

# School Social Work: Enhancing Learners in Zimbabwe to Reach their Full Potential

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**Abstract:** *Learners in Zimbabwe face numerous problems such as poverty, child abuse, child labour, teenage pregnancy, sexual harassment, bullying, learning problems and low self-esteem among others that usually hinder them from achieving their full potential in their studies. On this note, it is here contended that school social work is part of an inter-professional approach to understanding and providing help for learners who are unable to use their learning capacities to the full extent, including those who require special services to enable them to make full use of their educational opportunities (Sossou and Daniels, 2002). Although school teachers may try to address these problems, they are sometimes not well equipped with the skills and knowledge on how to deal with the problems effectively. Furthermore, the teachers usually have very huge classes and do not have adequate time to work with learners facing predicaments in their school work. The overall aim of school social work is to provide social work services to learners, parents, and teachers who experience problems within the context of the learning setting in order to prevent and overcome barriers which inhibit students from reaching their full potential. The paper presents a discussion on school social work as a source of support and help to prevent learning problems by intervening with at-risk learners in Zimbabwean schools.*

**Keywords:** school social work; problems; learners

## 1. Introduction

Social work beginnings can be traced to charitable and religious ideas. The profession of social work as it is known today was developed in the West, particularly in Britain and the United States of America (Stuart, 2013). In the case of Africa, social work was brought as a colonial export from the European colonizing countries (Kreitzer, 2012). Social work is concerned with helping people cope better with problem situations. Kemp (2010) argues that the social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance their wellbeing. Social workers throughout the world are found in a variety of settings such as physical and mental health, correctional institutions, child welfare, alcohol and drug abuse, schools and hospitals among others. However, there are no social workers in schools in the majority of African countries despite the fact that the family and the school are central places for the development of children. In Zimbabwe, most people are not even aware that social workers can be employed in schools. The majority of schools in Zimbabwe do not offer school social work services except for a few private schools in major cities. This paper is based on extensive examination of literature regarding improving learners' academic achievements in Zimbabwe through the provision of social work services.

## 2. School Social Work

School social work as a field of practice differs from generic social work. It is a specialized area of practice within the broad field of the social work profession. The primary mission of school social work is to help learners, families, schools and communities to remove obstacles that interfere with the learners' performance in class and to advocate a school setting that promotes success for all pupils (Costin, 1973; Huxtable, 2013). Similarly,

Openshaw (2008) argues that the goal of school social work should be to give all learners an opportunity and resources to help them succeed academically and socially in a safe and healthy environment. Accordingly, school social work plays a fundamental role in developing learners and linking them with resources as well as offering support necessary for the maximization of their potential in the educational process. School social workers are instrumental in furthering the purpose of the schools to provide a setting for teaching, learning and for the attainment of competence and confidence (Openshaw, 2008; Constable, 2009; School Social Work Association of America, 2016). In other words, school social work seeks to enable learners to make maximum use of the academic, developmental and social opportunities afforded them in the school setting.

Although school social work as a field of practice has been in existence for over a hundred years in countries like the United States of America, it is virtually non-existent in most developing countries. School social work practice arose independently in New York, Boston, and Hartford during the 1906-1907 school year (Dupper, 2003; Constable, 2009). Workers in community agencies initiated contact with the schools in order to link them more strongly with homes and communities (Costin, 1969). These workers were not hired by the school system but worked in the school under sponsorship of other agencies or civic groups. In New York, it was a settlement house that sponsored the workers (Constable and Blyth, 2002). Constable and Walberg (2009) write on the school as a community of families. They argue that the school is a community of families, of teachers, parents and others working in a partnership with one another as socializers of children. The development of this supportive community is even more important when children, families, communities and schools have special needs, where the connection between home and school is not easily developed, or

where there is cultural or linguistic diversity, the social worker can help develop this community (Nebo, 1963).

There is strong evidence base that resilience in children is promoted when the resources in the school, family and community are united and dedicated to their healthy development and educational success (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Subotnick & Walberg, 2006). Schools and families are places where children should develop, discover their own dignity and worth, and come to realize their potential. Nonetheless, there are often gaps in this relation, within the school and within the family, in their relation to each other, and to the needs of the learners. There are gaps between aspirations and realities, between manifest need and availed programmes (Constable, 2002). School social workers practice in the space where children, families, schools and communities encounter one another, where hopes can fail, where gaps exist, and where education can break down (Massat et al, 2009). Hare (2002: 101) also notes that "schools play an integral role in preparing youth to become healthy, creative, and productive adults, workers and citizens". They are a microcosm of the larger society in which they function. Therefore, school social workers play a critical role in assisting schools function properly.

