

Workers needed to foster improved academic performance: Perspectives of social workers and education officers in Ghana

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Abstract

This study examines the perceptions of social welfare and education officers in Ghana about school social work practice and its possible contributions to improving academic performance at the basic level of education. Qualitative data were collected through two focus group discussions with social workers and education officers. Participants expressed views that school social work interventions are needed to strengthen the bond between the home and the school, help students deal with psycho-social problems, and reduce the burden on teachers. Suggestions were also made on the best ways to foster the practice of school social work in Ghana. These coalesced around three core themes: active engagement of stakeholders, a robust funding mechanism to develop and sustain social work interventions in schools, and a long-term agenda to train and recruit more school social workers.

Keywords

Academic performance, basic education, education officers, interventions, school social work

Introduction

Around the world, education is considered a tool for the foundation of human development and is associated with well-established social and economic benefits including improved health, advancement and use of technology, and individual and household well-being (Rolleston et al., 2011). The importance of education (especially at higher levels) to the development of nations and people around the world can never be overemphasised as the United Nations and other similar bodies have declared as key to the economic and social development (Ansong et al., 2018; Ansong et al., 2021). Efforts are being made by many countries, including Ghana, to improve upon their standards of education and also make schools accessible to every child of school-going age. Though the government of Ghana (GOG) has provided free access to both basic and secondary education, low levels of academic performance may contribute to large numbers of

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out-of-school children. In previous studies, other authors have identified individual- and school-related factors that influence children within school environments (Balenzano et al., 2019). Evidence from the research also indicates that interventions by social work professionals in schools can help students cope with problems at school, which leads to positive academic achievements. Despite this, school social work interventions have not been part of measures employed by government to improve the quality of education and learning experiences in schools. Through focus group discussions, this article highlights the perceptions of two important stakeholders in education and child welfare (social workers and education officers) about why schools in Ghana need social work interventions.

Globally, many countries, both developed and developing, have come to the realisation that the academic performance of students constitutes a major determinant of their progression from one stage (basic education) to the next stage (secondary education). That is, the problem of poor academic performance of students is a barrier to the achievement of the purpose of education, which is to mentally prepare individuals for service to themselves and to society at large (Ansong et al., 2020). Currently, there is wide dissatisfaction with the performance of students and the education system in many countries, including Ghana.

In sub-Saharan Africa (Ghana included), despite the investments and efforts made to expand and improve education, many nations continue to face problems of large numbers of children who are out of school (Ansong et al., 2021). In Ghana, individuals who acquire education up to the basic education level (the first 9 years of formal schooling, which includes 6 years of primary and 3 years of junior secondary schooling) may not be as competitive in the workplace as those who attend school beyond junior high school (JHS) level (Sackey, 2008). Thus, children who aspire to attain high levels of education will have to perform well in school to increase their possibility of progression. Yet many young people do not progress in school because of poor academic performance at the basic level due to student-related, family-related, and school-related risk factors (Balenzano et al., 2019).

A key role of social workers in schools in sub-Saharan Africa includes reaching out to families within the communities to enrol their children and also link them to the necessary services available within the educational system when needed (Huxtable, 2013). Other school-related welfare services that are in existence in Ghana include the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE), which focuses on making education free (GOG & Ministry of Education [MOE], 1996). The school feeding programme and the capitation grant also run under the FCUBE umbrella (Akyeampong, 2009) and currently the Free Senior High School Policy put in place by the GoG. In Ghana, one qualifies to be a social worker by obtaining a diploma, Bachelor's or postgraduate degree in social work. Several institutions in the country offer educational programmes in social work at various levels.

On the other hand, school social work, a specialised area within the social work profession (Dupper, 2003), is practised within school environments with country context variations. School social work exists to address the varied needs of students within an educational setting with a focus on improving their lives and assisting them to achieve their educational goals (National Association of Social Workers, 2012). Empirical evidence (Constable, 2008; Joefowicz-Simbeni and Israel, 2006; Shaffer, 2006) suggests that school social workers can play a complementary role in addressing the multidimensional psychological, behavioural, economic, household and school challenges that lead to low academic performance. However, much of what is known thus far about the relevance of school social work to academic performance and progression from low to higher grade levels comes from studies in the United States and other developed countries (see Hafford-Letchfield and Spatcher, 2007).

