause for concern which resulted in them contacting the parents about this.

> *'I remember a child who used to bring cold chips to school, almost every day. Sometimes it would be cold pizza and I had to speak to the parents about this' (SSW, England)*

Research suggests that good nutrition has the potential to positively affect performance in school and can minimise irritability and behaviour difficulties in children (Kelly, 2008). It is also crucial that where there is the availability

of food through various programmes, that these foods are balanced and offer nutritious value to health to aid growth and development.

Food vouchers are one way through which families can obtain nutritious food through regulated food vendors in England. Food vouchers can be used by parents and carers to purchase food, fruit and vegetables. To address issues of food insecurity, this SSW responded that:

> *We came up with food vouchers which really helped the parents' (SSW, England)*

The practice of free school meals operates differently around the world and in the United Kingdom, Free School Meals were made universal for all children in reception class, year 1 and year 2 of school (ages 5–7 years) from September 2014, according to Long (2015).

Salifu and colleagues (2018) argue that in Ghana, the School Feeding Program (SFP) which was implemented in selected deprived schools in districts across the country, achieved positive outcomes in the area of school enrollment and progression of children. They recommend the expansion of this program to meet the needs of many other children in the country. That said, one participant from Ghana, who worked in a boarding school commented about the food provided by the school as not always being adequate. He commented that:

> *You could tell that some children needed more food. There was one boy who was always hungry shortly after breakfast (SSW, Ghana).*

Research suggests that globally, and before the covid-19 pandemic food insecurity was of concern and that households with children experienced even more food insecurity. The covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated this as the findings from this study reveal. In March 2020 When the government of Ghana mandated the closing of its schools to curb the spread of COVID-19 there were concerns about how children who benefited from the school feeding programme would cope. The Global Food Banking Network reported that some families did not know where their next meal would come from, however by January 2021 when schools re-opened the network had delivered 24,822 food boxes to 8,455 families in Ghana (Global Food Banking Network, Online).

> *I told the teachers to keep an eye on some particular children who brought sweets and water to school. I mean, this wasn't healthy and wasn't really food. So now with the pandemic and them at home, what will their situation be like? (SSW, Ghana)*

Participants from the UAE did not specifically mention hunger or a lack of food in their responses but generalised socio-economic issues within their discussions about poverty.

Goal 3- Good health and wellbeing

Wellbeing, according to Dodge, et al. (2012) is fundamental to social, psychological and physical health and is also about the resources required to access these. Wellbeing is inclusive of good health at every stage of one's life. Children at all levels of the school system will face stressors to their own health and wellbeing and these stresses may come from themselves, their families or the community. These concerns, if not addressed in a timely and thorough manner can impact on mental, physical and emotional health. The theme of wellbeing came up frequently during this research in all three countries among participants. They expressed variably the role of SSW in supporting good health and enhancing wellbeing among students and pupils.

Issues of mental health was frequently referred to particularly with the English sample. There appeared to be strong links between family circumstances and the health and wellbeing of children. For example one participant informed that:

> *I worked with families as well so I wasn't just like working with the children in the school solely, I was working with the families because for example, working a child that had a panic attack, has to, first of all I had to get consent from the parents because the parents was worried as well about the frequency of this, I mean the panic attacks (SSW, England)*

Another participant expressed concerns about children who were caring for adults at home. The role of 'young carer' which in England refers to children and young people who have caring responsibilities for their parents and other family members (Joseph et. al, 2020).

Research suggests that these caring roles impact on children and young people's health, wellbeing, education and other social and employment opportunities.

One SSW articulated the situation as follows:

> *So it's also that some children take the care role, young carer's role, and without the school knowing you'll be finding it difficult to support the young person because sometimes they come to school tired, sometimes they are late to school sometimes they don't come to school, and being a social worker in the school that's the way you pick up all those things and then find ways of addressing it or supporting the young people (SSW, England)*

In addition to caring responsibilities that impacted on the wellbeing of children and young people, a SSW in Ghana made specific reference to children with special needs and recognised the role of SSW in ensuring that the school met the needs of children with disabilities. He articulated it thus:

> *I worked with a child who had development challenges and this meant she had to frequent the toilet and I realised she needed special education*

in an inclusive school instead of the mainstream school. In those schools, teachers are trained to work with children with developmental needs. I told the teachers and spoke to her parents. (SSW, Ghana)

It is unclear for how long this had been going on prior to the SSW notifying the teachers and the child's parents, however the intervention appeared to meet the approval of the mother who is reported to have been:

Very happy with my advice and was going to look into it for her child. (SSW, Ghana)

Another SSW acknowledged the importance of specialist services for areas such as mental health.