In Europe, social pedagogy has been used in countries such as Germany, Holland and Hungary to embrace the activities of youth workers, residential or day care workers (with children and adults), work with offenders, and play and occupational therapists (Galuske, 2009). With the growth of more integrated children's services in Britain, there has been an interest in social pedagogy as a means of making sense of the professional development of staff in these areas of state service (Cameron, 2004). As an idea social pedagogic first started being used around the middle of the nineteenth century in Germany as a way of describing alternatives to the dominant models of schooling. Conversely, by the second half of the twentieth century social pedagogy became increasingly associated with social work and notions of social education in a number of European countries.

Within the traditions that emerged there has been a concern with the well-being or happiness of the person, and which might be described as a holistic and educational approach. Smith (2009) posits that to fully appreciate some of the debates around social pedagogy and the role of pedagogues it is worth going back to the distinction between teachers and pedagogues in ancient Greece. People had jobs as specialist teachers. For example, Achilles had a tutor, Phoenix, who had the task of teaching him to be both a speaker of words and a doer of deeds. Pedagogues were family attendants (usually slaves) whose duties were to supervise, and be with, the young sons of the house. Chosen for their reliability (and sometimes their inability to undertake heavier duties), pedagogues took the boys to the gym and school (and sat with them in the classroom). As Castle (1961:63 -4) has commented:

This attendance of the pedagogue (paidagogos) on the boys was not purely protective. The paidagogos was also expected to supervise his young charge's manners in the home and in the street and even in school, where he was in

attendance as a symbol of parental authority throughout the school day. This moral supervision by the paidagogos must be stressed. He was more important than the schoolmaster, because the latter only taught a boy his letters, but the paidagogos taught him how to behave, a much more important matter in the eyes of his parents. He was, moreover, even if a slave, a member of the household, in touch with its ways and with the father's authority and views. The schoolmaster had no such close contact with his pupils.

Consequently, school social workers as pedagogues provide an integral link between school, home and community in helping students to succeed academically. As such, the school social worker role is unique in its focus on the student in the school environment in order to facilitate successful learning through relief of stress and removal of barriers and inequalities.

In Africa, it is only Ghana that has a comprehensive school social work system; South Africa and Nigeria are also in the process of fully establishing school social work as a field of practice. As for Zimbabwe, most people are not even aware that social workers can be employed in schools as mentioned earlier on. Social workers are employed in various settings in the country but surprisingly and unfortunately not in schools.

### **3. Problems Faced by Zimbabwean Learners**

Learners in Zimbabwe encounter a plethora of challenges that militate against their quest for academic excellence and in the process stifling their professional potential hence jeopardizing their life chances. The learners face many problems from home, the school and community such as poverty, child abuse, bullying, sexual harassment, homelessness, learning problems along with other problems.

Poverty is now being experienced by the majority of the citizens. The prevalence of poverty in Zimbabwe has been exacerbated by the economic and political crisis being experienced by the country. This has led to a breakdown of a considerable number of families with children resorting to staying on the streets. Children raised in poverty have poor employment records as adults and they are more likely to engage in smoking, prostitution, alcohol and drug abuse. This greatly puts them at risk of being sexually abused with the possibility of contracting HIV/AIDS and unwanted teenage pregnancies. Some of these children automatically drop out of school and become dangerous criminals. Furthermore, children coming from a poor background have challenges in paying tuition fees, buying the stationery and affording other things required at school. As a result, this might have psychosocial effects on the learners' academic performance and achievement.

A number of children in Zimbabwe are living in child-headed households. Zhunguzha (2014) observed that such children are vulnerable to problems such as lack of parental guidance, physical abuse and other harsh living conditions. A sad phenomenon in Zimbabwe today is that many parents of school children are dying of HIV/AIDS

related diseases leaving a whole lot of orphans living in child-headed households. It is common knowledge that when parents die the amount of resources available for education decrease. Children orphaned by AIDS and other diseases who do not have anyone to look after them, inevitably drop out of school as they cannot afford school fees, uniforms, stationery and textbooks despite the fact that they have the right to education. Besides being orphaned there are other contributing factors that cause child-headed households such as the weakening of the extended family's safety nets in the country, socio-economic conditions that forced some parents to leave their children behind to work in the Diaspora and to engage in cross-border trading. Children living in child-headed households encounter problems such as bullying, stigmatization and discrimination at school that reduce their self-esteem and confidence to participate in class activities.