Empirical evidence (Allen-Meares, 2006; Alvarez et al., 2013; Constable, 2008; Joefowicz-Simbeni and Israel, 2006; Kim and Streeter, 2008; Shaffer, 2006) indicates that school social work interventions can have a positive influence on students' academic performance, but the current education system in Ghana does not include school social work services such as counselling, brokering and advocacy. Although the Ghana Education Service (GES) provides guidance and counselling in schools, this service is being offered by teachers who double as counsellors. The combination of their teaching load and counselling services does not allow for adequate and effective provision of services to children with problems in schools. However, social workers are trained to provide comprehensive services that go beyond the school to encompass every aspect of the children's lives. Social workers will not be burdened with teaching loads, but will be able to dedicate all attention to helping children to deal with problems. This article uses empirical data to examine the perceptions that education officers in basic schools and qualified social workers have about school social work practice and its possible contributions to improving academic performance at the basic level of education.

Review of the literature

It is worth noting that literature available on school social work practice is largely derived from the United States because they have a well-established school social work system. A review of works of literature indicates that some countries provide social work services in schools but in different forms. This study reviewed literature specifically on school social work practice most associated with the United States. Deficiencies in children's memory and their ability to read are strongly linked to their poor physical health (Kramer et al., 1995). Wagner et al. (2005) further this argument by indicating that behavioural problems of children can translate negatively into their grades and educational attainment. Critical to the academic success of these children is their accessibility to cognitive, behavioural, physical health, and human services (Cameto et al., 2004). Yet only a small number of students or pupils with cognitive, social, physical or behavioural problems, and suffering from poverty, abuse and/or neglect have access to needed services (Flolu et al., 2007). The fragmented nature of available services in most developing nations poses a great challenge to families and children in terms of accessibility and efficiency as well as effective utilisation of such services. In developing countries such as Ghana with under-resourced school facilities, children face a higher risk of under-performance, which may partly be because school social work interventions are missing.

Students, teachers, school administrators and families are often confronted with challenges such as emotional and behavioural problems of children, which in one way or another negatively affect the school climate, thereby interfering with the learner's ability to function effectively and progress academically in school (Kelly, 2008). School social work, therefore, is a field of the social work professional activity which seeks to provide services geared towards eradicating problems that impede students' ability to learn and have access to and benefit from education (Constable, 2008, 2009). These problems must be identified by and with the students, parents, teachers and administrators.

School social work practise focuses on school–community–child–parent interaction and addresses barriers that militate against children's ability to access and benefit from available educational opportunities (Dupper, 2003). It provides the bridge between schools, homes and the community in an environment where support in various areas of need, such as financial and mental health, is deteriorating (Constable, 2009). School social workers are required to abide by core values of ethical practice, which include service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, integrity and competence (Hepworth et al., 2010). School

social work's potential can be realised through the acceptance of the practice by school authorities and administrators in countries such as Ghana (Higy et al., 2012).

Literature on school social work clearly demonstrates that the practice, just like the social work profession in general, provides a range of services at the macro (tier 1), mezzo (tier 2) and micro (tier 3) levels (Franklin and Kelly, 2009; Kelly, 2008; School Social Work Association of America [SSWAA], 2012). School social workers serve students with macro-focused or micro-focused interventions depending on the definition of the problem at hand. The macro-focused approach is the broadest level of influence and comprises larger systems (at state, societal or governmental levels) (Allen-Meares, 2010). Micro-focused practice, on the other hand, involves working in school to promote change in certain areas such as behaviour or attendance. School-wide incentive programmes for appropriate behaviour at school is an example of a micro-focused area that utilises school social workers (Allen-Meares, 2010). Dupper (2003) and SSWAA (2005) established that the practice, initiated in 1906, involved school social workers as 'visiting teachers' who embarked on activities such as conducting home visits, leading classroom groups, and consulting with teachers and school authorities.

