

Guest Editorial

Building perspectives and innovation in school social work

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We are delighted to present this Special Issue on school social work and begin by reflecting on the formation of a professional collaboration, which culminated in our first international conference on school social work and this special issue of the *Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning in Health and Social Work*.

During the development of a Master's degree in School Social Work at North-West University, South Africa, a small but determined network emerged. Initial conversations focused on postgraduate provision in the United States, but momentum quickly grew. What began as informal exchanges between a handful of professionals soon attracted more scholars and practitioners with a shared passion for school social work.

An important catalyst came in 2023, when three members attended the International School Social Work Conference in Denver, Colorado, hosted by the School Social Work Association of America. While the conference provided valuable opportunities for learning, international participation was limited. In true social work fashion, the delegates turned challenges into possibilities. They began to imagine a new, more internationally inclusive school social work conference that could connect practitioners, academics, and students across borders.

Early meetings, held online between colleagues in South Africa, the United Kingdom and Sweden soon drew others from Ireland, the United Arab Emirates, and further afield. What started as benchmarking and informal knowledge exchange evolved into structured conversations on the systemic challenges facing school social workers: under-resourced schools; limited recognition of the profession; and the pressing need for advocacy on behalf of children's holistic development. Despite cultural and geographical differences, members recognised shared priorities and agreed on the value of sustained, organised collaboration.

Regular online meetings became a cornerstone of the group's work. Initial discussions compared models of practice, ethical frameworks, and accountability structures from different countries. Over time, the collaboration deepened, with members delivering joint conference presentations, hosting international webinars, and offering one another professional support. The network bridged academic research and frontline practice, thus ensuring that theory and lived experience informed one another. The group now meets monthly, focusing on the delivery of an annual international school social work conference, and on providing a platform to foster innovation, to advance research, and to strengthen practice worldwide. Leadership is shared and rotates to ensure inclusivity. The integration of practitioner and academic perspectives is one of the collaboration's greatest strengths. Academics contribute research and theoretical frameworks; practitioners offer insight into the realities of school life. This blend reflects a common vision: that no child should be left behind because of social, emotional, or environmental barriers, and that school social workers are vital to achieving that goal.

The emergence of the international SWiS network has also created opportunities to amplify collective scholarship and practice. Members act as critical friends, promote one another's work, and collaborate on publications. Online meetings have become spaces to explore both regional variations in school social work and the challenges shared globally, including role ambiguity and a lack of clear professional definitions. Word of mouth has steadily expanded the network's reach, generating interest from new countries and contexts.

Members began planning an annual international conference, to be hosted in different countries to ensure inclusiveness and avoid reinforcing dominant models of practice. The first conference, held in Essex, UK, in September 2024, brought together students, practitioners, academics, and placement supervisors. Presentations covered a wide range of topics, from counselling and therapeutic practices in Sweden to anti-racism initiatives, LGBTQ+ support, bullying, poverty, trauma, honour-based violence, and attendance issues. The programme deliberately included elements of co-production and interactive engagement. A group of young people from Ireland presented on racism in schools, while a student panel reflected on their placement journeys, sharing how their perceptions of their role evolved and how they came to appreciate the pressures facing schools. Workshops on mindfulness and dance, along with poster presentations, enriched the event. Feedback highlighted the value of authentic networking opportunities

and the sense of shared purpose that emerged. The enthusiasm generated by the Essex conference confirmed the potential of the SWISC network to grow into a specialised international knowledge base. Delegates spoke of feeling inspired and motivated by exposure to innovative practice from around the world:

Seeing all the innovative work happening in the field sparked so much passion and inspiration. It gave me hope, support, and showed me how I could progress collaboratively with colleagues in this field.

From its inception, the conference series has been guided by a clear vision: to create meaningful spaces for dialogue, collaboration, and innovation among school social work researchers and practitioners globally. This initiative was first envisioned by Jennifer Rafter, Marelize Vergottini, and Maria Kjellgren, each committing to host conferences at their respective universities. Professor Prospera Tedam soon joined the coordination committee, followed by Professor Leticia Villarreal Sosa.

The first conference, hosted by Jennifer Rafter, was held at Anglia Ruskin University, Chelmsford. The second, in September 2025, in Vanderbijlpark, Johannesburg, is organised by Marelize Vergottini. These events drawing participation from scholars in Australia, Greece, Norway, and Finland. The third conference will take place in Sweden, in autumn 2026, with Maria Kjellgren as the main contact.

The coordinating committee's mission is to advance scholarly exchange and strengthen the link between research and practice. A key priority is ensuring the active participation of practising school social workers, so that research remains grounded in the realities of schools and children's lives. In identifying conference themes, the committee strives for inclusivity and relevance across diverse national and psychosocial contexts, always with the aim of supporting children and young people to achieve their educational and life goals.