Despite various protective instruments, child sexual abuse is a reality in Zimbabwe. Teachers and parents are some of the culprits of this heinous crime and they have appeared before the courts of law and convicted. Additionally, media reports are inundated by stories of relatives, close family friends, community members and school teachers who sexually abuse children. A study on adolescent sexual reproductive health commissioned by the Southern African HIV/AIDS Information Dissemination Services (SAFAIDS) in 2011 established that an increasing number of Zimbabwean school boys were sleeping with their female teachers in exchange for favours. While efforts had been concentrated on "saving" the girl child, the boy child has become the "open target" of sexual predators in schools. The favours noted in the research, mostly centred on passing examinations. Of the 200 pupils interviewed, 7 per cent confirmed they had had sex with their teacher in exchange of favours and the majority of this 7 per cent were boys (SAFAIDS, 2011).

Due to poverty, deaths of parents, child labour, lack of educational opportunities, especially for the girl child and children with disabilities, children are highly likely to be exposed to multiple risks for sexual abuse. Mantula and Saloojee (2016) noted that many children in Zimbabwe continue to suffer traumatic incidents of sexual abuse. The resultant is that some children become psychologically affected and end up having depression, thoughts of committing suicide, anxiety, isolation, loneliness and other mental disturbing issues which affect their capacity to perform well in school.

Hence, in a nutshell, learners face personal, family, school and community obstacles preventing them to reach their full potential in their educational activities. Personal hindrances include disabilities, physical and mental health problems, drug use, adolescent pregnancy, and learning problems among others. Family problems include domestic violence, divorce, child abuse, homelessness, and family illnesses. In schools many learners face poor facilities, ineffective teaching, bullying, and abuse by staff. Classroom management is becoming more difficult even in countries with a tradition of obedient students and respected teachers and Zimbabwe is not an exception.

Community-wide problems that make school difficult for many children are violence, crime, decaying neighbourhoods, and lack of community services, and poverty. The above-mentioned problems are indeed barriers to effective learning and development in Zimbabwean schools.

In recognition of such challenges, the educational fraternity put in place guidance and counselling services for learners in all schools. However, these services are fraught with a number of administrative, professional and technical challenges characterising the education sector. Such challenges include heavy workload, inadequate professional orientation in the area of counselling and family support as well as higher teacher-learner ratios among others. Gudyanga et al. (2015) pointed out that counselling in Zimbabwean schools is not given adequate time given that the teacher is also a subject teacher and has to attend to several lessons, so he/she conducts counselling when available. Due to large numbers of students the teacher is likely unable to attend to them all. A study conducted by Nkala (2014) revealed that the Guidance and Counselling Subject lacks relevant human personnel (qualified teachers) and material resources (books, stationery, counselling rooms) which are needed in the teaching of the subject. As a result these problems that can inhibit the learners' performance in their studies and this can be better addressed by qualified social workers.

Even though learners in Zimbabwe are given assistance by Schools Psychological Services, mainly staffed by Educational Psychologists in the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, the support is to a great extent channelled to pupils with learning difficulties. The Schools Psychological Services provide services to meet the needs of learners who cannot benefit from public schools without the provision of special equipment and facilities of some special kind in collaboration with specialist teachers (Tshabalala, 2013). Regrettably, Schools Psychologists operate at district level which makes it impossible for them to cater for every learner's need on time and they tend to delay the assessment of learners leading to delays for appropriate intervention programmes. Therefore, social workers can become part of joint efforts to make schools safe for everyone (Constable and Walberg, 2009). Important to these efforts is the mobilization of resources to supplement and enhance the educational process and improve child and family functioning. It is in this light that school social workers as trained professionals are in a better position to identify learners at-risk through assessment of the school, pupil, home and family factors that influence and hinder learning, teaming and collaborating with the school, parents and community agencies and groups, and provide direct and indirect services.

#### **4. The Role of School Social Workers in Zimbabwean Schools**

Children today are increasingly becoming victims of many social forces that negatively affect their role as student as the family is in a state of change and their unmet physical and emotional needs will continue to interfere with their

ability to learn and adjust in school (School Social Work Association of America, 2016). Thus, social workers play an important role in schools as they help make the school a responsive and stimulating environment for different pupil groups (Allen-Meares et al, 2002).

The right to education is one of the rights encoded in the United Convention on the rights of the Child, an agreement between nations that has been widely ratified and recognized by countries worldwide. Social workers have a major function to help every child enrol and complete school successfully, thereby promoting the realisation of the right to education. In the course of working with learners and their school and family environments, school social workers will be assisting pupils to accomplish tasks associated with their learning, growth and development; and the realization of intrinsic, dignity, capability and potential (Massat et al, 2009). Thus, the school social worker's focus should be the constellation of teacher, parent and child. In doing this, the social worker would be helping in the fulfilment of the child's right to education.

