

The Practice of School Social Workers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

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Abstract: *The practice of school social work in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has existed for several years. Established in 1954, the Administration of Education and Social Activities under the Ministry of Education (MOE), has since this time, undergone numerous transformations that have affected the level and effectiveness of the practice. This study aims to explain the practice of social workers in Saudi Arabia schools and how social workers perform their duties. In achieving this aim, a qualitative approach was adopted where participants were divided into two focus groups. The data collected were analysed manually in six stages, as suggested by Creswell (1998), Yin (1998) and Meriam (2008). Social workers perform their duties using a variety of skills to solve problems and communicate with school personnel, students, and parents. They also apply strategies in dealing with situations inside the school. However, the data collected via the focus groups revealed that social workers were required to take on many extra tasks that were not within the scope of their job description, which affected their performance and overall effectiveness. Accordingly, this study recommends that a deeper understanding of the present level and conditions surrounding the work efficiency of professionals and decision-makers should be considered in light of removing existing obstacles that hinder the social workers from performing their responsibilities.*

Keywords: *School social workers, social work practice, KSA.*

1. INTRODUCTION

School social work and practices adopt a broad perspective on solving student problems by focusing on the surrounding social conditions and student interactions within the school system. This perspective stems from the social work and conditions that centre on

the "individual environment" and surrounding ecosystems (Calis & Calis, 2015). In environments where the diversity and students of different backgrounds prevail, the social workers in these schools become vital. School social services and practices differ amongst different countries. For instance, in Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia, social work does not function at the same pace and development compared to Western countries (Pushkina, 2017).

Social work was initially introduced into the Arab world in the Republic of Egypt before progressing into the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) after the Ministry of Education (MOE) utilised several social workers credited with building the practice and establishment in planning for this field of work. What is evident regarding social work in the KSA is the mix between the Egyptian and United States (US) models.

Indeed, the establishment of social work and conditions contributed positively to Saudi society (Abu Al-Nasr, 2017; Carrillo, 2019) which resulted in attracting social workers to help alleviate many of the social and behavioural problems that schools were afflicted with during this time. Likewise, international students in some schools in larger cities facilitated the presence and development of distinct cultures within these schools. Higher education institutions (HEIs) also worked to equip social workers to work alongside teachers and administrators inside schools. Further, it trained and further qualified the social workers by providing them with the skills required to undertake their work. To be eligible for this work, a social worker needs to attain a bachelor's degree in addition to gaining work experiences and knowledge in theoretical science and practical application. This is because students and their families face a variety of behavioural and social problems, and they need a qualified person to help them deal with these sorts of problems and to also assist schools in achieving their goals.

Social work was introduced into the KSA according to five stages. The beginning or preparatory stage was when the responsibilities of teachers increased driven by the increasing number of students. The second stage, or foundation stage, witnessed the establishment of the Department of Social Education and Social Activities, in which social workers were hired externally from the school environment and volunteer teachers, and was the stage that witnessed remarkable social activity within the school environment. The third stage was the professional stage, which evidenced the use of several Egyptian social workers in Jeddah and Makkah, who were responsible for supervising and planning social activities in highlighting school social workers as a profession. The fourth stage consisted of hiring Saudis social workers which was the first time this was undertaken. Notably, it was seen as a defining moment when social work in schools was assigned to social workers of Saudi nationals. The first group consisted of 79 Saudi social workers, followed five years later, with 416,(189) social workers assigned to female student schools. However, their terms of reference (TOR) varied according to different locations; especially in the major cities. The largest number of social workers was recruited in the city of Riyadh (Abu-Alnaser, 2017; Albrithen & Yalli, 2015). The assigned tasks of the social workers included:

- i. Specific services to assist students either individually or within groups to address and overcome social problems and difficulties;

- ii. Provide students with certain skills and cognitive aspects to prepare them for a better social life;
- iii. Assist students in understanding their abilities, tendencies and development and using them to the maximum possible; and
- iv. Assist in their integration within the community to invest in human resources, inspire them to work and connect them to their local environment to achieve social well-being.

