

## School Social Work in Malaysia: Challenges and Prospects

Zulkarnain A. Hatta  
Universiti Sains Malaysia  
Penang, Malaysia

### Abstract

This paper calls for the introduction of school social work in Malaysia. Many industrialized countries have introduced school social work, partly because teachers are not able to tackle students' personal and social problems. Teachers are burdened with teaching tasks and are not trained to handle social problems. The introduction of school social work in these developed countries was an admission that there was only so much teachers could do in addressing the problems of school children. Even with school counselors, the problems have not decreased. Many parents in Malaysia perceive schools to be incapable of providing sufficient education to excel in the major exams. The existence of many private tuition institutions and private teachers is a testimony to that perception. If society has already deemed these teachers to be incapable of providing quality education, to expect them to look after students' social problems is presumptuous on society's part. The need for school personnel who understand the social ills of the community is urgently needed, and it is the contention of this paper that school social workers are best equipped for that responsibility.

*Keywords:* Malaysia, school social work, social issues

## Towards Establishing School Social Work in Malaysia

Malaysia's education system is heavily influenced by the British system because of colonization that began around 1824. Today, the education system in Malaysia has changed and differs from the original British education system. Malaysia is a multiracial country, thus different arrangements have been made in order to cater for the needs of certain groups of students. Because of this, different types of primary and secondary schools have been set up throughout the nation. Most schools in Malaysia are funded by the government; some are fully funded, while others are partially funded. While formal education starts at the age of seven, most parents have been sending their children to kindergarten at a much earlier age. Children will spend 6 years at primary or elementary school before proceeding to secondary level. Most will spend another 5 years at the secondary level before they further their studies at tertiary level or opt for employment in the real world. Some students enter the sixth form before they attempt entrance to universities and colleges. Thus, Malaysian children spend an average of 11–12 years of primary and secondary education.

Data from the Malaysian Ministry of Education (2008) show that in 2008, there were 7644 primary schools, 3,153,027 primary school students, 210,912 primary school teachers, 2181 secondary schools, 2,311,724 secondary school students and 159,016 secondary school teachers. In those formative years, more than 5,000,000 Malaysian school children spend more than one-third of the day in school. Studies have shown that the school environment definitely plays an important role in the socialization of these children (Moore-Polanco & Raghavan, 2006). While the majority of children have turned out to be productive citizens and have come out of the school system unscathed, many others have had negative

experiences that have affected their future. Invariably, all school systems in the world have had their fair share of bullies, dropouts, and other antisocial behaviors. Malaysia's schools are not exempt from this.

### The Problem

In 2005, the nation was shocked by the case of Muhammad Afiq Qusyairi Baharuddin, a 13-year-old student who was being severely beaten by fellow students in Kuala Lipis. A year before that, another student by the name of Muhammad Farid Ibrahim was beaten to death by older students at a Negeri Sembilan school. These two violent incidents should be enough to alert the school system that measures have to be taken to mitigate the problem. Several questions have been raised in relation to the problems of bullying and other disciplinary issues in the Malaysian school system:

- Why is there a deviance in attitude and thoughts occurring among these students?
- Where is the weakness in our school system?
- Is there a mechanism that can channel the negative energy of bullies to a more positive outlet?
- Are these cases being deemed as isolated cases?
- Are plans to overcome them still at the drawing board?
- What should be the priority of the schools: prevention or punishment?

In addressing the last question, students who are caught have been meted out punishment by the school, the justice system and by their parents. However, those punishments do not seem to deter others from antisocial behavior. Assuming that most parents do play their role in raising their children to be good, it appears that that their negative behaviors are being enhanced in the school environment (Moore-Polanco & Raghavan, 2008;

Yaakub, Naggapan, & Jusoh, n.d.). In many cases that involved gangsterdom, vandalism and physical abuse, the sources of provocation are often found in schools (Boon, Yahaya, Hashim, & Ujang, 2008; Farley, Smith, & Boyle, 2000). Based on the figures provided by the Malaysian Ministry of Education (2008) of students and teachers in Malaysia, the teacher–student ratio is approximately 1:14. Apparently, the low teacher–student ratio is not a variable that contributes to the reduction of students’ social problems in school.

