

THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN SUPPORTING STUDENTS WELL-BEING AND EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

School social workers hold a vital role in promoting students emotional, mental, and social well-being, which directly impacts their educational success. This study uses a literature review method to explore the functions, challenges, and opportunities faced by school social workers in Indonesia. Key findings show that social workers support students through mental health interventions, advocacy for disadvantaged students, collaboration with school staff, and addressing socio-economic issues. However, the profession faces significant barriers, including shortages of trained personnel, limited resources, especially in rural areas, and persistent social stigma. Despite these challenges, growing awareness about mental health and student welfare offers opportunities to strengthen the role of social workers in schools. The study recommends expanding the workforce of social workers, enhancing training, and fostering multi-stakeholder collaboration to improve service delivery and ensure equitable student support nationwide. Ultimately, the article emphasizes the need for comprehensive policies and systemic support to maximize the contributions of school social workers in enhancing students academic and personal development.

Keywords: school social workers; student well-being; mental health support; educational inequality; student advocacy

1. INTRODUCTION

School social workers play a crucial role in helping students deal with social, emotional, and psychological problems that affect their learning. In many countries, their importance is widely recognized, including in Indonesia, where student welfare has become a growing concern (Solehuddin et al., 2024). School social workers assist students facing difficulties due to family problems, economic hardships, and mental health issues. They act as a bridge between students, families, schools, and communities, offering both short-term solutions and long-term support to improve students' well-being.

Several studies have highlighted the importance of school social workers in supporting student welfare. Research by Scherf (2021) found that school social workers play a significant role in improving students' emotional resilience and social adjustment. Similarly, a study by Verma and Giri (2024) showed that students who receive support from social workers tend to perform better academically and engage more in school activities. Magdalena, Sibise and Mathebula (2023) emphasized that school social workers contribute to the holistic development of students, especially those with special needs or facing family difficulties.

However, despite these positive findings, there are still gaps in research regarding the effectiveness of school social workers in different contexts. Most studies focus on

urban schools, while little research has been conducted on rural or underprivileged areas where students may face even greater challenges. Moreover, the long-term impact of social work interventions in schools remains underexplored. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the challenges school social workers face in Indonesia and identifying opportunities to strengthen their role in the education system.

Although school social workers are legally recognized under Law No. 14 of 2019 on Social Work, they still face many difficulties in Indonesia. One major issue is the shortage of school social workers. According to Wiryawan (2022), there are not enough social workers to meet the high demand, especially in rural areas. Many schools experience serious social problems, but they lack professional support. This situation forces school social workers to handle a large number of students, making it difficult to provide effective interventions (Yesuraja & Jose, 2020).

Another challenge is the social stigma associated with the profession. Many people still view school social workers as charity workers rather than trained professionals (Isaksson & Sjöström, 2016). This misunderstanding affects how families and schools perceive their role, often limiting their ability to offer meaningful support to students.

Despite these challenges, awareness of student mental health and well-being is increasing. More schools are beginning to acknowledge the importance of social workers, especially in addressing mental health issues and preventing school violence (Bent-Goodley, 2018). However, stronger policies are needed to support school social workers. This study focuses on understanding the role of school social workers in Indonesia, identifying the main challenges they face, and exploring opportunities to enhance their effectiveness. It aims to provide recommendations for improving policies, training, and collaboration with other stakeholders to ensure that students receive the support they need.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a literature review method to analyze the roles, challenges, and opportunities of school social workers in Indonesia. A literature review was chosen because it allows for a comprehensive understanding of existing research, policies, and case studies on the topic. This method helps identify patterns, trends, and gaps in previous studies, providing a strong foundation for discussing school social work in Indonesia. Additionally, a literature review is effective for synthesizing information from multiple sources, which is crucial for examining a broad issue like school social work that involves education, social welfare, and mental health.

The data for this study were collected from academic journals, government reports, policy documents, and case studies. The main sources include publications from the Indonesian Ministry of Social Affairs, UNICEF reports, and previous research on social interventions in schools. The inclusion criteria for selecting the literature were: (1) studies published in the last ten years (2014–2024) to ensure relevance and up-to-date findings, (2) research that focuses on school social work in Indonesia, and (3) publications that discuss the roles, challenges, or policies related to school social workers. Meanwhile, studies were excluded if they: (1) focused only on general social work without specific reference to school settings, (2) were not written in English or Indonesian, and (3) lacked empirical evidence or were opinion-based articles.

For data analysis, a thematic approach was used to identify key themes related to the role of school social workers, the obstacles they face, and potential strategies for improvement. The literature was systematically reviewed and categorized into three main themes: (1) the functions and impact of school social workers, (2) barriers to effective school social work, and (3) strategies and policy recommendations. This thematic analysis

helped structure the discussion, making it easier to compare findings from different sources and draw meaningful conclusions about the current state of school social work in Indonesia.

