Are Social Workers Needed in Botswana Schools? Some Food for Thought

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Abstract

Based on the premise that children in the 21st century face numerous problems that affect their educational, social, psychological, and physical well-being, this article argues that social workers are needed in Botswana schools to help students deal with the psychosocial problems that hinder effective learning. Such problems include truancy and school drop-outs, divorce, HIV/AIDS, poverty, child abuse, substance abuse, low-self-esteem, teenage pregnancy, sexual harassment and lack of support services. Children cope differently with psychosocial challenges. Some are resilient and can thrive in the face of adversity; others cannot. The latter can benefit greatly from planned interventions by social workers. This article aims to spark debate and further research among stakeholders involved in issues of social work and education.

Introduction

The processes of rapid, and accelerating, social change which Botswana has experienced since independence have resulted in numerous social problems that affect all members of society. However, as the most vulnerable members of society, children are at greatest risk. They face numerous psychosocial challenges that, among other things, greatly affect their schooling and hinder the state's pursuit of excellence in education. There is a growing awareness worldwide that to achieve desired educational outcomes, children's social problems must be addressed. This view is also in line with the educational goals of Vision 2016. According to Vision 2016 the education system must be adapted to the changing needs of the country, and the world, and empower citizens to live full, productive lives (Presidential Task Group, 1997). While parents and teachers can help children cope with psychosocial problems to a certain extent, trained social workers have the potential to influence and effect changes that maximise students' learning and fulfil this long-term vision.

There is no doubt that schools in Botswana have hardworking and committed teachers. However schools do not exist in a vacuum. Certain conditions (both within the school and in the larger environment) affect the success and well-being of students. For example, how does a teacher engage a child who comes to school hungry or battered? How does he assist a student battling to cope with pressures from peers to engage in drug or alcohol abuse? How does she engage a student who is disturbed by the death of a friend or family member, or whose parents are going through a difficult divorce, or one who lives in a violent family environment?

In the rest of this article we first provide some necessary background information about social work, then give a brief overview of social work in schools, before setting out our rationale for the employment of social workers in Botswana schools. Finally we focus on the challenges of implementing such a policy.

Social Work: A Global Overview

We live in a globalised world; we cannot ignore global trends. To help readers put the arguments raised in this article into a global context, this section provides a concise overview of social work in general and school social work in particular at a global level. We are mindful, however, that although the world is now a 'global village', each country remains unique and has unique problems that need to be handled differently. Therefore, while there is a lot that countries can learn from each other, there is also a lot that countries must do on their own to address their own problems.

Social work basically seeks to enhance the social functioning of individuals, groups and communities. It is a "profession that helps people to solve personal, group and community relationships through social work practice, including casework, group work, community organisation, and research" (Skidmore *et al*, 1991: 8). As such social workers aim among other things to reduce problems in human relationships, enrich living through improved human interaction and help individuals solve their personal and social problems. Some of the distinguishing characteristics of social work are its focus on the wholeness and totality of the individual (stressing the total person in the total environment), its emphasis on the family's role in moulding behaviour and the value of community resources in helping people to solve problems, and its goal of helping clients help themselves.

School social work is a specialisation within the social work profession that aims to help children develop their social, emotional and intellectual abilities as fully as possible within the context of the school system. It aims to confront the complex issues facing children and help them acquire the knowledge and skills to deal with their problems, succeed in their school careers and become responsible citizens in the future. School social workers are concerned with a wide range of social problems that children face as they interact with their environment. Thus school social workers do not work only with children and youth. They also have to be able to engage parents, teachers and school administrators, and use a variety of professional skills and techniques to intervene effectively in a variety of situations.

Originally school social work was intended mainly to benefit children from poor and disadvantaged families. However this focus was later expanded across the whole social spectrum. As Costin argues (1981), after the founding of school social work in the United States, further specialisation became inevitable because of the complexity of society's institutions in which social work is practised, the diversity of specific demands placed on clients and the varying character of the transactions that clients engage in within a given institutional environment. With the increasing complexity of social problems throughout the world in the 21st century, the role of social workers in schools has inevitably broadened to encompass a spectrum of issues affecting families from all social backgrounds – child abuse and neglect, substance abuse, family violence, HIV and AIDS, teenage pregnancy, lack of parental support, suicide, sexual orientation, school truancy and dropout, ethnic and cultural diversity, disability, poverty and unemployment (Dupper, 1993; Mintzies, 1993; Bosch, 1998; Huxtable, 1998; Franklin, 2000; Gilbert, 2001; Lee, 2001). Consequently new interventions are constantly being developed to guide professional practice (Gallant, 1993; Hare, 1994).

