

International School Social Work: Building Networks and Relationships

The growing emphasis on international social work has also been paralleled in the specific practice area of school social work. In 2014, Huxtable found that school social work was established in approximately 50 countries (Huxtable, 2014). However, those numbers have continued to grow as various countries engage in pilot projects and advocacy to introduce or develop this specialization of social work. This winter, I spent six weeks in Vietnam supporting the development of school social work in that country. Many social work academics and professionals in Vietnam have been working tirelessly to introduce school social work in the schools through internships, partnerships with local organizations and UNICEF, as well as through research aimed at providing evidence that this is a vital service to children in the schools, and supports everyone's goal of maximizing student potential and achievement. Throughout the years engaged in international work and networks, it has been clear that social workers across the globe understand the importance of school social work, particularly as I hear of common issues faced in different countries such as bullying, ethnic and racial conflict, lack of support for LGBTQ students, and others. Teachers need our support to best serve their students.

As I transition from Editor-in-Chief to the role of Associate Editor of the International Journal of School Social Work, I am proud to say that this journal has served an important platform for intellectual and professional exchange in a way that is accessible to school social workers and academics across the globe. As Founding Editor-in-Chief, with my colleague Brenda Lindsey, we made this aspirational goal a reality. This is now the 4th issue of the journal and has attracted many top authors in the field of school social work. I would like to leave the international community with a reminder of the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) Practice Model for school social work and invite colleagues in other parts of the world to engage with this model, critique the model, and help us to expand this model in ways that serves the universality of the work that school social workers do as well as address some of those unique aspects of the local contexts. The following is a brief overview of the SSWAA Model (Frey et al., 2013) which can be found in more detail on the SSWAA website.

SSWAA Model

The School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) practice model encourages school social workers to 1) provide evidence-based educational, behavioral, and mental health services; 2) promote school climate and culture conducive to learning; and 3) maximize access to school-based and community-based resources. Additionally, the model contains four key constructs. School social workers are expected to possess advanced knowledge and technical skills to guide their practice in these areas:

- 1. Home-school-community linkages** – A hallmark of school social work practice is the belief that academic achievement is profoundly impacted by the environment, including relationships and interactions across home, school, and community settings. Facilitating communication and promoting linkages across these systems is a central characteristic of school social work practice.
- 2. Ethical guidelines and educational policy**- School social workers pledge to follow professional ethical guidelines and carry out federal and state educational policy to provide the highest level of school social work practice.
- 3. Education rights and advocacy**- Educational rights and advocacy requires that school social workers address the ways in which structural inequalities and school processes affect school quality and educational outcomes.
- 4. Data-based decision-making**- Data-based decision-making refers to the process of integrating the best current research evidence in designing and implementing interventions.

I invite others to consider questions such as how international ethical guidelines and local educational policy impact school social work practice in your context? What are the issues around educational advocacy and rights that we need to attend to in your context? How can the international community support these efforts? What role does school social work play in addressing those inequities? How do we begin to support the development of school social work practices that de-center Western approaches developed in the Global North, that sometimes might not be the best fit in other cultural contexts with different political realities? What can we learn in the United States, from other countries, particularly as we have not been in a place of upholding children's rights as a

country by continuing to hold children in cages and in deplorable conditions in detention facilities (Cumming-Bruce, 2019)? As a global community, we can begin to address these various issues by continuing our work to develop, maintain, and strengthen our international collaboration and networking. Our work is far from finished, and I look forward to the continued strengthening of our international connections and relationships. Let's continue to use all of the mediums at our disposal to share information and support this work for our children. I will leave us with this quote by Van der Kolk (2014):

The greatest hope for traumatized, abused, and neglected children is to receive a good education in schools where they are seen and known, where they learn to regulate themselves, and where they can develop a sense of agency. At their best, schools can function as islands of safety in a chaotic world (p. 353).

Schools can be islands of safety and liberation for our youth, and school social workers can be important facilitators and bridge builders in that process.

References

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