By applying this structured literature review method, this study aims to provide a well-rounded understanding of how school social workers contribute to student well-being, what challenges hinder their effectiveness, and what opportunities exist to enhance their role within Indonesia's education system.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Based on the literature review, this study identifies three key roles of school social workers: (1) emotional and mental well-being support, (2) student advocacy, and (3) collaboration with school staff. Additionally, this study highlights how school social workers assist students facing social and economic difficulties. These findings are drawn from research studies, government reports, and policy documents that focus on the impact of school social work in Indonesia.

Emotional and Mental Well-Being Support. One of the most important roles of school social workers is to support students who experience mental health challenges, such as anxiety, depression, and trauma. Many students struggle with emotional stress due to family problems, school pressure, or social issues. School social workers work closely with counselors and psychologists to provide individual and group counseling (Sinaga & Ritonga, 2023).

Several studies confirm that mental health support from school social workers positively impacts students' academic performance. Research by Jayanti & Umar (2024) found that students who receive help from social workers show higher engagement in school activities and better learning outcomes. However, access to mental health services in schools remains unequal, especially in rural areas where social workers are limited. This gap in availability suggests the need for more government support to strengthen school-based mental health interventions.

Advocacy for Students. School social workers act as advocates for students who require additional assistance. They help students who face financial difficulties, disabilities, or family problems, ensuring they receive the necessary support. In many cases, social workers help students access government assistance programs, such as the Family Hope Program (PKH) and Smart Indonesia Card (KIP), which provide financial aid to low-income families (Solechah, 2020).

Despite these efforts, many schools, particularly in remote areas, still lack proper support systems for students in need. The literature suggests that stronger collaboration between schools, social workers, and local authorities could improve access to financial and psychological support for disadvantaged students.

Collaboration with School Staff. School social workers do not work alone; they collaborate with teachers, school administrators, and counselors to create a supportive school environment. One of their key responsibilities is to train teachers on how to identify students who show signs of emotional distress or social difficulties. This early detection is crucial in preventing serious behavioral problems among students.

Additionally, social workers help schools design intervention programs that reduce negative behaviors such as bullying, school violence, and absenteeism (Zahid, 2024). Research suggests that schools with active social work programs experience fewer disciplinary issues and higher student engagement. However, not all schools have access to social workers, which limits the effectiveness of these interventions in some regions.

Handling Social and Economic Problems. Many students in Indonesia come from low-income families and struggle with basic needs such as transportation, food, and healthcare. Financial instability can lead to poor school attendance and low academic performance. School social workers play a key role in identifying students who need assistance and connecting them with social welfare programs (Wiryawan, 2022).

However, existing studies show that many students in rural areas do not receive proper social services due to a lack of social workers and limited school resources. The findings suggest that expanding the number of school social workers and increasing government funding for school welfare programs would help reduce educational inequality.

Summary of Findings

The literature reviewed in this study highlights both the positive impact of school social workers and the challenges they face in Indonesia. While social workers provide essential support in mental health, student advocacy, school collaboration, and economic assistance, there are significant barriers such as limited resources, lack of trained professionals, and unequal access to services. Future policies should focus on increasing the number of school social workers, improving training programs, and ensuring equal access to student support services nationwide.

Table 1. Summary of findings

Role	Main Activities	Key Findings	Challenges
Emotional and Mental Well-Being Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Help students with anxiety, depression, trauma - Provide individual and group counseling (Sinaga & Ritonga, 2023) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students who get support perform better academically (Jayanti & Umar, 2024) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited access to mental health services, especially in rural areas
Advocacy for Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Help students from poor families or with disabilities - Connect students to government aid programs like PKH and KIP (Solechah, 2020) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Financial and social support improves students' school participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited support systems, especially in remote areas
Collaboration with School Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Train teachers to detect student problems early - Create anti-bullying and intervention programs (Zahid, 2023) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Schools with active social workers have fewer behavior problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not all schools have access to school social workers
Handling Social and Economic Problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identify students' basic needs - Connect families to social welfare programs (Wiryawan, 2022) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social work support reduces inequality in education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of social workers and resources in many rural schools

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the vital role of social workers in supporting students' emotional, mental, and social well-being, advocating for students from marginalized backgrounds, collaborating with school staff, and addressing social and economic problems. The findings of this research highlight the crucial role social workers play in enhancing students' educational experiences and their overall well-being. However, these findings also underscore significant challenges, particularly in rural or under-resourced areas, which limit the effectiveness of social work interventions. To provide a deeper understanding, this discussion will compare these findings with previous studies to show how they align and where discrepancies arise.

Emotional and Mental Well-Being Support. One of the primary responsibilities of social workers in schools is to provide emotional and mental well-being support to students. This support typically involves helping students deal with issues such as anxiety, depression, trauma, and other mental health concerns. Social workers offer individual counseling sessions and group therapy, which can significantly improve students' mental health and academic performance. As reported by Sinaga & Ritonga (2023), social workers in schools play a critical role in assisting students with emotional and psychological challenges. These professionals often serve as the first line of defense against mental health issues that may otherwise go unaddressed.