I had a child in my school who had some mental health problems so I referred the parents to mental health practitioners to assist. It was not my area and it is important to not be all knowing' (SSW, Ghana)

The SSW in this situation recognised the strengths of SSW but also acknowledged limitations especially in the specialist areas of practice.

The role of SSWs in Ghana included working with children who had emotional and other difficulties as articulated by a respondent:

We deal with children who have psychological and emotional problems (SSW, Ghana)

In the area of health and wellbeing, SSW from the UAE stated that in '*preparing and implementing social action plans on individual cases*' they were contributing to the wellbeing of children in their school. Closely related to this was the account of their role in preventing bullying and supporting victims of bullying. One participant stated that:

'The main issues we have is around bullying in our schools (SSW, UAE)

Continuing on the theme of bullying, another SSW from England, following intervention with a child who was bullying others:

Changed his attitude, his behaviour towards others and also his school attendance because he then got to know the importance of school and making friends. (SSW, England).

Research has found that bullying affects physical, emotional and mental wellbeing of victims in the short and longer term. It is also important to understand perpetrators of bullying as they may be demonstrating the effects of being bullied themselves. Bullying impacts negatively on children's health and wellbeing can result in a loss of self-esteem, anxiety and physical manifestations such as headaches, dizziness, upset stomach to mention a few (Graham, 2016). For this reason, acknowledging the role of SSWs in developing anti-bullying initiatives is an important step towards achieving good health and wellbeing for children in school environments.

A participant in England stressed the importance of SSW in supporting children where there was evidence of substance misuse in the home. He argued that:

> *There could be substance misuse within the family and it will be a concern f if the parents are using substances and these young people are exposed to them every day. How it is having an impact on this young child? (SSW, England).*

The international definition of social work helpfully asserts that, 'social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing' (IFSW, 2014) and the preceding examination of participant narratives highlight the role SSW can have in meeting the goal of good health and wellbeing for children and their families.

Goal 4- Quality education

The importance of education cannot be overemphasised and it is important that we consider the importance of quality education to achieving the SDG's. The findings from this research point to the role of SSW in ensuring that children and students access and benefit from good quality education.

> *Children need to be happy to be able to learn and succeed. Some children have a LOT going on. Its difficult to understand how these children are expected to learn anything with some of the problems they experience at home (SSW, Ghana)*

A few participants particularly in Ghana and the United Arab Emirates bemoaned the expectation that they would replace teachers where teachers did not come to work or where there was a general shortage of staff. This, it could be argued, while a possibly pragmatic strategy to manage teacher shortages in the short-term, is by no means appropriate for children and could undermine the achievement of this goal if used as a longer term strategy to address teacher shortages in schools.

> *We are expected to cover classes when there are no teachers (SSW, Ghana)*

In England, one SSW reported that they would be in class with teachers observing children's behaviour and providing feedback and recommendations for future interventions where necessary.

> *We are in the classroom with the teachers, observing children who may be distracted or distracting other children. Sometimes they are just having a bad day, other times there can be something going on behind the scenes (SSW, England).*

According to a participant from the UAE, improving attendance was a clear part of the role of school social workers.

We take attendance, then we talk to the children about the reasons for their lateness or poor attendance. If nothing changes we talk to the parents (SSW, UAE)

The SSW in the UAE stressed the importance of speaking with the child first about attendance related matters with the view to involving parents if there were no changes. This is a significant finding and speaks to research that suggests that improving school attendance is an important issue for schools.

Additionally in the UAE, one participant expressed their role in following up on children who were not achieving. They summarised their role as one which involved '*supervising the behaviour of students and following up on underachievers (SSW, UAE).*

The UAE government is committed to ensuring that every child has an equal opportunity to go to a good school where their learning needs will be met and their welfare supported to enable them achieve their aspirations. This makes SSW an important strategy for enabling this to occur.

In the example below, it is clear that a more positive relationship between the SSW and the child is required to improve learning. The SSW has this to say:

A teacher told me that child B used to be a good student but her academic levels are dropping. I called the student and realised that there was a problem at home. When I said I would discuss it with her parents, she freaked out. (SSW, Ghana)

A drop in academic levels is of concern and the SSW in seeking to address this rightly discussed the situation with the child first. The child's response is indicative of broader family issues and her reaction to hearing that the situation would be discussed with the family is also of concern.

Seeking insight into the impact of the covid-19 pandemic, a SSW remarked that the distance/ online learning was demotivating and that:

Some children are losing interest in school because of the pandemic so we have to work to motivate them (SSW, Ghana)

Goal 10- Reduced inequalities

Speaking out against injustices which hinder the realisation of social justice is a role for social workers and is also aligned to the SDGs in terms of promoting social justice for marginalized individuals and communities.