Accordingly, the Saudi social workers did well, despite the lack of support, resources, and programs under development. Moreover, there were some difficulties and challenges in performing their work, which was having limited knowledge about the actual conditions and the environment surrounding their roles and the lack of cooperation within the school system and the surrounding community. However, despite these challenges, they managed to carry out their work (Albrithen, 2014).

The role of school social workers is important given they perform many tasks, including supporting positive behaviour and providing individual and group counselling to students dealing with academic delays, and consulting with teachers, parents, and school administration (Mollah, 2015). However, social workers in Saudi schools suffer from not only having a lack of confidence in carrying out their work, but they also perform some tasks that are outside of their primary roles, suffer from interference in performing their work and fail to have sufficient support from teachers and school administration (Al-ajlan, 2000).

Presently, there are a large number of students who have registered and are undertaking social work courses in Saudi universities which are playing a key role in qualifying and training them to work in various fields, including the schools. The number of Saudi universities offering social work courses has since risen to seven given there were only two universities previously. The Saudi government has also sent many male and female students to study social work in different universities in other parts of the world, with the majority studying in the US and the United Kingdom (UK), to attain their master's degree and PhD in social work. This is to develop their skills and expose the students to modern methods in the practice of social work so that they can return once finishing their training and programs to use these skills in growing and developing the practice of social work in their respective countries (Almaizar & Abdelhamed, 2018).

The fifth stage represents the current stage, which was initiated in 1981 and witnessed the establishment of the General Directorate of Counseling and Guidance for students, which supervises all workers in student counseling, including social workers, preparation of policies and legislation for their work, and supervision of all programs that are implemented. The administration under this establishment of this organization focused on introducing changes during the first few years, including the introduction the term "counseling and guidance" instead of the term "school social worker". Consequently, this change resulted in attracting student counselors and teachers and those of different disciplines, outside of the social sphere into the profession

In gaining a diploma in social work (guidance and counselling), two semesters were required representing 27 credit hours in preparing graduates with the skills in

psychology, sociology, and social work to be qualified to work in student counselling and guidance fields, to raise the level of performance and rehabilitation of students through student counselling and helping to guide students and schools on the education process for students and teachers. While developing their expertise and skills, the program equipped students scientifically and practically in areas that would assist them in performing well and playing an active role in the educational process (Abu Al-Nasr, 2017; Soliman, 2013).

Admission to study in the program required the fulfilment of all unified regulations for postgraduate studies in the KSA universities. Students are only accepted into the program that fulfils the following criteria:

- i. Holding an educational degree in one of the following disciplines: psychology, sociology, social work, or non-educational degree in the disciplines of sociology and social work;
- ii. Good performance in meeting university qualifications;
- iii. Holding a specialisation other than the previous majors. He/she must have at least three years' experience in student counselling and guidance; and
- iv. Passed a personal interview conducted with him/her to make sure he/she fulfils the physical and psychological requirements to learn the basic aspects of the profession.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

In 1981, the MOE in the KSA made some changes related to the position and role of a social worker in schools. One of these changes was renaming the position and job title from a school social worker to a student counsellor. This transition resulted in opening doors and attracting people in filling the position in carrying out counselling and guidance for teachers regardless of their background and field of study. According to Aldakil (2014), counselling and guidance workers are responsible for the activities and behaviour of students within the classroom, which include the student's achievement, problems associated with the curriculum, and students' educational future. In addition, the school social worker is also responsible for the social life of students and the extent of their overlap and impact on their educational life. The workload assigned to social workers will have a direct impact and benefit in servicing students and their families with professional skills which will help to raise the level of academic performance students and to face challenges that could stand in their way for success.

However, school social workers in most schools in the KSA do not operate under specific standards; but instead, they operate as conventional social workers without paying attention to the specific needs of school children. Specific standards for the KSA are therefore absent, as such; there is a need to develop a standard given the idiosyncrasies of the KSA where conventional ways may not provide the desired results in schools. In the KSA culture, ideas, and community pressure on people are real and are a pressing concern to individuals (Al-ajlan, 2000; Carrillo, 2019).

Notwithstanding, the lack of standards for the work of social workers in schools have restricted and curtailed their activities, making them less important from the standpoint

of schools, their staff, and the local community. Moreover, there is a perceived gap between the role expected of social workers and their actual role. Moreover, there are so many roles and tasks that they perform, which fall outside of their responsibility based on the job description and international standards. They suffer from given the many responsibilities and tasks, which may affect performance (Al-Ghamdi, 2010).

