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Article

Social Work Practice in UAE Schools during and after COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: Apart from their obvious educational mission, public schools provide health, psychological, emotional, and social development grounding for students. Thus, the educational system is special in that it combines multiple integrated responsibilities and duties beyond the scope of any other social welfare program. As such, social workers are a very important constituent of this system, and they ostensibly serve to attend to the wellbeing of students while ensuring educational system performance. In light of this extremely steep set of demands, this work assesses and compares social workers' authentic roles in UAE schools during and after the COVID-19 pandemic so that we may contribute to the improvement of educational systems worldwide. The results are nuanced and will better illuminate the important capabilities of social workers in the continually changing educational system, as well as the challenges they face and ameliorate during emergency scenarios.

Keywords: social work; COVID-19 pandemic; school social worker; qualitative method; UAE

1. Introduction

The world's educational systems are responsible for more than simply imparting knowledge to younger generations. They are also responsible for catering to the psychological, emotional, and social development of the ever-changing global collective student body. Contemporarily, as a key social welfare benefit, public schools are provided to the population to guide their development so that individuals may become productive members of society. As such, social workers are routinely assigned to public schools to help ensure that these abstract goals are met. Because their responsibilities and expected contributions are largely underreported in the literature, particularly in the UAE, this work investigates the real situation of social workers' roles in public schools during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Our purpose is to provide a nuanced and operational understanding of the challenges and strengths of social workers in schools so that policymaking organizations can be well-informed of the key indicators and empirical expectations.

Among the social systems deployed worldwide, global educational systems were among the most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The welfare of students has always been considered to be of paramount importance. However, school staff, families, suppliers, publishers, and a host of ancillary participants were also deeply affected by the lockdowns and quarantine measures. The negative impacts are still being assessed, and it may take decades to fully understand the limitations we faced and overcame. We now can clearly see that, for decades prior to the pandemic, there was a vast dearth in the understanding of the roles of social workers in schools and their responsibilities for students, staff, and parents. We might consider COVID-19 as the forcing function that compels us to finally pin down this problem and establish an empirical and functional framework for improving the physical, emotional, and mental health policies of public education. Regarding the social workers, it is telling that families and governments relied heavily and (mercilessly?) nonstop on the limited staff of educational social workers to provide real-time feedback on the system's human-organic wellbeing during and after the pandemic (Lucio, Krough, Stalnecker, & Villarreal Sosa, 2020; Chang, Guynes, Richmond-Roberts, 2020). Notably and unsurprisingly, the most impacted members of society were the poorest (Lucio, Krough, Stalnecker, & Villarreal Sosa, 2020; Chang, Guynes, Richmond-Roberts, 2020), and they clearly need the services of social workers the most.

COVID-19 has forced the rapid development and implementation of new capabilities, methods, and technologies that have potentially changed the staff training and classroom education environment forever. Notably, the focus on mental health crises and individual accommodations has become more pronounced than ever. From these changes of priority and the general realization of our society's meekness, school social workers are increasingly expected to step up and provide for our welfare needs while also ensuring changing policy enforcement (Lucio, Krough, Stalnecker, & Villarreal Sosa, 2020; Chang, Guynes, Richmond-Roberts, 2020). Given that the full scope of this impact on public schools remains unearthed, the current study investigates the responsibilities of social workers in UAE schools during and after the COVID-19 pandemic so that we may contribute to the global improvement of public educational systems in an empathetic and forward-thinking manner.

2. School Social Work in the UAE

The school social work program, the UAE's largest social worker employer, began in 1972, when the Ministry of Education appointed Egyptian social workers to Emirati schools (Tedam, 2022). This section covers the necessary history, models, responsibilities, benefits, and problems faced in the school environment.

2.1. Historical View

Social work originated in the US, quickly followed by Egypt (Al Krenawi & Graham, 2003). The US model focused on family welfare, whereas the Egyptian model focused on schooling. In the UAE, oil discovery was a driving force for improving its educational system, as it enabled programs to be rebuilt from the ground up, as published in the article "One Corner at a Time: Collaborating for Educational Change in the UAE." (Sowa & De La Vega, 2008) The first instance operated within the framework of the Sociology Department at UAE University. In 1995, it became an independent department at the university, where the scope was expanded to cover Emirati society and its value system. As such, the UAE developed model changes that differed from those of the US and Egypt.

2.2. Models of Social Work Practice

There are two basic social work models in the UAE: family–school cooperation and strengths-based practice.

2.2.1. Family–School Cooperation Model

By promoting the active participation of both schools and families in the educational welfare of children, social workers organize meetings, workshops, and related activities to foster collaboration and goal-setting. Additional services are offered directly to families to facilitate their cooperation and to help them deal with challenges. Part of this facilitation involves intervention and advocacy within the school system. Empowerment is key to developing a strong partnership between families and schools in the UAE (Stringer & Hourani, 2013).