Traditional social work skills such as social administration, community organisation, clinical social work (previously referred to as case work), group work, family therapy, advocacy and crisis intervention among others are very relevant for the practice of school social work (Illinois State Board of Education [ISBE], 2008). The roles played by school social workers often require the adoption and utilisation of these skills and the basic principles of generic social work practice. Knowledge of the educational environment (educational policies and programmes, human development issues) in addition to these basic principles and skills of social work ensure that school social workers effectively fulfil their roles (ISBE, 2008). The central focus of school social work (like generic social work practice) is the level of participation of clients in assessing and determining their needs, and initiating, designing and implementing intervention strategies with support from the school social worker.

Most schools across the globe reported increases in the use of preventive measures and curative interventions to help make school environments learner friendly, such as through school social work practice. The need to address serious student social, emotional, psychological and physical problems is undisputed. Berzin and O'Connor (2010) examined syllabi from school social work courses designed for students to determine whether such courses were responding to the complex changing context of the educational landscape and found that the recent focus of school social work at multiple levels is in line with the changing context of the educational landscape. The authors further found that practitioners have been trained to conceptualise interventions to respond to the complex needs of their clients in the form ensuring that interventions are targeted to specific needs of individual students. In addition, Allen and Tracy (2004) found the roles of school social workers to have gone beyond the usual three levels of general social work practice, due to the complexities within the students' environment. The complexity of problems encountered within schools necessitates a holistic approach targeted at multiple agents such as students, teachers and parents from multiple levels of interventions (Kelly et al., 2010). This suggests that the adoption of multiple intervention agents and levels in the curriculum of school social work can help in acquiring effective strategies geared towards addressing the academic and behavioural issues of students.

Alvarez et al. (2013) found, in their study of 100 of the largest school districts in the United States, that the number of students who complete high school is much higher in districts that employ the services of social workers in their schools as compared to schools without social workers. Similar results were found by Alvarez and Anderson-Ketchmark (2010) in their assessment of the 'Check & Connect' programme, indicating that school social work practice and its programmes,

which are aimed at improving school achievement and attendance and addressing behavioural issues of students, positively affect their retention and completion rates. It was found that students referred to the 'Check & Connect' programme in the United States have up to 90–94 percent attendance rates. Also, research by Durlak et al. (2011) indicate that violent behaviours will be less likely among schoolchildren who benefit from school-based interventions.

Sporadic attempts have been made by several researchers to ascertain the effects school social workers can have on the school climate (Alvarez et al., 2013; Comer, 1984; Eccles et al., 1993; Homana et al., 2006). Those by Alvarez et al. (2013), which sought to examine whether school social workers influence educational outcomes in the United States, found that school-based practitioners have the potential to improve school climates, encourage parental involvement, link students with resources and provide access to student support services. In addition, a quantitative study of 485 students and 104 school personnel by Hopson and Lawson (2011) in the United States revealed that school social workers seek to promote and ensure a school climate that is caring, safe and responsive to the needs of students. Generally, the study found that social workers play a pivotal role in creating a positive school climate because of their expertise in ecological systems perspectives, promotion of teamwork, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Mallet (2013) found that, in the state of Ohio, school social work programmes have, since 2001, created a conducive atmosphere for students' learning. He further established that maltreated children and youth assisted in this way progressed in their core academic subjects. The researcher thus concluded that social work intervention produces promising results in the education system.

Methods

The study used a qualitative research design and specifically an inductive approach to collect data from two groups, namely social workers from the Department of Social Welfare (DSW) and education officers from the GES. Inductively, a set of research questions that focused on the study was used to guide the data collection (Neuman, 2014). The study sought to investigate the perceptions of education and social welfare officers about the potential of school social work interventions in improving academic performance in Ghana's basic school. Two focus group discussions were conducted, with social workers forming one group and education officers making up the other group.