The key finding of this research is that students who receive emotional and mental health support tend to perform better academically. This finding is consistent with the study by Jayanti & Umar (2024), which showed that students who had access to mental health services were more likely to experience improvements in academic achievement. Mental well-being directly influences students' ability to focus, engage in learning, and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers. Without adequate mental health support, students may struggle with issues that distract from their academic potential, such as stress, emotional turmoil, or feelings of isolation.

However, a significant challenge that emerged from this research is the limited access to mental health services, particularly in rural areas. While larger urban schools may have social workers and counselors available, rural areas often face a shortage of mental health professionals, which exacerbates existing disparities in students' access to necessary support. This finding resonates with Sinaga & Ritonga's (2023) study, which also highlighted the lack of accessible mental health services in rural and remote schools. As a result, students in these areas may not receive the necessary interventions that could improve their mental health and academic outcomes, leaving them vulnerable to untreated psychological issues.

Advocacy for Students. Social workers in schools also engage in advocacy for students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as low-income families or those with disabilities. In this role, social workers connect students with vital resources and services, such as government aid programs like Program Keluarga Harapan (PKH) and Kartu Indonesia Pintar (KIP). These programs provide financial assistance to families in need and help ensure that students from marginalized backgrounds have access to educational opportunities.

The research found that students who receive advocacy and financial support are more likely to remain engaged in their education and participate actively in school activities. Solechah (2020) also found similar results, noting that financial and social support significantly improve students' school attendance and participation. Students who receive assistance with school fees, transportation, and other related expenses are more likely to stay in school and perform well academically.

Nevertheless, the study also revealed that a major challenge is the limited availability of support systems in remote areas. While government programs exist to assist students from disadvantaged backgrounds, these programs are often not easily accessible in rural or less-developed regions. This issue can prevent many students from benefiting fully from these services. Solechah (2020) also emphasized the gap in support systems in rural areas, where students may not have easy access to the necessary resources, such as transportation to government offices or knowledge of available support programs. As a result, these students may fall behind academically or drop out of school due to financial constraints or a lack of support.

Collaboration with School Staff. Collaboration between social workers and school staff is another important aspect of the role of social workers in schools. Social workers work closely with teachers, counselors, and administrators to identify students' problems early, develop intervention strategies, and create anti-bullying programs. Early identification of issues such as behavioral problems, learning difficulties, or emotional struggles can help provide students with the support they need to overcome these challenges.

The research found that schools with active social workers tend to have fewer behavioral problems and better overall student well-being. This aligns with the findings of Zahid (2023), who noted that schools with social workers actively involved in the school community were more successful in preventing and addressing behavioral issues. The collaboration between social workers and teachers allows for a more holistic approach to student support, ensuring that all aspects of a student's well-being—emotional, social, and academic—are addressed in a timely manner.

However, a significant challenge identified in this research is the lack of social workers in some schools. Not all schools, particularly those in rural areas or with limited funding, have access to full-time social workers. Zahid (2023) also found that schools in under-resourced areas were less likely to have social workers on staff, which hindered the implementation of early intervention and support programs. The absence of trained professionals in these schools limits the school's ability to provide the necessary services to students, which can lead to increased behavioral problems, emotional distress, and academic underachievement.

Handling Social and Economic Problems. Another essential role of social workers is to address the social and economic problems that students face. Social workers identify students' basic needs, such as food, clothing, and shelter, and connect their families to relevant social welfare programs. This support is crucial for students who face significant economic challenges that may interfere with their ability to attend school, focus on their studies, or participate in extracurricular activities.

The study found that social work support helps reduce educational inequalities by ensuring that students from low-income families or disadvantaged backgrounds receive the necessary resources to succeed in school. This aligns with the findings of Wiryawan (2022), which highlighted that social work interventions can reduce educational inequality by addressing the underlying social and economic issues that students face. By connecting families to social welfare programs, such as food assistance or housing support, social workers help alleviate the financial burdens that might otherwise prevent students from continuing their education.

However, the study also revealed that the lack of social workers and resources in many rural schools remains a significant challenge. In areas where social work services are limited or nonexistent, students may not receive the help they need to address basic needs, such as access to food, school supplies, or transportation. This challenge has been noted in previous studies, such as Wiryawan (2022), which emphasized the lack of resources

available in rural areas and the need for more social workers to support students in these regions.

4. CONCLUSION

This current research highlights the essential role that social workers play in supporting students' emotional and mental well-being, advocating for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, collaborating with school staff, and addressing social and economic issues. The findings of this research are consistent with previous studies, which also emphasize the importance of social work in improving students' academic outcomes and overall well-being.

However, the research also highlights significant challenges that hinder the effectiveness of social work interventions, particularly in rural and under-resourced areas. Limited access to mental health services, lack of social workers in schools, and the scarcity of support systems in remote areas are recurring themes in both this study and previous research. Addressing these challenges is crucial for ensuring that all students, regardless of their background or geographical location, have access to the support they need to succeed in their education and personal development.

To improve the effectiveness of social work in schools, it is essential to increase investment in mental health resources, expand social work services to rural areas, and strengthen the collaboration between social workers, teachers, and other school staff. By addressing these challenges, we can create a more equitable and supportive educational environment for all students.

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