2.2.2. Strengths-Based Practice Model

This model, facilitated by social workers, identifies the inherent strengths and assets of students, families, and communities in a process that allows the participants to make their strengths stronger so that all parties may achieve positive outcomes. Weaknesses and deficits are overshadowed by positive effects, which promote the resilience needed to allot time and energy to skills development and personal growth. By working on these things together, participants naturally learn how to help one another, which is unironically key to maintaining self-efficacy and -confidence (Pulla & Kay, 2017).

2.3. School Social Worker Responsibilities

Most of the school social worker roles in the UAE have already been well-described in this paper. However, their responsibilities can be recapitulated from some related sources (e.g., Sowa and De La Vega, 2008; Al Ketbi, 2019) as follows:

- Facilitate effective communication (collaboration) among schools, families, and communities.
- Provide family services and assistance.
- Intervene in situations where a child's social, emotions, and/or behaviors need attention.
- Counsel students, families, and staff.
- Connect participants to external community resources, agency programs, and academic guidelines.

2.4. Recruiting School Social Workers

In the UAE, school administrators and relevant educational authorities oversee social worker recruitment. In doing so, they seek to ensure that prospective recruits are qualified, licensed, and available using a fair and amenable hiring system (Tedam, Wagner & Mitchell, 2022).

2.5. Social Worker Benefits

Several professional development opportunities are available to school social workers, such as workshops, training programs, and conferences of their own, which aim to enhance their skills and knowledge. Salary is generally based upon an individual's experience level, qualifications, and the type of employing educational institution. Overarching hiring and payment policies are more directly influenced by government regulations and market demand.

Many educational institutions in the UAE provide healthcare benefits to their social workers, and the institutions are expected to prioritize a work–life balance for them by offering flexible working hours, vacations, and other benefits that support their overall wellbeing.

2.6. UAE Laws and School Social Work

According to Federal Law No. 3 of 2016 (Wadeema's Law), suspected cases of child sexual abuse must be reported to law enforcement. Hence, school social workers are the linchpin for increasing overall awareness and due diligence in this area (AlMatrooshi, Gilani & Mujtaba, 2021). School social workers receive specialized training on how to recognize, report, and support victims (AlMatrooshi, Gilani & Mujtaba, 2021). To empower their social workers and other school staff, institutions have implemented tailored child protection policies to facilitate compliance with national statutes (AlMatrooshi, Gilani, & Mujtaba, 2021).

2.7. Challenges and Dilemmas

Social workers in UAE schools often face challenges due to limited resources and heavy caseloads, which can adversely affect the quality and effectiveness of their services. A lack of specialized training in areas such as career counseling or mental health can result in dilemmas for some social workers in addressing the diverse needs of students. Separately, school social workers often encounter challenges related to cultural sensitivities and norms, requiring them to adapt their approaches to individuals. It is challenging for any employee, especially when empowered as a social worker, to coordinate and collaborate effectively with so many stakeholders while attending to their own wellbeing (Al Falasi & Al Zouebi, 2019).

More generally, school social workers sometimes encounter difficulties in communicating effectively with stakeholders due to language barriers, cultural differences, or inadequacies in trust. Indeed, many students and parents seem unwilling to engage due to a variety of factors. This further complicates the school social workers' professional expectations, as they must establish and maintain sensitive boundaries and careful, deliberate protocols when building rapport with all parties separately.

3. Methods

Recalling that this study aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of the changing responsibilities of school social workers in the UAE, based on timeframes during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, we conducted in-depth interviews directly with the workers (n = 22). Using a *field-of-practice* approach, we prepared nine interview questions related to uncovering and synthesizing their roles during the period in question:

1. What is the nature of the basic responsibilities performed by the social worker in the school in general? Please mention this in detail according to the following divisions: Administrative responsibilities, Professional responsibilities, and recreational activities organized by the social worker?
2. How was your practice in your role as a social worker in the school during the COVID-19 pandemic? Please mention this in detail according to the following divisions: Administrative responsibilities, Professional responsibilities, and Recreational activities organized by the social worker?
3. Did your practice in your role as a social worker in the school change after the COVID-19 pandemic? How did it change or remain unchanged? Please mention this in detail according to the following divisions: Administrative responsibilities, Professional responsibilities, and Recreational activities organized by the social worker?
4. When comparing the role of the social worker in schools before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which period do you believe the service delivery was more effective? Why?
5. Do you think the coronavirus pandemic has affected the practice of social work in schools?
6. What difficulties did the social worker face during the COVID-19 pandemic when providing various services to students and parents?
7. Do you think social workers in schools had sufficient competence to provide remote services to students during the COVID-19 pandemic?
8. What suggestions do you have to increase the effectiveness of the social worker's role in school in general?
9. What are your suggestions to increase the effectiveness of the social worker in the school if a crisis similar to the COVID-19 pandemic occurs in the future?