Participants

Participants were purposively sampled because of specific characteristics the researcher was looking out for (Neuman, 2014). The criteria for inclusion in the study were (1) that welfare officers must be qualified social workers and (2) all participants were required to have been working in their respective fields for a minimum of 5 years. This was done to ensure that only people with adequate experience and the requisite knowledge and skills would be selected for the study. A total of 15 participants, comprising 8 social welfare officers (qualified social workers) from the DSW in Ghana and 7 officers/experts from the field of education, including personnel from the Ghana Education Service, were involved in the study. Data saturation was reached with 14 participants (Creswell, 2012). In Ghana, the GES is the main body under the MOE which oversees the operations of all education and school-related matters nationwide, and the DSW similarly takes charge of the welfare and social protection of people across the country. There were 9 women and 6 men involved in the study and their ages ranged between 34 and 57 years; 7 participants (4 from education and 3 social workers) had 20 years or more of work experience with the GES and the DSW. The number of years of work experience of the other participants ranged between 6 and 15.

Recruitment procedures

A non-probability sampling technique allowed the researcher to select participants purposively (Tongco, 2007). The initial step involved approaching qualified personnel (individually) in their offices to explain the purpose of the study, and seeking their consent to take part in the study. In all, 21 people were contacted, 4 declined and 3 could not take part in the study because of time constraints. The next step after the participants consented was to submit two letters (one each) to the Ghana Education Service and the DSW to seek permission to conduct the study. After the permission was granted, it took some effort to get participants to agree on specific dates and time as a result of their busy work schedules. Finally, two different dates and times (one for each group) were agreed upon and it was proposed that venues for the focus group discussions should be located on participants' premises for their convenience.

The discussions turned out to be very informative and participants expressed themselves with passion because they had vested interests in the subject matter. The facilitator steered the discussions according to the objectives of the study. With participants' permission, the discussions were audiotaped and later transcribed to text format. The researcher then proofread the text transcript to maintain the tone and quality of the original audio recordings. After the data transcription, the researcher organised and coded all interview transcripts to allow for efficient data analysis.

For this study, permission sought from the concerned offices of education and social welfare adequately addressed issues of research ethics. Furthermore, the entire research process was self-monitored by the researcher to ensure that confidentiality and anonymity of participants were guaranteed. Informed consent, voluntary participation and other ethical standards were also observed in the conduct of the study. The role of the researcher from the Department of Social Work of the University of Ghana had no power implications on the study participants. Furthermore, the department has no oversight responsibility of the Ghana Education Service and the DSW. Consent was, however, sought from participants before data was collected.

Data analysis

Data were analysed with the aid of Atlas.ti software, which is a software used to aid the analyses of qualitative data. ATLAS.ti is specifically designed for qualitative research work that utilises deep levels of analysis involving large or small volumes of data (Darmody and Byrne, 2006). It is typically applied to studies that use qualitative research approaches to organise and analyse unstructured and non-numerical data (Friese, 2014). It helped to sort, arrange, classify and code information, and to examine relationships between the themes derived from the coding of the data to generate expected findings based on the research objectives and questions. In this study, themes and common patterns in the transcripts and field notes that relate to the main aim of the study were identified (see Table 1). Analysed data were discussed by drawing from existing literature and the patterns identified in the transcripts and notes.

Results

Perceptions from the focus groups regarding school social work practice in general

The social workers' focus group expressed their views about the practice of social work in schools around the world (see Table 1). Being professionals themselves, they provided more detailed information about the practice than the education officers. They were of the view that social workers provide services including counselling and special education that are needed by many pupils. They

Table 1. Themes and examples of comments derived from the focus group with social workers.

<p>1.1. Social workers provide critical services in schools (including special needs services) <i>I am aware that they offer many important services (counselling, advocacy and many more) in schools which I believe our schools in Ghana need as soon as possible.</i></p> <p>1.2. Social workers are qualified to help students, teachers and parents deal with their psychosocial issues <i>As a social worker myself, I studied school social work in school, which is why I strongly believe that just as our fellow professionals are doing in the US, our training has provided us with the skills to assist students, teachers, and parents to effectively resolves their psycho-social problems.</i></p> <p>1.3. School social workers also play key roles, including the role of a broker in schools <i>My opinion is that the various roles that school social workers perform are key when you talk about children's welfare and academic performance. For instance, as a broker, they are able to link children and families to certain resources, including healthcare and financial services</i></p>
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Table 2. Themes and examples of comments derived from the focus group with education officers regarding their views about school social work practice in general.