Inequalities are an ongoing concern in all countries the world over and refer to the unequal distribution of power and privilege however in the context of the SDG's reduced inequalities focusses on how to bring countries closer together with fewer areas of inequality. School social workers were

reported to be working towards reducing inequalities within their own jurisdictions in their response to the covid-19 pandemic.

> *In a time where schools have been closed for a very long time, children will come to school traumatized. Some may have lost their loved ones as a result of the pandemic. Some may have been depressed or have faced issues of abuse during the lockdown. So it's a whole new world and it is important for social workers to be responsive to some of these challenges (SSW, Ghana)*

Interventions undertaken by SSW's should seek to reduce social isolation, facilitate inclusion and validate the dignity and worth of all. Across the world, there is evidence of low school participation among some groups and it is important that school social work interrogate this. For example, girls, orphans and children whose parents have health complications are less likely to be enrolled in school (Healy, 2001) as well as children engaged in trade and other forms of income generation to support themselves and their families.

To mitigate the impact of parents' language literacy on their children's education, this SSW in England identified a useful strategy to reduce inequalities. She shared this:

> *I approached the council about support to teach some of the parents English because this was impacting on the children's homework. The council organised 13 weeks free English language sessions. (SSW, England).*

Social workers have a role in signposting parents to necessary and available community resources and in this example, it was for language support. Research by Ainscow et al., (2016) found that intelligent children from multilingual homes were often ascribed to low ability groups and so this strategy by the social worker could also address this concern. It is important to note that linguistic diversity should be valued and promoted in schools however in this case there was evidence that the parents English proficiency was impacting on the child's learning.

A participant from England expressed the view that in the absence of SSW's, particular groups of minority children are at risk of exclusion and discrimination. She expressed it thus:

> *I don't feel that there is much awareness around the difficulties that different groups may face. So an example there was a time where, like last year there was a lot of media report around Muslims and there were lots of Muslims being attacked. Staff either weren't aware, or didn't want to acknowledge the anxieties that some of the Muslim children had for their parents whilst they were in school worrying about mum and dad whether they'd be able to pick them up because of the concerns that had been in the media (hmm). How this affects the functioning of children on*

> *a day to day basis. So cultural awareness and the impact that will have*
> *on children on a day to day basis needs to be part of the training as well.*

In order to promote inclusion and equality in schools, it is crucial that social work embraces its core purpose of respecting diversity and so combating Islamophobia and religious bias is central to this mission. Shier and Graham (2013, p. 395) argue that 'the person-in-environment approach stresses the role of the social work practitioner in helping individual service users navigate their social environment'. The role of the SSW therefore must prioritise assisting children to navigate their environments while speaking out against oppression and hate in all forms to promote wellbeing within and outside of school.

School social work appears to have a role of contributing to the realisation of specific SDG's, an area which is currently under researched. The interview data frequently referred to elements of the role which constituted meeting the current needs of children without compromising their future needs. A main theme throughout the data was one of addressing inequalities especially around the different achievement and attainment rates of children due to additional learning needs, family and external factors and irregular school attendance.

It is acknowledged that the goals are interconnected, and that actions in one area affects the outcomes in others however, in disaggregating or separating the SDG's, this paper has sought to outline the specific ways in which school social workers in the United Arab Emirates, England and Ghana contributed to the global agenda. However, the data shows their contribution on micro and mezzo levels, where improvement of the situation for a particular child or family contributes to positive outcomes on a broader level.

The International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) is concerned that the gains made by countries in progressing the SDG's will be eroded by the global pandemic and so it is important that with the gradual relaxing of covid-19 restrictions around the world, social workers in schools build upon some of the progress achieved pre-pandemic.

Implications for Practice

Towards a re-imagined school social work: Opportunities for education and practice

The findings from this research identify opportunities for expanding the role of school social work to include a contribution to the realisation of SDG's through education and practice. Social work programs around the world could benefit from introducing specific modules and courses which are transformative and which focus on enhancing social workers theoretical

knowledge of poverty and skills in poverty reduction and eradication strategies. Specifically, in the United Arab Emirates University where all first social work placements occur in schools, this bespoke teaching will be beneficial. Additionally, social work programmes could adopt a holistic approach by using the SDG's to design the curriculum, thus ensuring that course aims and learning outcomes align with the SDG's (Drolet et al., 2015).

A further recommendation is made for post qualifying or ongoing training for school social workers to maintain currency and develop specialist knowledge and skills to continue to deliver high quality service to children, their families and communities through social work services in schools. This recommendation is particularly relevant for the UAE where schools are the largest employer of social workers.