Interviews were conducted at private and government schools in Al Ain City, and all workers were UAE national citizens. Participation was voluntary, and workers were recruited via paper mail sent to the schools. Interviews were conducted in person and face-to-face in a secluded, quiet place on specific dates and times. Interviews lasted 60–80 min. Among the 22 participants, four were male, and 18 were female. Their ages ranged from 25 to 42 years, and their experiences ranged from 5 to 19 years.

4. Results

These results are discussed according to the three types of interview questions: practices during the pandemic, after the pandemic, and general practices.

4.1. Social Work Practices During the Pandemic

4.1.1. Administrative Responsibilities

The COVID-19 pandemic constrained the positive energy of social workers by restricting their interactive contact with students, teachers, administrators, and parents. Most activities were transferred to remote communication methods, such as WhatsApp, Zoom, and Teams, which did not yield many benefits in terms of their human-factor expectations. Notably, students were far less influenced by remote PowerPoint presentations than in-person, interactive sessions.

A critical skill of social work includes the exchange of eye contact and body language, especially when imparting wellbeing and mental health guidance. The remote tools brought to bear during COVID-19 were very immature, and their capabilities were limited by insufficient national and worldwide infrastructure. When attempting to address, for example, the frequent absences of

students, it was very frustrating for the social workers to be forced to depend on the even more physically distanced modes of intervention made available. In the past, the social worker could engage the students and their families more directly, such as at conferences or in their homes. Similar scenarios impacted social workers' ability to engage with teachers and staff.

4.1.2. Professional Responsibilities

Access to personal and private information was hampered during the pandemic when workers were forced to work remotely and/or from home. However, fulfilling their roles of intervention was heavily curtailed, as their key interactive toolbox had to be discarded. That is, eye contact was removed. Empathetic bodily and voice expressions were strongly limited. Their ability to see, interpret, and diagnose hidden signals was made largely unavailable. .

One interview participant reflected on this experience by stating,

Unfortunately, during my case study sessions with students and holding the first session to introduce them to the role of the social worker and his tasks, it was done behind a phone, which, of course, reflected negatively because I needed at least three sessions with the student and their parent through social media platforms to build a professional relationship with them, instill confidence, and assure them that the information is within the framework of confidentiality as long as it does not pose a danger or harm to any members of the community in the surrounding environment.

Social workers are also expected to engage directly with families by administering treatment plans and providing family tasks for them to accomplish between sessions. A student behavior intervention process normally adheres to the following guidelines:

- Analyze student behavioral and psychological issues based on teacher observations and school reports—Gather necessary information.
- Conduct initial assessments, highlight possible causes, and narrow the list of potential tools.
- Develop individualized treatment plans, including specific strategies and activities to address behavioral problems and achieve positive change.
- Implement treatment plan via counseling sessions and therapy, including family activity provisions and tasks.
- Monitor student and family progress in implementing the treatment plan—Conduct periodic follow-up sessions.

Obviously, it was very difficult to achieve satisfactory results during the pandemic, especially when noting that the families also experienced various forms of trauma due to the pandemic, including their curtailed ability to commiserate in person.

4.1.3. Recreational Activities

An interview participant stated,

As school social workers, we had to adjust the recreational activities that we wanted to introduce to students and involve them in through organizing and selecting suitable parties based on the health and social conditions in the virtual school environment.

To remotely provide and facilitate these kinds of activities during the pandemic, the school social workers indicated that they engaged in the following methods:

- Online workshops using live video platforms to enhance social and emotional skills
- Online competitions, games, and educational challenges
- Counseling sessions via phone and/or video
- Developmental events, such as online workshops and skills training
- Awareness campaigns via social media
- Virtual field trips (e.g., museums and recorded videos)

4.2. Social Work Practice after the Pandemic

4.2.1. Administrative Responsibilities

After the pandemic, the most significant changes, as noted by the interviewees, included the following:

- Limitations eased somewhat, but because social distancing requirements persisted, personal interactions resumed somewhat, but remained severely restrictive. The momentum of relying on phone calls and online sessions persisted.
- There was an increased need for mental health support among students and family members due to the pandemic's impact on the psychological wellbeing of most students. The long-term isolation caused by the lockdown created the need for new individual consultation protocols, which, of course, required online policies and procedures.
- With the adoption of remote learning by many schools and the improved technologies made available by the end of the pandemic, students' social and psychological needs became more pronounced. However, most psychosocial support was offered through online means, as all clientele were forced to improve their abilities to acquire and implement key social media platforms, such as Zoom and Teams.
- By the end of the pandemic, it was noted that the school social workers had basically constructed the most effective infrastructure and personal network connecting families and schools. Hence, post-pandemic COVID-19 awareness responsibilities were allocated to social workers. As such, they organized awareness campaigns on maintaining mental health and community safety.
- Collaboration with external entities, such as hospitals and health centers, increased as school social workers were increasingly tasked with supporting students and family members in need of additional services.