<p>2.1. Social workers are equipped with the skills needed to assist students with problems <i>From what I know, social work professionals are well trained to handle children and families with problems and so it is hoped that vulnerable children (children with disabilities) will receive the needed help from them.</i></p> <p>2.2. Their duties complement the work of teachers <i>The work they do in schools contributes to creating an atmosphere for learning which supports the work of teachers.</i></p> <p>2.3. Social workers are equipped with the skills needed to assist students with problems <i>My knowledge about social work professionals is that they are well trained to handle children and families with problems and so it is hoped that vulnerable children (children with disabilities) will receive the needed help from them.</i></p>

explained that assigned social workers liaise between the home and the school, thus ensuring the involvement of parents in their children's education, linking clients to resources and creating an enabling environment for teaching and learning.

As shown in Table 2, the education officers were also of the opinion that school social work practice will first introduce staff members to schools whose job description does include teaching, thereby reducing the burden on teachers to allow them more contact hours with their pupils, and that social workers will have the skills and time to deal with the numerous problems that children encounter at school. Taken together, both focus groups suggested that school social work practice has only been associated with positive outcomes for some children. It, therefore presents itself as a significant addition to school environments irrespective of their geographic location in the universe.

Reasons assigned to support the need for social workers in Ghana

Table 3 summarises the reasons why participants were of the view that school social workers are needed in Ghana. The social workers overwhelmingly agree that school social work practice is needed in schools as an intervention to contribute to improved academic performance. They are of the view that because of their rigorous training, social workers are well equipped to remove some of the barriers to academic achievement. These were that social work practitioners are well placed to provide essential services to children and families (mentioned 13 times), visit homes to increase parental involvement (mentioned 15 times) and provide special needs services for children with disability (mentioned 9 times).

Table 3. Themes used and examples of comments made by the social workers' focus group about the reason why Ghana needs school social workers.

3.1. They will create a strong link between the home and the school

Practitioners work with parents, children, teachers, and school authorities to create a friendly learning environment . . . parental involvement is critical, but lacking in our schools, school social workers will visit homes to keep parents involved in their children's education.

3.2. To provide essential services to children and families

The need for social workers in Ghana's basic schools is absolute . . . if we want to remove barriers to successful education and improve academic performance; I think school social workers will be the best people to help children deal with intellectual, behavioural, and other problems.

3.3. Evidence from the USA suggests that school social work interventions can bring a positive impact on academic performance.

Since it is working for others out there, I strongly believe that it would be helpful to our children and the school as a whole.

3.4. Provide support for children with special needs

Many needs of children with disability suffer neglect because teachers are not trained to handle them, but social workers will be able to assist them to overcome some of the problems (including stigmatisation and discrimination) they face.

3.5. Social workers will also advocate for improved services and resources to support children in school

The role of advocacy is very important because through that policymakers will receive information about the needs of children and schools.

The reasons given by the education officers are summarised in Table 4. The reasons mentioned most include the following: social workers will help solve the problems children face in school (mentioned 6 times); bring skills that are different from regular teaching skills while devoting much time to children and families who may be needing support (mentioned 8 times); and complement the work of teachers and other stakeholders in the field (11 mentions).

Comments made by social workers suggest that they have a good understanding of school social work practice and its significant role in improving academic performance. Reasons provided by both groups point to the fact that schools in Ghana have a need for social workers to help remove barriers in the form of problems facing children in schools. Participants expressed the view that there are student- family- and school-related factors that negatively affect teaching and learning, which necessitates school social work interventions in schools.

Best ways of adopting school social work practice into the Ghana education system

Table 5 presents suggestions on the best way to implement school social interventions in Ghana. There was a consensus by both focus groups that school social work interventions are needed in schools to help address the challenges children encounter. The most common way suggested was that stakeholders in education, including the respective ministries, teachers, parents and social workers, among others, must be fully engaged before decisions are made (13 mentions). The next were suggestions to introduce school social work practice on a pilot basis (11 mentions), which is the usual practice for the GoG with the introduction of major programmes in the country. Nine participants suggested that the government must ensure that there will be an adequate number of qualified social workers to be posted to schools around the country before commencing anything. This is because most public schools struggle with problems related to poor academic performance, and therefore measures like school social work practice must be comprehensive enough to benefit all schools and children, with an emphasis on rural communities.