The 2024 conference, "Empowering Global Futures," reflected the network's aspiration to inspire action and innovation. The 2025 conference, "Unified for Impact: Global Innovations in School Social Work," will further this ambition. For the 2026 event, discussions among Nordic colleagues have highlighted urgent societal issues, including the impact of gang-related crime on children as young as ten in Sweden. Preventive, collaborative approaches between schools, social services, law enforcement, and communities are being considered as a potential focus.

As the SWISC network grows, its members remain committed to inclusivity, mutual learning, and advocacy for the profession. The vision is ambitious: to embed school social work within education systems worldwide, supported by a robust evidence base and informed by diverse perspectives.

We invite researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to join us in Sweden in 2026. Together, we can strengthen the profession, share expertise, and create supportive educational environments where children and young people can thrive. School social work is relevant and essential for safeguarding children's welfare, supporting their emotional and psycho-social development, and ensuring equitable access to education by addressing barriers rooted in poverty, family difficulties, discrimination and wider social inequalities.

Introducing the Special Issue

This special issue brings together diverse international scholarship and practice insights on school social work, highlighting innovations, challenges, and the evolving role of the profession in South Africa, United States of America, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

Marelize Vergottini and Mike Weyers present the first study of its kind in South Africa to map the roles, responsibilities, and challenges of school social workers in the Free State Province. Using a mixed-methods approach, they document how decentralised education structures have resulted in a lack of uniform role expectations. Findings reveal extensive responsibilities spanning learners, educators, multidisciplinary teams, and policy engagement, yet constrained by structural inconsistencies and resource limitations. This research offers a foundation for developing local standards and guidance, with implications for countries at similar stages of developing school social work services.

Erika Gergerich and Stacy Gherardi describe the Interprofessional Education for School Health and Wellbeing (IPESH) pilot, which adapted interprofessional education models from healthcare to the PK–12 education context in the United States of America. Graduate students from social work, education, nursing, counselling, and educational psychology engaged in a blended programme of workshops, team-based case discussions, and online collaboration. Evaluation demonstrated improved attitudes toward

interprofessional collaboration, enhanced understanding of professional roles, and stronger communication and teamwork skills. The article provides a replicable model for preparing pre-service professionals for integrated, equity-centred practice in schools.

Tarja Väyrynen Börgesson and Maria Kjellgren explore Swedish school social workers' counselling practices with children experiencing mental ill-health and their parents, framed by Minuchin's structural family systems approach. Interviews with practitioners reveal decision-making processes on whether to involve parents in sessions, shaped by the child's needs, age, and consent. The study underscores the importance of considering the family system, balancing parental involvement with the child's autonomy, and adapting approaches to individual circumstances. Findings address a literature gap in Sweden and offer transferable insights for family-inclusive counselling in school settings.

Helena Johansson and Åsa Borgström discuss the development and delivery of a master's-level course in school social work at the University of Gothenburg, designed to strengthen professionalisation and bridge research and practice. The course emphasised organisational knowledge, interprofessional cooperation, and research-based practice, producing "academic products" for use in workplaces. The authors situate the course within broader debates on professionalisation in Sweden, noting the need for more advanced qualifications among social workers and for integrating scientific knowledge into daily school social work practice.

Emma Ottosson presents a case study of collaboration between a student health team and a leisure centre in rural Sweden aimed at improving identification and support for children in need. The co-located organisations combined outreach, relationship building, and shared professional knowledge to increase accessibility and trust. The study highlights the unique challenges of rural contexts, where limited services and resources necessitate creative, cross-sector approaches to promote children's agency and early help-seeking.

Jennifer Rafter, Cathryn Jani, and Barry Fearnley explore how non-traditional placements, such as the Social Workers in Schools (SWIS) project, can expand horizons for students and challenge entrenched hierarchies that privilege statutory placements in England. Their article, "Using student SWOT analyses of school-based placements," analyses students' reflections on strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of school placements. Despite initial apprehensions, students identified rich opportunities for creativity, early intervention, and

direct child-centred work. The authors argue that school placements allow social workers to ‘re-centre’ in community spaces, building vital interprofessional relationships. Their study provides a compelling case for sustaining and evolving SWIS as part of diversified placement provision.

Book Review

Marvia Chambers reviews *Shifting Stories: How Changing Their Stories Can Transform People* by Andrew Scott. The book applies narrative, solution-focused, cognitive-behavioural, and transactional analysis approaches to help individuals reframe unhelpful workplace narratives. Chambers notes its relevance for social work supervision, offering practical strategies for reflective exploration of personal and professional “stories” that may hinder effective learning or team functioning. She highlights its applicability in practice education, where structured reflection can help students reframe perceptions and engage more positively in placements.

Together, the contributions in this Special Issue showcase the breadth of school social work practice internationally, the value of interprofessional and cross-sector collaboration, and the ongoing need for professional development grounded in research and reflective practice.

We continue to be grateful to the many reviewers who continue to give up their time and expertise to enhance the quality of the journal.

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