Therefore, this study explores the work by social workers in Saudi Arabia schools and the actual roles they perform. The previous literature in this field is somewhat limited, dealing with the work of social workers in Saudi schools. Most studies dealt with this topic from different perspectives by focusing on the potential benefits of social work and not addressing the topic itself. The present study is distinguished from previous studies by focusing on social work in Saudi schools and the roles. Moreover, it is a qualitative study, examining in detail, some of the issues of social work in Saudi schools in understanding the problem. Accordingly, this study attempts to explain the practice of social work in the context schools in the KSA.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

To explain the nature of social work in schools is quite complex since it requires specific preparation of the social worker themselves. In preparing the social worker in meeting the diverse needs and challenges faced in schools (Berzin & O'Connor, 2010), school social work can be described as a system of support services available to the school system to understand students who are experiencing difficulties in utilising resources of the school, in its task of educating students in academic, social, and emotional matters. School social work also provides help within the program and policies of the school that enables students to aspire in achieving their best potential (Al-ajlan, 2000; Shaffer, G. L., & Fisher, 2017).

School social work in KSA has been in existence since 1954 after the Administration of Education and Social Activities by the Ministry of Education was established. Two school social workers (both Egyptians) were assigned at the launch. Social work aimed to create a design or layout, organise programs intended to progress events in schools and to oversee numerous social and social worker activities, by considering that social gatherings are equally important as their academic counterparts. School social workers are responsible for organising parent-teacher meetings, educational activities, athletic clubs, and community services (Abu-Alnasr, 2017).

The role of social workers is to utilise their professional skills and training to help schools to fulfil their primary purpose. As such, school social workers play a pivotal role in meeting the needs of students and the school. Often, the role of school social workers respond to the needs of the educational system and track changes in policies at both the local and national level (Peckover et al., 2013). Defining the various roles of school social workers is therefore important, although the planning around these roles is often a mixture of the skills of social workers, experience and perceptions regarding their work.

Social workers also face the problem of having insufficient knowledge of the school's administration system and supervisory educational areas in carrying out their tasks and roles in the school effectively. This is often reflected in the limited understanding surrounding their role and recognition within the school system. This ambiguity

contributes to delineating the roles of social workers resulting in the dissatisfaction regarding their performance and effectiveness as a profession (Richard & Villarreal Sosa, 2014). As such, social workers are left to orientate students and staff members regarding guidance and counselling objectives, plans and services offered through the program to ensure everyone is aware of their role.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of school social workers in performing their work depends on the cooperation of staff working in the school environment. For example, teachers spend much of their time with students in the classroom each day. Therefore, teachers and social workers must cooperate to achieve the mutual goals of the school (Pushkina, 2017). Also, there must be positive cooperation between school social workers and student families, in order to help connect the home to the school and make parents aware of the academic, behavioral, and psychological status of their children in the school. Rosenkoetter et al. (2007) mentioned that social workers play an important role in connecting the home to the school. They also contribute towards encouraging professional cooperation between social workers and families in meeting the psychological and social needs of students. Additionally, social workers contribute to directing and coordinating services and connecting students to external sources in meeting their needs. All these aspects represent the major contribution of social workers to the success of the school.

Theoretical Framework

The present study is based on system theory which relates to the concepts of social construction and social systems. System theory is an interdisciplinary theory about the abstract organisation of phenomena, which refers to the complete unit comprising of many interacting elements and components in that a part or element of the internal elements influence the composition of the whole. Moreover, the theory aims to achieve certain functions between some individuals and a social symbol which play specific roles which may vary according to social attitudes. Williams (2017) points out that for the social worker to understand a client and achieve the required change, he/she must first acquire a good understanding of the complex and interrelated elements that interact with and affect the client. In other words, the school social worker must acquire a unique perspective in order to understand how different systems affect a client.