Studies conducted by both sociologists and educators have consistently shown that most of these problematic children come from problematic households (Basri, 2009; Feldman & Weinberger, 1994). Society in its many classifications reacts differently to these youth. Fellow students shy away from them; teachers segregate them from the “mainstream” student body and they are often placed in a class of “underperformers”, which only encourages the transference of more negative exchanges. The dejection that they perceive limits their scope of friends who share similarities with them: academically weak and have family and social problems. Nonetheless, not all gravitate to gangs; some isolate themselves (individualists), having lost any sense of role models both from their parents and/or teachers. Many do not have outlets to express their feelings and many have no source of love.

Malaysian schools are also faced with sexual promiscuity, drug abuse, absenteeism and dropouts. While preliminary indications are that the rate is not alarming, the implications are that the majority of students involved in such activities do not function well academically or socially, and therefore, become dysfunctional members of society (Basri, 2009; Boon et al., 2008). While there have been several studies conducted on school social problems in Malaysia, none have been conducted at the national level. Thus, there are no

national data that show the real status of the social implications presented by students in Malaysian schools. To compound matters, Malaysian education authorities are reluctant in revealing the statistics of these issues, and school officers are hesitant about speaking about the problems facing their schools.

Based on secondary data and the ever-increasing social problems in Malaysian public schools, this paper highlights the need of introducing another helping mechanism in addressing the issue: bringing school social work to the Malaysian education system. The rest of this paper gives a brief history and concept of school social work, its difference with school counselors, models of school social work, and finally, a discussion about the immediate need of introducing this mechanism to Malaysian public schools.

#### Background of School Social Work

In most industrialized countries, school social work is part of the school system. However, in Malaysia, school social work is a new concept. There is no official record that has registered a school social worker in any Malaysian schools. A brief introduction to some of the industrialized countries' school social work development is helpful to understand its importance, and more importantly, an insight into the similarities that Malaysia is now facing with these countries viz-a-viz social problems and modernization.

The USA, the first country to establish school social work, has an extensive history dating back to 1906–1907. In New York, staff who worked at a settlement house realized the need to know children's teachers in order to understand and communicate, so they started visiting schools and families. In Boston, the Women's Education Association placed visiting teachers in the schools to foster harmony between school and home in order to facilitate children's education (Flynn & McDonald, 1991). At its inception,

school social workers were known, among other things, as advocates for equity and fairness, as well as home visitors. The expansion of school social work services was encouraged by a number of factors. By 1900, over two-thirds of the US states had compulsory attendance laws, and by 1918, each state had passed a compulsory attendance law, making school attendance obligatory, and not simply a privilege. A 1917, a study of Truancy in Chicago supported “findings that the need for school attendance officers who understood the social ills of the community” and school social workers were best equipped for that responsibility (Allen-Meares, Washington, & Welsh, 1996, p. 25). During this time, leaders in the field, like Breckinridge, expressed concerns of how school and education would relate to future success and happiness, and expressed the need to connect school and home in order to relate to the needs of children.

Among the Scandinavian and Nordic countries, Norway and Sweden started school social work in the 1940s, followed 10 years later by Denmark and Finland. By the 1950s, school social work positions were made part of the school system. In these countries, school social workers were traditionally known as “school curators”, which means “one who cares” in Latin (Huxtable, 2002). Presently, school social workers in the Scandinavian and Nordic countries work with individuals and are also engaged in group counseling (collaboration with the school counselors); they also serve as consultants for teachers and other school staff. They are in constant cooperation with the social services department and/or therapeutic units and are expected to mediate between students and family/teachers. The positive development of school social work in these European countries can be attributed to their well-known consciousness towards the concept of welfare.

In the Asian region, South Korea began to give serious attention to school social work at the beginning of the 1990s. Social problems began to increase significantly with the advancement of material prosperity, modernization and urbanization in South Korea at the turn of 1970s. During those years, despite the increased number of social workers, school social work was not considered to be an important service until recently. In its early phase, as a practice, school social work services were provided for the community's low-income elementary school students and juvenile delinquents. One of the reasons why school social work took time to attract the attention of policy makers was the introduction of school counselors to schools. The School Counselor System of Korea Act required one licensed school counselor to be hired for a set number of classes. Society thought the introduction of counselors in the schools would be the solution to students' social and academic problems. People expected counselors to solve students' problems, but those expectations were not met. In the 1990s, Korea began to question the effectiveness of the school counseling system as emerging student problems worsened. Consequently, the Korean Ministry of Education and the Seoul Education District decided to introduce school social work services (Huxtable, 2002). They began with pilot projects on seven schools. These school social workers were required to have a Masters degree in social work, and their responsibilities, among others, included providing counseling, home visits and acting as a liaison between teachers and parents. However, Korean school social work is unique in that most of the school social work services are provided in private community welfare centers and not in individual schools. When school social work is implemented in the school system, community welfare centers become "brokers" between teachers and social workers in order to maintain each other's rights and roles.