The Case for Social Workers in Botswana Schools

Having established that children face numerous psychosocial problems that affect their well-being, it is only reasonable that social workers should be attached to schools. The need for social workers to be placed in Botswana schools is not a new argument. A number of researchers (Ncube, 1997; Callistus, 1999; Ratsatsi, 2000) as well as participants in numerous workshops that the authors attended between 1998 and 2003, have highlighted this need. This paper argues that the employment of social workers in schools is long overdue in Botswana for several reasons.

First of all school is often the place where behavioural and emotional problems that require social work intervention begin to be exhibited (Gilbert, 2001). Moreover research has shown that when children with psychosocial problems are acting out their most disturbing emotions, their behaviour confuses and distracts parents and teachers who are often "so preoccupied with the surface behaviours that they are unable to address the underlying emotional issues . . ." (Draimin *et al*, 1999: 44).

Second the education system has given a great deal of attention to raising achievement but very little attention to the personal and social obstacles to students' success. Attention to these obstacles is crucial because school failure has serious implications for successful functioning in adult family and work roles, is associated with higher mortality and suicide rates and is also a risk factor for alcohol and other substance abuse. Unlike teachers social workers are trained to deal with problems that involve the complex interaction of personal, social, emotional, family and community factors.

Third a large number of students are adolescents. This developmental stage confronts them with multiple issues of identity and sexuality that can be very difficult to resolve without professional help. The training that social workers receive equips them with an understanding of the peer and other pressures that influence teenagers to engage in risky behaviour such as substance abuse and early sex. Substance abuse invariably affects students' performance adversely, sometimes leads to school failure and can even result in serious illness or death. An incident that occurred in Botswana in September 2003, when nine secondary school students died from drinking ethanol, attests to the lethal effects of substance abuse. Through approaches such as educational programs, psychosocial support groups and individual counselling, social workers are capable of assisting adolescents to handle such pressures, so that they are not pushed into activities that place their school careers or their lives in danger.

Fourth the presence of social workers in schools could go a long way to making schools centres of service provision to families. Although most educators agree that the family's role is critical to student success, schools are generally not equipped to involve parents effectively or to intervene in the problems of troubled families. Working with parents is an essential part of the role of school social work. As Bowen (1999) observes, school social workers are well placed to support home educational responsibilities of parents because of their training in interpersonal skills, family dynamics as well as ecological perspectives and cultural diversity. They can help parents understand how to help their children overcome behavioral and emotional problems that hinder effective learning. They can also make referrals for family-based counselling and community services. The knowledge and skills base that social workers have enables them to work hand-in-hand with

structures outside the school in order to provide more effective intervention strategies for students. In other words social workers use assessment and treatment perspectives that involve the larger system. Children come from families, and in most cases it is necessary to involve families when working with children. Increasing parents' contact with schools is essential, particularly as government schools often complain of the difficulties of getting parents involved. School social workers are in a unique position to open doors, engage with families and promote a more family-centred philosophy within the school system.

Finally in Botswana students' psychosocial problems are currently handled by guidance and counselling teachers. However the psychosocial issues that students face are often too complex to be addressed adequately through counselling alone. Moreover the ability of guidance and counselling teachers to provide counselling to students is hampered by a number of factors. The following sections deal with each of these factors in turn.

High Teaching Loads and Time Constraints

High teaching loads do not allow teachers to devote enough time to counselling. The current policy is that all guidance and counselling teachers should also teach the subject they have been trained in as their major subject. Students are not examined in guidance and counselling, so teachers are expected to treat guidance and counselling as their minor subject (Ratsatsi, 2000). The resulting time constraints hinder effective counselling, particularly since students are often free to seek the assistance of guidance and counselling teachers only during break or study times. High teaching loads and time constraints also compel guidance and counselling teachers to provide services largely within the school boundaries. This makes it very difficult for them to have a holistic picture of students' problems, particularly those that originate in the home or community environment.

Negative Attitudes towards Guidance and Counselling

Some stakeholders in the education system have negative attitudes towards guidance and counselling for one or more of the following reasons: lack of support by school heads, lack of interest by teachers offering guidance and counselling (who feel that guidance and counselling is a waste of time since it is not examinable) and fear on the part of some teachers that guidance and counselling weakens school discipline, since traditional approaches to discipline are very different from those which are supposed to be used in guidance and counselling (Motswagole, 1999).