Table 4. Themes used and examples of comments made by the education officers about the reasons why Ghana needs school social workers.

4.1. It can help to enhance the education system

No matter what we do as educationists and teachers, the children are still not performing appreciatively, if school social work interventions can change that, then it would be welcome

4.2. The education system is in crisis, school social workers can help to restore it

For instance, in the past five years, we have had some districts recording zero per cent pass in Basic Education Certificate Examination. Zero per cent pass is a situation where you have a whole school failing . . . that is when not even a single student passed to enter into a senior high school.

4.3. More time and attention will be dedicated to the welfare of children provided by social workers

We are in charge of schools under our districts and we simply cannot devote much time to attend to students with problems (unless the problem becomes very serious in nature). Sometimes, by the time supervisors and others discover students' problems, it may be too late because the child would have already dropped out of school or failed their examination.

4.4. To investigate and assess situations in order to find solutions in the interest of children

Practitioners will use their skills and position to ensure that the underlying causes of problems facing school children are addressed effectively.

4.5. School social workers will reduce the teachers' workload

In our schools, teachers become mothers to these children and this "mothering" takes much of their time. We hope that the introduction of school social workers will reduce this burden on teachers. I believe teachers must concentrate on teaching and other matters be left to professionals with the right training. Social workers are perfectly qualified to help students, teachers, and parents deal with their psycho-social issues. Sometimes, we get to the school to check on them (teachers) and operations and would be informed that a teacher was absent because he/she was accompanying a sick student to their home or a hospital . . . other times we are told teachers have gone to pay visits to parents of students to share some concerns.

Table 5. Themes used and examples of suggestions made by both focus groups about the best ways of adopting school social work practice in Ghana.

5.1. The best way would be to make it a part of the GES, another programme to be run

I think school social work practice must be implemented as a special programme under the education service because it is about the schools and the GES is the authority which oversees everything concerning education and schools in Ghana.

5.2. Social welfare must take control of any social work interventions even if they operate in schools

The social work professions have strict regulations for practitioners and to ensure that these rules are followed, it would be best to be put social workers in charge of their operations.

5.3. The education system seems overloaded with different things which may be part of the problems that we are trying to solve.

I think social welfare has adequately qualified personnel that are capable of operating school social work programmes successfully in Ghana.

5.4. The two ministries should come together to work out how to successfully implement school social work practice.

Many programmes in Ghana do not achieve their goals because of how they were implemented, sometimes as if they are in a rush to start before adequate planning and preparation. This time, all stakeholders must be brought on board to find out the best means of implementation.

5.5. The government must secure adequate funding and support before introducing school social work practice.

From my experience, financial constraint is a huge factor in determining whether a programme will be successful or not. Imagine that social workers will be posted to schools and there will be no money to pay their salaries.

5.6. Expand institutions to train more school social workers to fill all schools.

I don't think that Ghana currently has an adequate number of qualified social workers and therefore needs to provide the opportunity for many more to be trained before rolling out any social work programme in our schools.

Discussion

Although evidence from research indicates a positive relationship between school social work practice and improved academic performance, it has not formed part of the efforts to improve the quality of education in Ghana. The participants were very emphatic about how children in Ghana's schools need interventions from school social workers in order to cope with the plethora of problems they encounter within and outside the school environments. It was suggested that although teachers and other staff members do their best to assist students, they lack the requisite skills and training to effectively tackle and resolve some of the problems. For instance, providing counselling services to young children especially requires specialised training as a major part of social work training. As indicated by Flolu et al. (2007), the unavailability of adequate professional services to children in schools may lead to more serious problems for them. The results from this study also show that teachers are compelled to spend significant amounts of time (during which they should be teaching) to assist students with problems. On the one hand this is seen to reduce the contact hours between teachers and students in the classroom, and on the other hand the teachers' workloads increase and affect their teaching, which ultimately affects academic performance negatively. With regard to the previous points, participants were of the view that the presence of social work professionals within school environments will reduce the 'mothering' and other burdens on teachers to enable them to concentrate on their teaching.

