



International Network for School Social Work

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School Social Work in Western Australia: The International School Social Work Conference as Activism

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Western Australia, the largest of the states and territories that make up Australia, has an area of just over 2.6 million square kilometres and a population of just under 2.6 million. The majority of the population lives on the coast, from the south west wine and farming country, north to the capital city Perth, up to the wheatbelt farming area and on to the beautiful and rugged Pilbarra and Kimberley areas, known for mining and tourism.

Whilst working as a teacher, I saw the impact that problems external to the child were having on their ability to engage with education. This motivated me to study social work, and advocate for social workers in public schools in Western Australia. 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 tasked with tending to the spiritual, religious, social and emotional well-being of students, staff and parents, both at private, religious based schools and secular public schools. Chaplains are not required to have a tertiary qualification of any kind.

In addition, government schools utilize the expertise of school psychologists who service multiple schools within an area. Psychologists prioritize testing for diagnosable learning or behavioral difficulties and following up post testing; the focus being 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 and link home and school.

The Edith Cowan University (ECU) School Social Work Field Education Program commenced in 2015 with five students and three primary schools. The principals at the schools were open to working with the ECU social work team to develop a model that would provide social work students with the learning required, assist and support the school in the relevant areas of need and be sustainable. I completed Master's research with this cohort of students and the social work and education staff who supported them as participants.

Upon undertaking this research I anticipated certain elements or concepts may be identified, such as the need for a qualified social worker in schools to be available to counsel students experiencing challenging life events. I thought it probable that students whose home environment made it difficult for them to learn would be recognised as needing support. What surprised me was the strength of the finding that it is the link to the home environment that has been identified as being the most needed and that it is here that Social Work is required.

Data from the research highlighted the disjuncture between family and school, between the school community and the broader community. Bridges between the school and an individual child's caregiver only exist in certain circumstances, such as when the parent or caregiver is engaged with the child's education. It is often where the most support is required that the bridge is non-existent. Many caregivers do not engage with the school due to their own schooling experiences. However the school environment provides a ready and accessible link to these families which does not necessarily exist elsewhere. It is this link which is overlooked or ignored until a reactionary response is required, with one staff member contending that "schools run a risk management model and on any given day, the time and resourcing is given to the most at-risk child that day". School staff and student social workers were aware of certain situations where they felt proactive action could be taken which would enhance the educational opportunities of a child, yet they were restricted in what they could actually do. This brings into stark focus the gap that exists in the support being offered to families and, access the families and schools have to community services.

There was a sense of frustration emanating from the school staff as they could so clearly identify where the gaps in support were and what needed to be done in order for children to fully access education. However, due to the machinery of an education department that is maintaining the traditionalist stance on education, government policies and resourcing shortages, they are unable to implement strategies to minimise these barriers. This is despite a clear statement within the *Australian Education Act, 2013* (p. 2) asserting:

Strong partnerships across the broader community are necessary to support all school students, including partnerships between teachers, parents, carers and families, not-for-profit and community organisations, and employers.

Research in the area of school social work in Western Australia continues so as to raise the profile of this needed field of practice. One element of advocacy undertaken was to seek to host the International School Social Work Conference. The bid was successful and we are organising an informative, interesting and exciting program for the 2020 conference. We realise the dates overlap with Thanksgiving for our American colleagues, so we promise you turkey with all the trimmings. More details will follow. Meantime, for more information please don't hesitate to get in touch.



8th International School Social Work Conference

25th – 27th November 2020

Pagoda Resort

Perth, Western Australia

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