In terms of practice, social workers in schools are expected to support and encourage the creation of positive school environments not only for improved education outcomes but also to enhance relationships, strive for social justice and guard against risk factors such as family poverty and disadvantage. This paper has examined the important role of SSW in facilitating the achievement of specific SDG' at micro and mezzo levels, providing opportunities for global learning at local and national levels.

In addition, SSWs could support migrants, refugee and other marginalised and vulnerable children to access and stay in education. Gaining access to quality education through the formal schooling system for some migrant children can be complex and so another opportunity for future school social work practice could be guidance and support for this specific group of children. This support could be in the form of linguistic as well as financial and other support to enhance their health, overall wellbeing and inclusion.

A database of school social workers is an important consideration for the future in the United Arab Emirates, England and in Ghana. Such a database will assist in understanding where any gaps or excesses lie in terms of practitioners. It will also assist in determining where training and professional development courses are required. Importantly, such a database could contribute to understanding the impact of school social work services on the wider family and community functioning as well as specifically identify school social workers as effective contributors to this global agenda.

It is important to note that although this research identified and evidenced the potential of SSW to contribute to five SDG's, there is scope for other specialist areas of the profession to achieve some of the remaining SDG's. For example, Dominelli (2018) argues about the need for social workers to become more involved with climate and environmental issues and to educate others on the importance of engaging in 'green social work'. Drolet et al (2015) found that environmental issues have not previously had the deserved attention in the social work profession even though the changing

environment impacts on people's health and wellbeing. Gaining this knowledge on social work programmes, along with a whole school approach, reframing the curriculum, enhancing students learning and wellbeing will go a long way in supporting the realisation of additional SDG's.

Conclusion

Schools are an integral part of communities which are the spaces in which the SDG's are designed to be achieved. This paper has examined the role of school social work in contributing to the SDG's using data collected from the United Arab Emirates, England and Ghana. The findings indicate that social workers in schools and education establishments can effectively contribute to at least five of the SDG's directly, while making indirect contributions towards meeting many of the other SDG's. The covid-19 pandemic has further extended the role of school social workers to not only facilitate the academic and learning needs of children but also to support adjustments arising from illness, social distancing and death of family and community members. There is now an opportunity in all three countries to reimagine and develop the role of school social workers based on the SDG agenda in the remaining years until 2030 and beyond.

Funding

References

Ainscow, M., Dyson, A., Hopwood, L., & Thomson, S. (2016). *Primary schools responding to diversity: Barriers and possibilities* (CPRT Survey 8). CPRT. Retrieved from: https://cprtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Ainscow-report-160505.pdf

Al-Krenawi, A. and Graham, J. R. (2003). 'Principles of social work practice in the Muslim Arab world', *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 25(4), 75–91.

Altshuler, S. J., & Webb, J. R. (2009). School social work: Increasing the legitimacy of the profession. *Children & Schools*, 31(4), 207-218. Retrieved from http://www.naswpress.org/publications/journals/cs.html.

Beck, K.F., Hämäläinen J. (2020) Mapping the field of international comparative research in school social work. *International Social Work*. doi:10.1177/0020872819897742

Bland, H. and Esmail, A. (2012) School Social Work Services in Federally Funded Programs: An African American Perspective. UPA.

Braun, Virginia & Clarke, Victoria (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77-101.

Bryman, A. (2004). *Social Research Methods*, Oxford, University Oxford Press.

Cordoba, P. S., & Bando, L. (2021). Social Work and the Sustainable Development Goals: A Student Placement Model. *Australian Social Work*, 1-8.

da Luz Scherf E. (2021). Challenges in making school social work a reality in Brazilian schools. *International Social Work*, 1-7. Retrieved from https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/00208728211031965

Dodge, R., Daly, A., Huyton, J., & Sanders, L. (2012) The challenge of defining wellbeing. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 2(3), 222-235.

Doel, M. (2010). The Impact of an Improvised Social Work Method in a School: Aspirations, Encouragement, Realism and Openness, *Practice*, 22 (2) 69-88.

Dominelli, L. (2018). The Routledge Handbook of Green Social Work. London. Routledge.

Drolet, J., Wu, H., Taylor, M., & Dennehy, A. (2015). Social Work and Sustainable Social Development: Teaching and Learning Strategies for 'Green Social Work' Curriculum, *Social Work Education*, 34 (5), 528-543. doi: 10.1080/02615479.2015.1065808

Dzang-Tedam, P. & Gaisie-Ahiabu, E. (2017). Child Protection in Boarding Schools in Ghana. Contemporary Issues, Challenges and Opportunities. Litchfield. Kirwin Maclean.

