



International Network for School Social Work

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School Social Work in Western Australia

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Australia is situated in the southern hemisphere, between Indonesia and Papua New Guinea to the north and Antarctica to the south. The country is sparsely populated. The population is just over 24 million and the area is in excess of 7.6 million square kilometers. By comparison, the United States of America is 21% larger than Australia, with 35 people per square kilometer and just 3 per square kilometer in Australia. In Western Australia, population density is only one per square kilometer. Perth is the only large city, with over a million people.

Education in Australia

Each state and territory in Australia has responsibility for education in its jurisdictions. However all have a non-compulsory year prior to primary, known in Western Australia as kindergarten, followed by twelve years of formal schooling, including six in primary school and six in secondary school.

As society and the Australian culture have evolved, the question is raised as to whether our schooling system has developed accordingly. The inequalities that exist on a more general scale within society are also evident in schools, and these influence educational outcomes. Moreover, there is a compound effect as educational inequalities may limit future opportunities thereby perpetuating a cycle of inequality. In 2009, school principals of government primary schools across the nation were invited to participate in a study on the purposes of education and how well these were being carried out. Among other concerns many school principals considered government schools were now held to a greater level of responsibility when it came to social and emotional wellbeing of students, and that this onus was once on others in the community, particularly parents.

This changing society has created a number of new barriers for children trying to access education. These barriers are plentiful and often multi-faceted, such as physical and mental illness, changing family structure, issues of law and order, poverty, social isolation, coupled with a political climate that embraces neo-liberal policies that advance the individual over the collective and support a view of education for a private purpose. The diverse cultures that are evident in many Western Australia schools also present challenges and this is an area where social workers could support the children, the families and the school staff. In particular, the Indigenous population represents only 3% of the state's total population, however, in certain locations in the state this percentage is far higher. A

qualified social worker with knowledge of the historic events, intergenerational trauma and a thorough understanding of the social inequalities faced by marginalized peoples, including Indigenous people, could work with the school promoting a more socially just model of schooling where Aboriginal capacity in education is built, thus creating sustainable and meaningful change, not just for the school, but the individual and community more broadly.

How Children's Needs are Currently Met

Currently school social workers are rarely employed in the government school system (where the majority of students are enrolled). Instead, as with the rest of the country, most schools in this state have access to Commonwealth government funding to employ a chaplain who is tasked with tending to the spiritual, religious, social and emotional well-being and other needs of students, staff and parents, both at private, religious based schools and secular public schools. Chaplains are not required to be social workers, nor are they required to have a tertiary qualification of any kind, so the role of chaplain does not include counseling.

In addition to chaplains, government schools utilize the expertise of a school psychologist who is usually required to service a number of schools in the area. Referrals are made to the school psychologist and regardless of whether the school psychologist prioritizes time on testing for diagnosable learning or behavioral difficulties or following up with students after testing, the focus is on those children with perceived or diagnosed learning problems. This leaves a gap between the services of chaplains and school psychologists, where school social workers could support families, link home and school and build social capital.

Qualifications of Social Workers in Australia

To practice as a social worker in Western Australia an individual must have a Bachelor of Social Work degree from an accredited Australian tertiary education provider (or international equivalent) and be eligible for membership of the professional body, the Australian Association of Social Workers (<https://www.aasw.asn.au/document/item/3550>). Schools that have employed social workers have not required any additional qualification and currently there is no specific curriculum for school social work. The questions of specialized training and certification to practice as a school social worker are issues for the School Social Work Practice Group to discuss when the specialty starts to be more widely implemented.

Advocacy for School Social Work

The School Social Work Practice Group in Western Australia, which was started by three motivated and passionate social workers is promoting and advocating for the profession of school social work in government schools. The social workers would participate in a multi-disciplinary approach to education in which all needs of children can be addressed, helping children reach their potential. Another of the group's priorities is to undertake research to provide an evidence-based platform from which to promote the importance and benefits of school social work, as well as policy context. Research can help stakeholders understand the potential of school social work in Western Australia.

The experience of others on both the Australian and the international stage provides encouragement to those of us in the Practice Group to pursue the inclusion of school social work within our schools. Following the example of others, the university social work programs are placing students in schools and this has highlighted the work that can be done. Our research draws on those studies that have been carried out in other parts of the world. The evidence garnered by others over many years can be used to identify the benefits of having social workers in our schools.