In this study, the researchers adopted the system theory across three distinct levels, namely micro, mezzo, macro levels. The first level (micro) represents the social worker in the school. The mezzo level represents the roles and assigned tasks within the school, and finally, the macro level signifies the school administrative function as supervising the work of all employees within the school. Each of the parts is important because they work together to achieve the objectives of the larger part, and any defect that may occur to any of them will affect the whole. As such, the social worker must know his/her abilities, capabilities, duties, and roles within the school in addition to understanding the school environment, dealing with surrounding circumstances, and attempting to take advantage of them in achieving their goals.

4. METHOD

a. *Sample*

A list of 100 social workers was submitted to the Saudi Arabia MOE to contact the social workers in scheduling an interview. The first author selected 80 informants base on purposive random sampling and the criteria set by the researcher (Patton 1990). The criteria included the willingness to take part in the study, holding a bachelor's degree in social work, and working as a social worker in the Riyadh schools having more than one year's experience. From the 80 informants that were initially identified and contacted via email, only four responded to indicate their interest to participate in the study. Therefore, to expand the sample size, a snowballing technique was employed (Creswell, 1998). Here, the first informants that were contacted were asked to recommend other people who would consider sharing their experience. This method was used until achieving saturation. A total of 10 school social workers were interviewed, each selected from a different school in order to obtain their experiences regarding their practice. This number represented all schools in the city of Riyadh. The reason for undertaking the study in Riyadh was due to its geographical nature and location, and also having the highest number of schools in Saudi Arabia and the highest number of social workers.

Data collection

Data were collected via two major sources. The primary source via focus groups, while the secondary source was based on previous literature used to validate the findings of the primary data. The informants were separated into two focus groups, with each group consisting of five informants based on their years of experience. The first group included social workers having less than five years of experience, and the second group consisted of social workers having more than five years of experience. The informants were also interviewed individually by the researcher. The process was undertaken twice for each group. Each session lasted between 60 min to 90 min, depending on the willingness of the informants to express their views and opinions.

4.2 *Data Analysis*

The researcher adopted a deductive approach in addressing the research questions. The data were then analysed manually in order to generate codes, themes, and sub-themes. The analysis consisted of six stages, as suggested by Creswell (1998), Yin (1998) and Meriam (2008). The first stage was to familiarise oneself with the data. At this stage, the researcher engaged in reading field notes and listening to the audio recording that was taken during the focus group discussions, in order for the researcher to understand the meaning of the data. Secondly, once understanding the data, the researcher transcribed the audio recording of focus group discussions into a written form and comparing these to the field notes. This process involved listening to the audio recording of the interviews repeatedly. The third stage involved tagging and labelling the data, which involved reading the transcribed interview notes and underlining important or key information mentioned by the informants. Each piece of information was tagged with a name for easy identification in the following stage. After the tag and labelling process was completed, the researcher then proceeded to code the information represented as the fourth stage. Following a critical evaluation and several discussions amongst the researchers on the identified codes, the codes were then sorted and arranged into groups, with each group having themes and sub-themes. In the last stage, the themes and sub-themes were

assigned with meanings and definitions to reflect the informant's views in meeting the aims of the research. The table below presents the themes and sub-themes.

Table 1: Overview of the themes and sub-themes

Sub-themes	Themes
<p>Problem-solving.</p> <p>Communication with teachers, staff, and parents.</p> <p>Build relationship- students, teachers, families.</p> <p>Educate teachers, students, and families.</p> <p>Provide guidance and direction to students.</p> <p>Engagement.</p> <p>Planning.</p> <p>Assessment of students profiles.</p> <p>Implementation.</p> <p>Evaluation.</p> <p>Follow up.</p> <p>Collaboration - teachers, parents, community. Motivation -talent, student, environment, self-confidence.</p>	<p>School social workers duties and roles.</p> <p>Social worker strategies in school.</p>

Interpreting the data and reporting was explorative and descriptive.