Korea regards school teachers in high esteem, so it is not easy for students or families to discuss problems with them. Thus, school social workers act as “brokers.”

In Hong Kong, school social work has been developed for more than 30 years, and at the turn of the 21st century, it embarked on the policy of one social worker for each secondary school. While this empowerment is a positive step in the development of school social work services, it is acknowledged by Hong Kong authorities as still underdeveloped. Nonetheless, school social work in Hong Kong is seen as one of the most developed in Asia. Schools throughout Hong Kong are being served by the Chinese YMCA of the Hong Kong school social work department.

In Japan’s case, prior to the middle of the 20th century, schools existed only for the education of children (Huxtable, 2002). However, as a consequence of urbanization, there was decline in community lifestyle and an academic-career based orientation of the school system, resulting in the alarming increase of many antisocial behaviors, such as truancy and bullying. The introduction of school social work in these developed countries was an admission that there was only so much teachers could do to combat these problems; their time was very much consumed with teaching-related duties. Japan is also known for its hierarchal social structure. It is not the custom for teachers to “come down” to the level of students in trying to understand their problems. Caught in a situation where problems needed to be mitigated, school social workers were seen as part of the solution in Japan (Yamashita, 2003). Instead of working with these students from a “superior” position, school social workers relate to the students’ point of view and try to be understanding. The roles of Japan’s school social workers are well defined by the School Social Work Association of Japan as follows:



- Listen to children carefully
- Do activities together (sport, games, music)
- Support study, if needed
- Express students' feelings to parents
- Mediate in schools
- Be a resource person.

It is evident from these examples of some industrialized countries that school social work was introduced in response to society's every increasing social problems among youth. The presence of school counselors, when they are required, is not sufficient in coping with students' social and academic problems. The old approach of seeing schools as only for providing education to children is disregarded in many countries. It is also worthwhile mentioning that in all of these countries, all school social workers are required to have at least a university degree in social work. This is to emphasize the need to have a specialized individual taking on responsibilities, and should not be given to anyone with any other degree. Unlike popular belief, the role of a school social worker and school counselor is not similar; therefore, duplication of duties will not be an issue.

#### *Difference between a school social worker and school counselor*

The generic job specifications of a professional school counselor entails providing developmental school counseling curriculum lessons on school work, careers, college readiness and personal and social competencies; assisting in and academic/career/college readiness planning to all students; and individual and group counseling for students and their families to meet the developmental needs of young children and adolescents (Stone & Dahir,

2006).

School social workers work look at the student as comprehensively as possible. Their work involves engaging teachers, family and community to bring about the desired change in the problematic student. Because their overwhelming workload, teachers do not have the time to be involved in these interactions with families and communities. From the school social work perspective, problems occur due to multiple causes. Thus, any positive change of behavior on the part of the student requires the involvement of other elements in society, primarily the family, school and community (Sarah & Arthur, 2003). All four are considered targets of change. Since there are many people and systems involved, the approach of a school social worker does not solely focus on the student's academic problem (academic underperformance is seen as a symptom), but explores the underlying causes which require the need to mediate between people and systems.

Therefore, social workers often serve as the link between students' families and the school, working with parents, guardians, teachers and other school officials (including school counselors) to ensure that students reach their personal and academic potential. In addition, they address problems, such as misbehavior, truancy and teenage pregnancy and advise teachers on how to cope with difficult students. In some countries, school social workers provide workshops to entire classes (Sarah & Arthur, 2003).

#### *Basic models of school social work*

School social work is structured around a range of ever-expanding practice models.

These include:

- The traditional clinical mode
- The school change model, where the major focus is the dysfunctional conditions of

the school

- The community school model, where school social workers are encouraged to employ community organization methods
- The social interaction model, which de-emphasizes a specific methodology and requires the worker to intervene with systems interacting with the target system.

