



International Network for School Social Work

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Social Workers Stepping into the Frontline in South African Schools

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With the South African education system currently attempting to re-open schools during the Covid-19 pandemic, fear and anxiety as well as financial uncertainties create new challenges. The important role of school social workers has become even more evident during these times.

School Social Work in South Africa

South Africa is a large, pluralistic country of 58 million people living in 9 provinces. Social workers in schools are expected to render holistic services. However, the provision of services is not uniform across the country and is still far from common across the country. Some social workers are employed by a school's governing body and serve only one school, others work for the Education Department or the Social Welfare Department, and are stationed either at a full service school, a special needs school or a cluster of schools. The pandemic has created a need for school social workers to be flexible, and to think out of the box to provide support during the crisis.

The Pandemic

The pandemic reached South Africa at the beginning of March and level 5 lockdown started in mid-March, allowing only essential services while everyone else had to stay at home for about 5 weeks. The school year starts in January and has 4 terms, so most learners missed one complete term due to the lockdown. Lockdown was gradually eased by stages and even at the present level 2 it requires social distancing and has restrictions on social and leisure activities. Grades 12 and 7 re-opened in the beginning of June if the school's health and safety regulations and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) were in place. Some schools were allowed to bring in more grades gradually if they could keep to the regulations for social distancing and wearing masks. Other schools started a staggered schedule until the schools were abruptly closed in August due to a surge in cases. The school calendar was adapted to accommodate an extra 2 weeks of school in our usually long December holiday, with only a week break in October. Even so, the curriculum had to be trimmed for the remainder of the school year, which ends in December.

Handling the Stress of the Pandemic

Motivational messages and tips to cope were communicated throughout. Some school social workers connected with communities and provided food and other important necessities such as masks to their learners. Parents were encouraged to speak up when they or their children needed emotional or other support from their child's school social worker. Communication was via email, WhatsApp, phone and home visits. As the lockdown regulations eased, school social workers were more able to make contact with children and families who needed emotional support and material supports such as food parcels, masks etc. As learners started returning to schools, a more direct strategy was followed with informative and educational talks to whole groups, individual and small group sessions. Sitting in a circle, we were able to maintain social distance, but still provide some form of connection and emotional safety.

As a means to reach learners, WhatsApp groups were established for communication. Info-graphics and posters were designed as a way of helping learners figure out their thoughts and feelings and to know how to reach out for help. This was unfortunately limited as it was not possible to reach all learners due to lack of resources. We also tried to ensure that the vulnerable learners on our feeding scheme were still assisted. Where possible food parcels were delivered, and where not, monetary food donations were provided, most of which was donated by teachers and staff at the school.

The current situation is causing teachers, learners and the parents alike to experience high levels of stress and for some, even trauma. We observed many signs of stress, such as children returning to school very quiet and compliant, rather than their usually boisterous selves, parents constantly finding fault with the school, sending messages that exposed their fears and overall levels of stress, and teachers who were exhausted even after a break. Some staff, learners and parents explicitly indicated that they feared returning to school due to the possibility of contracting the virus.

Research shows that optimal learning is hampered when a person is stressed or traumatised. Furthermore, research tells us that as adults we can either heighten children's level of stress, or assist in lowering their levels of stress. A Trauma-Informed School-based Model was developed by one of the school social workers in private practice, Marissa Jordaan. This intervention model provides a guideline, support strategies, and training material for social workers and teaching staff in order to develop an optimal learning environment. The goals are to assist staff members to be more emotionally regulated, controlling their stress levels; to enable learners to be less stressed and therefore better able to focus; to prevent behavioural problems from escalating; and to provide the necessary psycho-social support to the learners and staff. Marissa trained the teachers at her two schools, did a nation-wide online session that was live-streamed via Facebook and provided further sessions of training and discussion for school social workers nation-wide via an online platform.

The Way Forward

In this large, diverse country with a population of around 20 million learners, it is difficult to track how social workers are providing help during the pandemic. Where information exists we have seen that school social work has proven to be one of the most direct and successful ways of providing assistance and support to learners and families during the pandemic. As schools re-open even more, school social workers will be seen as the new frontline workers for support under difficult circumstances. It is an opportunity to extend the institutionalisation of school social work, which has been underway in recent years.