b. Ethical considerations

The ethical standards required in undertaking this study were met by obtaining formal approval of the Saudi Arabia MOE and school administration departments. Before commencing the interviews, the informants were informed about the purpose of the study, their respective roles and rights. Regarding confidentiality, the first author explained to each informant about the method to collect the data collection, their voluntary participation, and their decision to withdraw from the study at any time. A consent form was also provided to each informant to sign once they were satisfied with the ethical procedures, thereby agreeing to participate in the study.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study resulting from the focus group discussions identified the primary tasks undertaken by school social workers in helping students to overcome their the issues and obstacles faced by them and whether they were study-related, health-related or social-related problems. This was consistent with the findings by Browne et al. (2017) discovering that social work in education plays a critical role in preparing social workers in leading efforts to improve specific aspects in the life of students, helping to educate students to address study, social and health-related issues. The findings also portrayed how important experience is as a key factor for the success of social workers in solving problems quickly and effectively. One example expressed by one informant mentioned, “With more experience, the social worker gains the ability to decide about problems more if he or she frequently comes across the same problems.” This remark is also consistent with that of Johnson & Munch (2010), suggesting that there are no standards on the level of required practice and experience for social work practice instructors. Similarly, the argument for requiring practice instructors to be themselves and having experience in practice is grounded in ethics. In an ethical sense, the National Association of Social Workers stated that “social workers should accept responsibility or employment only based on existing competence or the intention to gain necessary competence” (2008, Standard 4.01). Further, the aspect of professionalism was also mentioned in the discussions as an important quality that a social worker must possess to solve problems effectively and ethically. For example, one informant mentioned: “Social workers must be neutral if the problem concerns two different students and does not stand by one student against another. I noticed some social workers through my conversation with them they stand by the distinguished students, and this is a mistake, they must treat the parties involved ethically, that means equally.”

Consistent with these findings, in the context of Saudi Arabia, the results attributed a preliminary study by Albrithen & Dziegielewski's (2016), recognised the importance of ethical practice principles within the social work context. As such, this opens the way for further investigation within the Saudi context focusing on how universal ethical principles are applied while considering cultural sensitivities and inaccurate interpretations

In both focus group discussions, those having more than five years of experience, and those with less experience also agreed concerning the importance and impact of cooperation with student families, and their influence in treatment plans and programs. According to the panellists, without the parents' cooperation, they cannot apply everything they believe is necessary. The more cooperative parents were with the school

and with the social worker in particular, the better it reflects the progress of the students and how serious are their problems inside the school environment. For instance, one informant mentioned that “Parents who are cooperating with us are not that many, but I noticed their influence on the behaviour of their children inside the school... it is big! I think if all parents collaborated with us, it would improve the school environment.” Consistent with this remark, Tho (2018) suggested that it is necessary to involve parents in the process of problem-solving, access to social services and resources that can assist parents, and to connect families and schools in changing/improving awareness, behavior, and bridges between families and schools.

However, good cooperation needs to proceed with good communication. Both group discussions emphasised the importance of communicating with students’ families. For instance, one informant commented, “Communication with students’ families requires social workers to be highly professional to identify their children's problems. It is vital to communicate professionally with the students’ families... this matter requires skill”. When probed to give an example, he continued “When the social worker wants to communicate with the father to inform them of a negative matter, it must be professionally undertaken to comfort him, his reaction and to help him reach an emotional balance.” Other informants agreed with what other panellists mentioned and pointed out the differences in communicating with families according to their educational level, and cultural background. For example, one informant noted, “But the families differ and communicating with uneducated fathers is difficult. I have had hard experiences in communicating with uneducated parents... you cannot communicate with them... and sometimes they do not respond to my calls no matter how hard I try.” This is remark consistent with that of Broussard (2003) who suggested that program content is absent concerning the diversity of family lifestyles and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, the social worker consequently assumes that the families of children in their classrooms embrace the same middle-class norms, values, and beliefs as their own families of origin.

Moreover, according to him, school social workers, who have long-standing experience providing individual and group services to students in the school setting, are well-versed in the knowledge and skills needed to work toward greater equity in home-school relations. The gap in teacher education, therefore, provides an opportunity for school social workers to apply their theoretical knowledge of ecological and family systems and to share their knowledge regarding racial and ethnic diversity, family diversity, and family strengths (Broussard, 2003).

Regarding social worker strategies in schools, this study revealed that there is a need for an evaluation stage (review of available information and data), to precede the start-up stage in developing an intervention strategy with the student. The former stage would need to involve the social worker and the student together. For instance, one informant mentioned, “I always focus in the evaluation phase on the student's strengths, which I can see, and which I can use in the intervention process, besides reviewing the information revealed by the student and search for missing information... this stage is important to me.”