Many school social workers in countries that have school workers use an approach that draws on components from all of these, but the traditional model, which focuses on working with students with social and emotional difficulties and their parents, continues to predominate. In the clinical model, school social workers work primarily through casework methods supplemented by group methods with students and family members. In today's practice, a greater emphasis is placed on evidence-based and promising methods (Raines, 2008).

Costin (1969) articulated the most comprehensive model. It focuses on the school, community and student and the interactions among the three. They serve as mediator, negotiator and consultant. The model advocates for school personnel to listen to students' grievances. They are required to set up informal groups for students, teachers and other school personnel. They too have to study and evaluate characteristics of the students, school and community conditions that affect the educational opportunity for target groups (students with chemical dependency, disabilities etc.).

#### The Malaysian Situation

There are studies conducted by Malaysian scholars that show the gravity of antisocial behaviors among students (Basri, 2009; Boon et al., 2008; Yahaya & Ahmad, 2006). In a study conducted by Yahaya and Ahmad (2006) on the perception of bullying in Malaysian

schools, there was a difference between students' and teachers' perception. Students felt that the level of bullying was moderate, while teachers felt that it was low. Regardless of the differences, both shared the view that the problem had to be addressed. The teachers felt the most effective way to tackle the problem was through the school's disciplinary board and rules/regulation. The study also showed the need for school counselors to be increased. The formation of the Jawatankuasa Petugas Khas (Special Officer Committee) was based on studies regarding gangs and bullying by Yaakub, Naggapan, & Jusoh, (2004) from the Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris. This is another indication and admission by the Malaysian Ministry of Education (2008) that the problems schools are facing are serious and need solutions.

The dropout rate is another symptom of the unhealthy state of affairs in the Malaysian education system. As in other Asian countries, such as Singapore and China, standardized tests are a common feature, contributing to the high numbers of dropouts. The Malaysian Chinese Association estimated that approximately 25% of Chinese students quit study before the age of 18. The data for dropouts in Malaysia are not available for this paper.

Parents who obsess over their children achieving high grades in school makes their children feel stressed. Not all are capable to withstand the pressure. The objective in academic excellence, while it is lauded, has to be tempered with a broader perspective. This concern has resulted in conflicting views. In 2008, the Regent of Perak, Raja Dr Nazrin, said that getting a string of As is meaningless if students fail to understand, appreciate and practice good values (New Straits Times, 2007). He went on to say that excellent results are a mere external appearance; there would be uneven development of human capital if students failed to inculcate good morals and values.

*Teachers and parents*

In the discussion of students' disciplinary and social problems, there is a need to look at the differences between the past and present perceived roles of teachers. Not too long ago, Malaysian society highly regarded teachers and educators in general. Educating children was the exclusive right of teachers, unlike today, where everybody wants to have a say in it. Teachers then were seen as special because they were deemed to be highly educated. Accordingly, almost anything emanating from them was not questioned by society at large, and that included punishments meted out to students. The respect given to them by society did wonders to the self-esteem of teachers, which in turn increased their motivation.

As with societies, such as Hong Kong, Japan and Korea, the Malaysian community lifestyle is beginning to fade, especially in urban areas. In the past, in most families, the mother would usually be at home taking care of domestic matters. Presently, more Malaysian women have better education, and because of economic demands, many of them have the same opportunities as their husbands to gain employment. As a result, children are left to the housemaids, daycare centers and/or become latch-key kids.

As a consequence of having an informed and educated society, present day teachers face more challenges than their predecessors. Unlike the past, many parents perceive that schools do not and are incapable of giving sufficient education to excel in major exams. The existence of many private tuition institutions and private teachers is a testimony to that perception.

The existence of tuition centers is a reflection of parents' perception of the insufficient quality of education given by teachers in schools. At the same time, many teachers feel that they are being burdened with other responsibilities apart from teaching. Basri (2009)

noted that teachers should be eased of their burden so that they can have quality time with students. Since teachers cannot meet the high expectations of parents to be both educators and “parents” to the students while in school, something has to give.

Modernization has many paradoxes; while it promises better and easier lives for all, it has also reduced the quality of interactions within many families. The advent of modernization has resulted in many parents having less time with the children. Televisions, personal computers, phones and other electrical gadgets have taken a lot of children’s time away from their parents. Many parents are just not capable of handling the emotional and academic problems of their children. It appears that the situation of parent–teacher is at an impasse. Teachers are demanded by parents to be both educators and parents in schools, while parents are not capable of being parents and teachers at home.