4.2.2. Professional Responsibilities

The pandemic significantly impacted the professional responsibilities of school social workers. One interviewee stated, "I faced challenges and difficulties when opening student files for case studies, diagnosis, and providing appropriate treatment." The following is a summary of the changes faced:

- With the shift of many educational activities to remote methods, social and psychological support was retained as a primarily online mode, which was challenging. Adapting the existing tools for a wider variety of services and consultations was essential, including initial data collection.
- Mental health issues among students and families had increased, and the social worker's role increased accordingly.
- Case follow-ups could be expedited with social media, but the interactive complexities remained a challenge due to the human expressive elements that social workers have long relied upon.
- Raising the level of community awareness of post-pandemic mental health issues became paramount. Social workers were relied upon to further guide students and families on how to cope with the stress and anxiety caused by continued social distancing and the persistent emphasis on remote learning.

4.2.3. Recreational Activities

Participants indicated that it took some time to become adept at helping their clientele regain their cognitive abilities and readjust to social life in the post-pandemic environment. During the initial post-pandemic period, most recreational interactions focused on social communication, disease prevention, and adapting to new physical contact policies. One of the participants stated,

I faced significant challenges in organizing school trips, with very few students registering due to their ongoing fear of infection and their desire to continue isolation from the external community to avoid any interaction. Here, the changes in the nature of my work became apparent.

4.3. General Observations

Overall, the pandemic led to an increased need for psychological and social support, which placed additional burdens on school social workers. After the pandemic, interactions increased mostly indirectly, but direct communications gradually became more commonplace, albeit restrictive. The rare opportunities to organize mass recreational and social activities within the school were more effective after the pandemic and beforehand. Regarding psychological and social challenges, the effects of the pandemic gradually became less challenging logistically and technologically. Note the following statement made by an interviewee:

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we faced many challenges. The distance of students from teachers and social workers reduced student commitment and revealed neglect in some families. Some students were absent or sleeping during lessons. When communicating with parents, we encountered unexpected excuses and justifications. Additionally, new and undesirable behaviors emerged, such as disruptions during virtual classes, students expelling each other from online classrooms, transferring assignments, and seeking external assistance in exams. Some problems were overcome through collaboration with parents, although achieving desired solutions was sometimes hindered by obstacles like student or family COVID-19 infections. The flexibility of pandemic-specific behavioral regulations prevented the achievement of required solutions, which needed to be more stringent.

Overall, when considering the periods during and after the pandemic, the difficulties identified by the interviewees can be summarized as the following two points:

- Difficulties in providing assistance—Contemporarily, social and psychological intervention requires personal and physical interactions, which continue to be challenging when applied remotely.
- Adapting to technology—For social workers unaccustomed to the extensive use of technologies for interactive communications, the nature and membership of the field has changed dramatically since COVID-19.

5. Conclusion

From 22 interviews, this study found that school social workers in the UAE during the pandemic faced terribly challenging tasks and a host of unexpected responsibilities. COVID-19 clearly brought focus to the vital importance of the social worker role in micro-societies. From our synthesis of the data, we found that during the pandemic, school social worker tasks largely focused on educating and encouraging students, reassuring them, and following up with families to achieve the desired outcomes, all remotely. Interestingly, physical distancing protocols led to the decline of several types of problems normally faced by social workers, such as fighting and antisocial behaviors in students. The overall challenges of school social workers both during and after the pandemic can be summarized in the following points:

- Technical limitations and weak internet connectivity posed difficulties in delivering online services, impacting the quality of social-worker interaction and support.
- The lack of direct communication with students and families reduces the ability of social workers to provide personal support and to understand the nuances of cases.
- The need for psychological and social support for students multiplied due to the pandemic's effects on mental health, leading to increased demands on school social workers.
- Social workers were required to follow health and safety measures while delivering personal services, which often led to increased stress for all parties.
- Families were negatively affected economically, further increasing the need for social support.

The pandemic placed extreme demands upon the social worker profession, and our interviews with UAE school social workers highlighted the vital importance of the vibrant and resilient character needed for the profession. Technical competencies in electronic tools are essential, but not sufficient, to ensure quality social service provisions. Their ability to handle the pressures of multiple and often conflicting social cultures, and their willingness to develop their skills and competencies to overcome technical and logistical difficulties, is a true testament to the stubborn willingness of many people to

overcome challenges, no matter how severe, in a much larger-than-themselves effort to help support the rest of humanity.

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