Participants in the group discussions also mentioned that they tended to focus on their efforts during the evaluation phase to focus on the strengths and the role of such attempts in facilitating the aid process. For example, one informant mentioned, “In the evaluation

stage, I start from the strengths of the student and try to highlight them to him. This helps in building confidence in him and motivation to start the intervention phase". This finding is also line with Spratt et al. (2019) where they found such assessments would stimulate further consideration as to how social workers might adapt to develop services better aligned to the needs of children and/or parents.

The discussion above has revealed the need for an evaluation stage (review of available information and data), to precede the start-up stage in developing an intervention strategy with students. The former stage involves the social worker and the student together. For instance, an informant mentioned "I always focus on the evaluation on the student's strengths, which I can see and use in the intervention process, besides reviewing information revealed by the student and search for missing information... this stage is important to me." The participants in the discussion focused on the attempts in the evaluation phase to focus on the strengths and the role of such attempts in facilitating the process. For example, one informant mentioned that "In the evaluation stage, I start from the strengths of the student and try to highlight them to him. This helps in building confidence in him and motivation to start the intervention phase". This remark is also consistent with how Stetler et al. (2006), defined the process of evaluation in revealing potential facilitators and barriers towards the implementation of the intervention program. Accordingly, this can be described as formative evaluation with respect to the intervention program. Whereas Marcynyszyn et al. (2011) suggested that evaluation of a program can help identify certain challenges that are faced when attempting to implement new programs so that others can expect to address and tackle such issues. According to Mullen et al. (2008), we should base adjustments of the intervention on the evaluative process and findings. During this phase, the evaluation will generate information that suggests ways to modify the program intervention, the implementation strategy, and the evaluation design for future applications.

The participants also emphasised that social workers should follow up on the cases once the intervention stage is completed, which may include meeting with teachers to check on the student's situation. For example, an informant remarked:

"Following up students' performance, researching and addressing the reasons for not fulfilling their responsibilities, following up their situation after the intervention, and the benefit of their involvement in the program is important to be done through observation or even meeting with their parents and teachers."

The findings that emerged from group discussions, especially with those having years of experience that exceeded five years said that follow-up was necessary to ensure the effectiveness of the intervention program and to monitor student behaviour and change following the program. For instance, one informant mentioned, "An important stage comes after the social worker-student relationship in the intervention program, and it aims to determine the positives points and to follow the situation closely so that we don't mislay the benefits achieved." This remark is consistent with Mullen et al. (2008), revealing how a complex strategy addressing many aspects of the implementation process needs follow-up data to assess the long-term effectiveness of the implementation strategy.

6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Social workers in Saudi schools work closely with students, their parents, linking the home environment to the school. Working closely with students is a demanding job, especially when it includes both the parents and students, carrying out their work at an individual and group level, and when facing problems that impede their practical progress and achievement. Besides their preventive role, social workers also play a therapeutic role in dealing with student problems.

Furthermore, social workers undertake numerous activities and roles, which include helping to solve problems facing students that impede them from academic achievements and continuous communication with all workers in the school, including parents. Social workers also perform tasks related to educating all workers and students in the school through the transference of social skills and educating parents to deal with difficulties facing their children. Social workers also seek to provide counselling services to students and others who require support. Therefore, it is important for social workers to continually campaign in promoting their roles and upgrade their skills through continuous training and learning.

Accordingly, this study aimed to provide further insight into the roles, skills and effort expended by social workers in the context of schools in the KSA, by drawing a clear picture of the stakeholders involved in the process of delivering services to students, teachers, administrative staff and parents, etc. Similarly, the governing body should also be aware and appreciate how critical the roles are of social workers, details of the practice, and demands in enacting high-quality standards in schools. The findings and comments presented in this study have also demonstrated the work efficiency and ethics of social workers and their ability to assist decision-makers to gain a better understanding of the status quo in the context of social work in Saudi Arabian schools. It is anticipated that this will go a long way to assist in removing obstacles that stand in the way of social workers in carrying out their respective roles.

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