Patterson (2007) found that negative destructive attitudes of children and inconducive family environments cannot be changed without outside support. Both teachers and parents today are in need of help in combating the growing social problems of students. Teachers do not have the time or the skills to handle these problems. Adding to their plight, society has already judged them of not providing quality education; therefore, to expect them to look after students’ social problems will be too presumptuous on society’s part. Even with the existence of school counselors, the problem still lingers. Disciplinary actions, while they are needed, will not solve the problem easily.

#### *The school social worker as part of the solution*

It is redundant to say that teachers, counselors and parents alone cannot tackle the issue at hand. It is timely that the country in general and the Malaysian Ministry of Education (2008) start looking at the introduction of school social work. Malaysia presently has

seven universities offering social work as a major. It defies logic that in Malaysia there is still no job specification for social workers. Social work as a profession is relatively still unknown to the public. Many still see it as welfare-related work (charity work and dole out by ministers' wives) or volunteer job. There is a paradox among policy makers: while they are concerned with the social issues in the country and see the need for social work programs, there exists a certain vagueness of understanding of what social work education and practice entails. If social work is truly understood by the authorities, the Social Work Act would have long been tabled and approved in the Malaysian parliament. The job designation of "social worker" would have been assigned in schools, rehabilitation institutions and prisons, just to name a few. There is no official job designation for social workers in the public sector. Instead, those individuals working in the field are given titles, such as counselors and welfare officers. Because of the lack of a clear policy regarding the social work profession, any attempt to introduce school social work faces quite a challenge.

One of the most unfortunate situations in Malaysia nowadays is that most social work jobs are being given to those who do not have formal social work education. The problem occurs in part due to the recruitment process of the Public Service Department and the commission of public service. The main criterion for recruitment is a university grade point average. Priority is given to graduates with a high grade point average. For example, if a student majoring in history has a higher grade point average than a social work major, and both are competing for a social work job, the former will get the job. The implication of this recruitment practice is dire: clients of that history graduate "social worker" will be victimized by the latter's absolute lack of social work education. It actually

renders him/her incompetent and inefficient in trying to serve the client. Despite being given in-house training, it is no substitute for 3–4 years of formal social work education. To remedy the problem, these agencies have spent huge amount of money to train these non-social workers by university academicians. A crash course will be given with the hope that it will replace the missing formal 3–4 years of formal social work education. Another ill effect of this unsound recruitment practice is the increasing unemployment and underemployment of social work graduates.

Another irony of the situation in Malaysia is that most people who call themselves social workers, both in the public and private sectors, are not formally trained. Medical doctors, counselors, ministers, politicians and activists all lay claim of being social workers, while real social workers still struggle to be recognized. Some are of the opinion that one does not need to be formally trained to be a social worker. If one is to accept this logic, the effort of the Malaysian Association of Social Workers to create competency standards for practitioners, and the Malaysian Council of Social Work Education's efforts to establish an accreditation body, will be to no avail. The term "professional" in Malaysia in the context of social work is still a contentious issue. Thus, the effort to define professional social work must be carried out vigorously to eliminate views that anyone with good intentions is a social worker (Hatta & Pandian, 2007).

Social work practitioners and academics have to be activists in promoting and educating both the public and government officials. They have to work together and find allies who are willing to listen, especially in the government. The task is to make social work officially recognized as a professional profession (similar to architects, counselors, medical doctors and lawyers), and the Social Work Act must be pursued at a rigorous pace.



As can be seen in South Korea and even in Malaysia, once the Counseling Act was passed by the respective legislative body, the situation changed for the better for the profession. The same can be done for the social work profession.

### Conclusion

Malaysia has approximately 9825 schools (combined total of primary and secondary schools). Based on seven universities graduating an average of 350 social work students per year, and assuming that all are employed as school social workers, the country will still be short of providing enough social workers. It took Hong Kong close to 30 years before it embarked on the one social worker to each secondary school policy. Although Malaysia is not ready for one social worker for each school, it can start by assigning several school social workers to school districts. Through this approach, social workers will be able to service several schools until each school in Malaysia is able to employ its own social worker.

Social work graduates from the seven universities are the nation's best option to assist in managing the problems in schools. Authorities can begin with pilot projects on several schools throughout the country in order to assess its feasibility. Conversely, to delay this poses a collective irresponsibility by society in light of the problems faced by Malaysian schools.

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