

## **International Network for School Social Work**

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Contact [mhuxtable@olympus.net](mailto:mhuxtable@olympus.net)

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### **Thoughts on Teaching School Social Work in Sri Lanka**

H.M.D Subodini Herath, Lecturer, School of Social Work, [darshika.herath7@gmail.com](mailto:darshika.herath7@gmail.com)  
National Institute of Social Development, Sri Lanka

#### **Education in Sri Lanka**

In ancient times the Sri Lankan education system was highly respected in a patriarchal society with royal patronage, great poets and teachers, where male oriented education was promoted through oral tradition. Buddhist monks were committed to write religious teachings in Ola leaf (palm leaf used for writing materials). The manuscripts were kept in temples and libraries from generation to generation. Mostly religion, literature and philosophy were taught within the temple premises. Thereafter with western influence of the Portuguese, British and Dutch, there was a turning point in the education system where missionary schools had been established. Later, government schools were established to ensure the provision of basic education. Dr. C.W.W Kannangara was the pioneer in a series of educational reforms, and in 1947 came the expansion in the provision of education, enactment of a comprehensive law on education with free education from kindergarten to the university, establishment of central schools, change in the medium of instruction to national languages and curricular changes. Kannangara's proposals included student welfare measures such as bursaries for promising students from disadvantaged families and free school meals.

#### **Problems of school children in Sri Lanka**

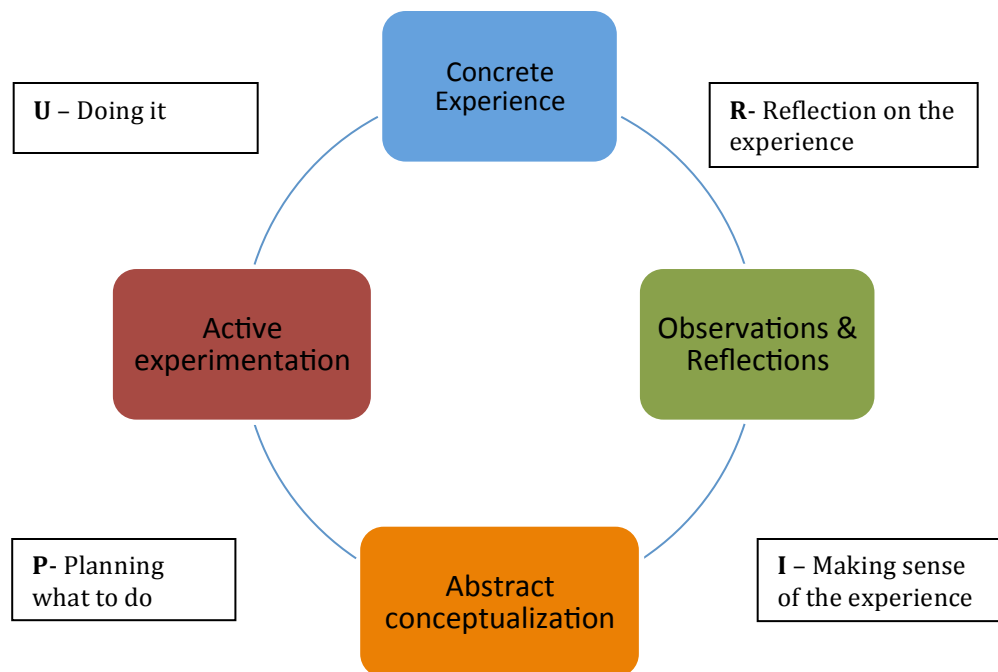
Students face innumerable issues, problems and challenges during their student life such as drug addiction, school dropouts, absenteeism and behavioral problems at school. Most of the time the needs of the children are not addressed with adequate guidance. However in some government and private schools school counselors are available to handle student issues, but there are loopholes in their service provision too. There are a few social workers who are appointed as school social workers in private and international schools, but advocacy is needed to promote formal school social work positions in government schools.

The National Institute of Social Development in Nawala, Rajagiriya is the pioneer degree-awarding institute which caters for bachelors and masters students of Social Work in Sri Lanka. The Bachelor of Social Work degree has been started in year 2003 with guidance from the University of Colombo. Since Social Work professionals are engaged with multi-disciplinary teams there is a need of teaching different disciplines to students during their learning period. School Social Work is an elective subject component for third year bachelor students and the main objective of introducing this course content is to provide the knowledge and skills for students to work in school settings. Other elective subjects are Medical and Mental Health Social Work, Human Resources Management, Counseling for Social Work Practice and Introduction to Persons with Disability for the third year bachelor's students. The School

Social Work curriculum for bachelors' students was designed by Mrs.V. Gowry Vasudevan, who earlier worked as senior lecturer in the School of Social Work at the National Institute of Social Development. There were 26 students who opted at the initial stage in 2015 for School Social Work and the course has continued to be popular every year, with many students also doing their research study on school social work after taking the elective. This subject component is designed to develop students' interpersonal skills and enhance learning abilities through providing theoretical and practical knowledge.

### Teaching Skills in School Social Work

I have gained experience and developed my teaching skills through teaching the school social work elective. Kolb's Learning Cycle has been a key teaching technique. This involves connecting involvement in a new experience with reflective observation, developing observations and abstract conceptualization, creating theories to explain observations, and using theories to solve problems. Kolb's theory helped me to teach students how to make the link between concrete experience and generalizations using abstract concepts. This encourages the students to use their experiences to learn concepts, so that they are learning not only from classroom teachings but also from relevant field



experiences, as illustrated in this model of the theory. Teaching methods include classroom lectures, documentary video clips, role play activities related to current issues in school settings, external resource persons, and field observations in schools such as St. Thomas School, Mount Lavinia where the first School Social Work Unit was started in 1997 by Mr. Sanjeeva de Mel, a graduate of the National Institute of Social Development.

### Lessons Learned

Experiential learning with practical assignments gives students field experiences that they can relate to the classroom teaching. For example, one group of students conducted group surveys on issues related to school children in Colombo and some other districts. The students identified many issues and their root causes through the survey, using theoretical knowledge from the School-Home-Community-Pupil Liaison Approach by Lela Costin. I developed my teaching skills, using techniques for oral, visual and kinesthetic learners, and enhanced my professional capacity as an academic by teaching the School Social Work elective unit as a specialized course for the Bachelor of Social Work programme at the National Institute of Social Development in Sri Lanka.