Inadequate Training

Many guidance and counselling teachers feel unqualified due to lack of adequate training (Motswagole, 1999; Bennel *et al*, 2001). As a result they tend to focus more on career guidance. A recent evaluation of the guidance and counselling programme in one boarding school in Botswana showed that 75 percent of guidance and counselling teachers only provide educational and vocational guidance services (Ratsatsi, 2000). Similarly Busang (1999) found that some guidance and counselling teachers are not comfortable either practicing counselling or teaching guidance and counselling classes. Moreover some studies have shown that guidance and counselling

programmes are directed more at ensuring compliance with school regulations. Due to lack of expertise very little is taught on sexuality or behaviour change (UNDP, 2000). Inadequate training can lead to reliance on approaches such as control, power and punishment that are not conducive to effective counselling, and that make students fear confiding in guidance and counselling teachers. This is clearly shown in the words of one student who participated in a study conducted by Monowe (2002) on the challenges facing guidance and counselling programmes in schools:

> Personally I am afraid of guidance teachers. Sometimes these people are very harsh on us, especially when we are late in the morning. They beat us without listening to our reasons, and this really provokes many questions . . . as to whether they really care about us, or can give us a supporting shoulder when we share our problems with them and the bad experiences that we go through (ibid, p20).

This is consistent with Galloway's argument (1990) that students' ability to share personal issues with teachers depends largely on the "moral climate" created. In other words, if students realise that teachers are always harsh on them, it is unlikely they will seek assistance (Monowe, 2002: 29). Social workers on the other hand are trained to listen to children, to view them as active agents in their lives and to advocate and protect children's rights. This approach is especially important considering the increasing number of reports of adults who abuse children or violate children's rights on a daily basis. Social workers are equipped not only with counselling skills, but also with skills to address life skills problems such as poor interpersonal communication, teenage pregnancy, peer pressure, bullying and violence, truancy and delinquency, orphanhood and HIV/AIDS. Provision of life skills is very critical for behaviour change, but this is currently lacking in most primary and secondary schools (Bennel *et al*, 2001).

Confidentiality Issues
Students' perception that teachers treat them harshly is not the only reason they are reluctant to seek counselling. They also fear that teachers will not respect confidentiality (Monowe, 2002) and feel intimidated about disclosing their personal problems to people who teach them. Several social work students who were doing fieldwork in secondary schools in various parts of the country from 2001 to 2003 have confirmed this. One social work student told us that after he introduced himself and the services he offered at the school assembly students flocked to his office to reveal their social and personal problems to him. This suggested that students had been keeping their problems to themselves up to then. Numerous researchers (for example, Ncube, 1997; Callistus, 1999; Ratsatsi, 2000) have found that many students prefer to discuss their problems with social workers rather than teacher counsellors. All these researchers conclude that students' diverse social problems are often left unresolved because there are no social workers in schools. They strongly urge the Ministry of Education to hire school social workers to help students with social problems that inhibit their educational performance.

Lack of Resources and Facilities
The final factor that hinders guidance and counselling teachers' ability to provide effective coun-

selling services is lack of resources and facilities, such as office space. Indeed not all schools in the country even have guidance and counselling teachers.

Challenges and the Way Forward

This paper has argued that social workers have a vital role to play in Botswana schools. However this role depends on effective collaboration between teachers and social workers in order to achieve favourable educational outcomes within our school system. We foresee a number a number of challenges that may act as barriers to effective interprofessional teamwork.

Differing Bureaucratic Structures and Policy Procedures

The first barrier to the introduction of an effective school social work programme involves differing bureaucratic structures and policy procedures. Government machineries operate through a set of rigid rules, regulations and policy guidelines. For example the mandate to provide education currently falls under the Ministry of Education, whereas social welfare services are the mandate of the Ministry of Local Government. The newly revised National Policy on Education (1994) says nothing about the provision of psychosocial support for school children. This is because government policy stipulates that social workers in the Ministry of Local Government will take care of this responsibility within their respective agencies outside the school system (Ministry of Education, 1996: 45). Given this scenario, we can expect that educational reform in this area will be a difficult process requiring a complete overhaul of the status quo. Moreover, in line with normal practice, government will have to commit money to conduct lengthy consultations to establish the need and justification for this programme before any implementation plan can be developed.