End Child Poverty Global Coalition (2016). Putting Children First: A Policy Agenda to End Child Poverty. Online at https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56588879e4b0060cdb607883/t/58b695766a4963083713367d/1488360829931/Putting+Children+First_A+Policy+Agenda+to+End+Child+Poverty.pdf

FAO (2002). The state of food insecurity in the world 2001, Rome. Food and Agriculture Organization.

Global Food Banking Network (2021) The future of school feeding in Ghana. Retrieved from: https://www.foodbanking.org/the-future-of-school-feeding-in-ghana/

Graham, S. (2016) Victims of Bullying. *Journal of Theory into Practice*, 55(2), 136-144.

Healy, L. M. (2001), International Social Work. Professional Action in an interdependent world. Oxford. Oxford University Press.

Henderson, M., Cheung, S.Y., Sharland, E. & Scourfield, J. (2016), The outcomes of educational welfare officer contact in England. *British Educational Research Journal*, 42 (3), 399-416.

Hokke, S., Hackworth, N.J. & Bennetts, S.K., (2020), Ethical Considerations in Using Social Media to Engage Research Participants: Perspectives of Australian Researchers and Ethics Committee Members. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*, 15(1-2), 12-27. doi:10.1177/1556264619854629

Huxtable, M., & Blyth, E. (2002). School social work worldwide. Washington, DC: NASW Press.

Huxtable, M., Sottie, C. A. & Ulziitungalag, K. (2012). Social Work and Education In Lyons, K.; Hokenstad, T.; Pawar, M.; Huegler, N. & Hall, N. (Eds.), The Sage Handbook of International Social Work, London, Sage.

International Federation of Social Workers (2014). International Definition of Social Work. Retrieved from: https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/

International Federation of Social Workers (2022). Social Work and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Isaksson, C. & Larsson, A. (2017). Jurisdiction in school social workers' and teachers' work for pupils' well-being. *Education Inquiry*, 8(3), 246-261.

Joseph, S., Sempik, J. & Leu, A. (2020). Young Carers Research, Practice and Policy: An Overview and Critical Perspective on Possible Future Directions. *Adolescent Res Rev* 5, 77–89.

Kelly, M.S. (2008). The Domains and Demands of School Social Work Practice. A Guide to Working Effectively with Students, Families and, Schools. Oxford. Oxford University Press.

Krumer-Nevo,M. (2016). Poverty-Aware Social Work: A Paradigm for Social Work Practice with People in Poverty, *The British Journal of Social Work*, 46(6), 1793–1808.

Long, R. (2015). School Meals and Nutritional Standards. Briefing paper. House of Commons.

Mair, S., Jones, A. & Ward, J. (2018). A Critical Review of the Role of Indicators in Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. In Leal Filho W. (Ed). Handbook of Sustainability Science and Research. World Sustainability Series. Springer, Cham.

Maslow, A. (1970). Motivation and Personalitu. New York. Harper Collins.

Muleya, E. (2020). Developmental Social Work and the Sustainable Development Goals in South Africa: Opportunities and Challenges. *The International Journal of Community and Social Development*, 2(4), 470-486.

Pulla, V. & Kay, A. (2017). Response to a strengths-based approach in social work in schools: An Indian school in Dubai. *International Social Work*, 60(6), 1418-1432

Quickfall, A. (2022). Recruiting participants via social media: Like, Share, Block, Report. London, SAGE Research Methods Cases.

Salifu, I., Boateng, J.K., & Kunduzore, S.S. (2018). Achieving free compulsory universal basic education through school feeding programme: Evidence from a deprived rural community in northern Ghana, *Cogent Education*, 5(1), 1-15.

Shier, M.L. & Graham, J. R. (2013). Identifying Social Service Needs of Muslims Living in a Post 9/11 Era: The Role of Community-Based Organizations. *Advances in Social Work,* 14(2), 395-415.

Tedam, P. (2020). Social distancing and social work field placements. *The Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning*, *17*(1), 51-56.

Tedam,P., Powell, H., Alfalasi, S.J.H & Almarqab, E. (2021). Enhancing the Social Work Field Practicum Experience through the Practice Development Forum (PDF) at the United Arab Emirates University, *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 41(4), 430-442.

United Nations (UN). (2015). Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Advanced unedited version. Retrieved from: https://sustainabledevelopment. un.org/post2015/trans-formingourworld [accessed on 9 September 2021]

Yin, R.-K. (2011). Qualitative research from start to finish. New York, The Guilford Press.