Social workers are equipped with professional skills and knowledge to deal with learners that encounter challenges that can interfere with their learning. They can identify children from poor families and those whose parents or guardians cannot afford to pay school fees and essential learning resources that are required in schools. Allen-Meares et al. (2000) also indicated that children who grow up in poverty need extra educational assistance if they are to achieve in the area of mathematics, computers and science. The aforementioned authors go on to say that lack of educational resources in their families and neighbourhoods inhibits the learners from achieving their potential. Girl children and children with disabilities are usually sacrificed when families are unable to pay schools fees and they drop out of school. Social workers can therefore play an advocacy role on behalf of these children by impressing upon their parents or guardians that they also have a right to education. They can then refer them to the Department of Social Development or Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that can assist them to pay fees. The Department of Social Development runs a programme called Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) that pays school and examination fees for children coming from families with poor backgrounds. In addition, NGOs help in paying school fees for Orphan and Vulnerable Children (OVC), particularly for the girl child. School social workers can easily network with these organisations and improve access to education for children who cannot afford school fees. Similarly, children with health problems or disabilities can also be referred to this Department which has the mandate of dealing with people's problems.

A huge number of school children in Zimbabwe are adolescents. This developmental stage confronts them with multiple issues of identity and sexuality that can be very difficult to resolve without professional assistance. Social workers, because of their training are in a position to deal with these issues effectively. As pointed out previously, HIV and AIDS are still serious problems in Zimbabwe and

they are claiming lives mainly due to ignorance. Some school children are also becoming pregnant in their teens thereby exposing themselves to sexually transmitted diseases including HIV and AIDS. Hence social workers can play an educative role by giving information about these diseases to them. They can also provide information on reproductive health to them through programmes for prevention of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Dupper (2003) puts forward that it has been shown that programmes that focus on sexuality (including HIV education programmes, school based clinics and condom availability programmes) do not increase any measure of sexual activity.

With regard to children who are sexually abused, intervention activities may include referral to appropriate individual and/or family counselling services, securing emergency shelter if necessary, referral to medical and legal services. Social workers can also provide emotional and moral support through counselling. They can also quickly inform the Zimbabwe Republic Police about the abuse so that the culprits are arrested. Social workers can contact the Department of Social Development which is tasked with investigating child abuse cases under the Children's Act (Chapter 5:06). In addition, prevention programmes such as Who Do You Tell, done in the United States of America, can be adopted (Dupper, 2003). The programme uses discussion, pictures, short videos, and developmentally appropriate role plays to provide children from kindergarten to seventh grade with information and permission to say no to unwanted touch.

Concerning school children who play truant in schools, the social workers can visit the children's homes and assess the conditions which prevent them from attending school, such as a violent household or a poverty-stricken household. Identification and intervention programmes that provide counselling for parents and the pupil at risk of developing chronic truancy are essential for increasing attendance. The social workers can also consult the teachers to find if there are any particular reasons why a particular child is not attending school and attempt to find a solution. Additionally, they can liaise with the teachers to minimize verbal reprimands and other forms of punishment which may contribute to disinterest in attending school. Social workers can also help children of all socio-economic levels who feel alienated from school and community, who are uncertain of their identity in the realization of their aspirations. In such instances, social workers can seek new ways of helping learners to communicate their points of view to school personnel.

In dealing with depression cases due to pressure of academic excellence or other social issues, the social workers can offer counselling services. They can also pay home visits to parents to help them develop realistic perceptions of their children's abilities. Too much pressure on the child will definitely affect his or her performance. At school the social workers can work hand in hand with teachers in eliciting information about a particular child who might be having learning problems. For example, the child might be a victim of sexual abuse and might become withdrawn in class.

Finally, social workers have to impress upon the school children the importance of discipline if they are to achieve their academic and other goals. Information on the dangers of alcohol and drug abuse can also be passed on the children since this can lead to discipline breakdown, especially in boarding schools. Social workers can also interpret school policy and the nature of school authority to school children. This might lessen the problem of bullying if the learners know the consequences of their actions.

## 5. Conclusion

The majority of schools in Zimbabwe need school social workers. The reason being that learners encounter a plethora of challenges that interfere with reaching their full potential scholastically. School social worker have the capacity and skills and knowledge to adequately help learners experiencing problems such as poverty, bullying, truancy, sexual harassment, abuse, among others to succeed in school. Thus, the Government of Zimbabwe should employ social workers in schools as they are change agents that necessitate a link between school, home and community in helping students to succeed academically. This can only be achieved if social workers in Zimbabwe advocate for social work services to be incorporated in schools.

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