Professional and Agency Rivalries

The second challenge is linked to the first one but relates specifically to the issue of professional and agency rivalries. Professionals in Botswana have not yet reached a level where they are confident about their own competencies. This leads to a lack of respect for the expertise of other professions and a lack of appreciation for the importance of teamwork. Instead unnecessary competition exists and concern is always for who gets the credit. Such professional power struggles have contributed significantly to the failure of the multisectoral approach to HIV/AIDS in most districts (Hope and Gaborone, 2001; Molebatsi and Mogobe, 2001; Molebatsi, and Mguni, 2001). We cannot expect that collaboration between social workers and teachers will be immune from these conflicts.

Lack of National Standards

A third challenge is that we still lack our own national standards in Botswana to guide social work education and practice. It is hoped that the National Association of Social Workers, which was registered in 2002, will work hard to address this issue. The absence of national standards partly contributes to the misunderstanding and marginalisation of the role of social workers. As a result social workers are identified only with destitution, emergency relief, orphan care and so on. Thus advocating the introduction of school social workers will require a lot of effort to convince stake-

holders and politicians that the core business of social work includes empowering and enhancing the well-being of all individuals, including school children.

Community Mistrust

Related to the issue of marginalization is the problem of mistrust that some community members have of social workers. There is a growing misconception that social workers, by promoting children's rights, encourage them to be disobedient to their parents and teachers. Agencies such as Child Line have been under constant attack for allegedly promoting 'lawlessness' among children. This mistrust will certainly act as another barrier to the introduction social workers into schools. In the same vein parents who are abusive will feel threatened by the idea, fearing that they will be discovered and called to account.

Differing Professional Languages, Values and Approaches

Differing professional languages, values and approaches will also pose a big challenge to the introduction of a school social work programme. Although teachers and social workers have one thing in common – to promote the social growth of their clients – they differ significantly in problem-solving techniques. For example, to a teacher, every crime committed by a student carries a penalty. This could be in the form of detention, manual labour, denial of co-curricular activities or corporal punishment. Social workers on the other hand use a much more holistic approach in addressing deviant behaviour. Usually this involves lengthy discussions with the student to establish the root cause of the problem, consultations with teachers and parents and assessment of the home and school environments. Conflicts between teachers and social workers over how to handle student behavioural issues in the school system will be inevitable. Indeed there have been cases where social work students doing internships in schools have experienced serious conflicts with teachers when attempting to address behaviour problems.

Cooperation between social workers and teachers will require institutionalised support reinforced through joint professional supervision and training. For this to happen educational institutions must promote opportunities for inter-professional training and development. Currently the Department of Social Work and the Faculty of Education do not offer joint programmes to prepare graduates for this role. Only at the Master's level is there inter-departmental collaboration. In addition the Master in Social Work program has a special course on social work in educational settings, which is an elective course for students in the Faculty of Education. Such joint training and closer professional cooperation is critical and can help generate more satisfying results for effective collaborative efforts at the agency level (Allen-Meares, 1994; Fowler *et al*, 2000).

Finally inter-professional teamwork in general is a new phenomenon in public schools. Whereas in the private schools teachers have become used to working jointly with nurses and clinical psychologists, this practice has not yet been established in public schools. Change takes time, commitment and willingness to take risks. The schools operate on a tight schedule with the aim of producing academic results. Consequently headmasters may not be willing to invest time overseeing and working with additional professionals. Currently the Ministry of Education is

wrestling with how best to utilise educational psychologists who are undergoing training. The role of these professionals is not yet clearly defined, and we foresee the Ministry arguing that this cadre can adequately replace the role of social workers in schools.

Despite all these challenges opportunities are already in place to facilitate the introduction of school social workers. For example in 2002 the Department of Social Work at the University of Botswana placed 40 percent of its students in junior and secondary schools throughout the country for an 8-12 week fieldwork experience. The students were placed under the supervision of guidance teachers, and responses from schools have been very positive. Schools in Tlokweng for example have recommended that the department automatically send students without waiting for permission from schools. This is indeed a good sign that schools appreciate the work that social work students can do. At the policy level there is also some acknowledgement that school social work is a necessary complement to the guidance and counselling programme. Policy makers believe that school social work can make a difference in the lives of students and teachers. However they feel that it may only be possible in the short term to place social workers per clusters of schools (Makuku, 2002).

Having examined the challenges that may block the effective utilisation of social workers in the school system, we close by observing that the only way forward is to acknowledge these challenges and begin to develop strategies to overcome them, beginning with fostering good working relationships between social workers and teachers. This can be achieved through ongoing dialogue, consultations and debates. It is hoped that this paper will stimulate such activities, as well as encouraging further research into the issues we have explored.

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