As a country that attained some of United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), including universal primary education (MDG 2A [United Nations Development Programme, 2015]), Ghana is even more determined to become more successful in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). UNESCO identifies education as a major factor to stimulate development; it is important to make provisions to create 'child friendlier' conditions. This will include ensuring that qualified professionals such as social workers will be available to provide needed support in schools. The findings also indicate that basic schools in Ghana need school social work practice to help improve academic performance. For some participants, the need is 'absolute'. This need is born out of the fact that Ghana is a developing country faced with challenges of poverty, unemployment, broken homes, child molestation, wife battering, child labour, child trafficking, school dropouts, academic failure, and so on (Adekoya et al., 2018; Banchirigah, 2008; Ibrahim, 2015). Children affected by these social problems require professional help in order to be able to cope in school. Therefore, social workers are needed in the school system to help the pupils by providing a link between the home and school, to address the issues that lead to poor academic performance.

Findings further show that respondents have expectations of school social work practice if it is adopted in Ghana. Potential benefits (emerging from the findings) include improved academic performance, access to effective counselling and support services, and attention to children with special needs. Others are advocacy, linking the home and the school, increased parental involvement, protection of the rights of children, education of the public on relevant issues, and seeking financial support for children from low-income families.

Limitations of the study

The study noted the following limitations. First, existing literature on school social work practice from Ghana and Africa in general was very limited, which accounts for why most of the information and literature utilised in the study was derived from the United States. In addition, a number of the targeted participants were reluctant to become involved in the study as they feared misrepresentation of their opinions by the researcher. The education officers especially expressed concerns about how (negatively) their views may be portrayed to the public. This is due to the fact that

they hold public office and must be careful about whatever information they give out to the public. A number of potential participants declined the offer to be part of the study as a result of this concern. This led to a delay in the recruitment procedures until the researcher managed to convince them of confidentiality in research.

Conclusion

The study found that although officers of the Ghana Education Service (GES) affirmed the significance of school social workers addressing the psychosocial, academic, health and behavioural problems of pupils, the Ministry of Health and the GES failed to introduce the initiative in Ghanaian schools. In the absence of professional school social workers, pupils often turn to peers and class teachers for solutions. However, with limited expertise to effectively handle the plethora of problems, comprising broken homes, child labour, abuse, neglect, lack of parental supervision, hunger and intimate relationship issues, and so on, that school children present, it is not surprising that all the participants in this research called for the introduction of school social workers in Ghanaian schools. Accordingly, the study observed that not only would the introduction of school social workers aid the effective resolution of children's psychosocial and emotional difficulties in Ghana, it also constitutes a sustainable approach towards the removal of barriers to pupils' educational success in the country.

Even though some of the education officers were of the opinion that social work functions are being performed by other units of the Ghana Education Service, this view was contrary to what professional social workers had to share. For them, social work is a profession that must be practised by social workers and not teachers. They were therefore not in favour of the practice of sending teachers on guidance and counselling courses for them to be able to effectively handle all the social needs of pupils. It is emphasised that schools with a professional social worker whose primary duty is to attend to the social and psychological needs of students will lead to better educational outcomes.

It can be concluded from the results of this study that academic performance in basic schools is not in line with expectations. Both focus groups acknowledged that the education sector of Ghana needs revamping to improve the quality and also become more supportive of children, especially the most vulnerable such as those with disabilities. The study identified several reasons why schools in Ghana may need interventions of school social workers. These include (1) that social workers are needed to provide certain essential services in schools, (2) that social workers possess specialised skills that are different from those of teachers and other professionals, (3) that they will dedicate all their time to assist and provide support to children in school, and (4) that they will strengthen the bond between home and school to increase the level of parental involvement in education, among others. Participants suggested that in order for the successful implementation of programmes such as school social work, stakeholders' engagement, financial readiness, and training of more professionals will be key considerations.

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