

## Strengthening social work practice in schools in India: Reflections from theory

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### Abstract

Social work has much to contribute to schools. While teachers develop the potential of learners through transmitting knowledge, skills and values, social workers can provide support for learners' well-being so they are ready to learn. Using ecological systems theory to evaluate and solve problems, school social workers can play an instrumental role in creating an enabling school environment, guiding children and youth to their reach their potential intellectually, emotionally and socially. The current paper begins with the significance of social work practice in school and presents its various models of practice. Unveiling the intertwining tasks of social workers and teacher educators in a school setting, the paper locates various challenges faced by social work professionals in the contemporary school setting. Last but not the least, the paper suggests various multitier roles for social work practitioners in schools.

**Key words:** Schools, social work, India

### Introduction

Social work in a school setting involves the provision of support to students in their school, family and community life to ensure that students reach their full potential in the educational setting (Constable, 2009). As a branch of social work, school social work is a specialized area of practice within the broad field of the social work profession providing a critical link between

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school, home and community. Aiming to coordinate the efforts of multiple stakeholders, social workers work as bridge and enable the students to improve their academic achievement and social, emotional, and behavioural competence. They seek to ensure equitable educational opportunities and try to create a pro social environment in the school system, thereby promoting respect and dignity for everyone.

School social workers with their democratic and humanitarian values are instrumental in solving the psychosocial problems, diagnosing, treating and preventing various maladjustments among children and improving their social functioning to ensure their peace and happiness. They work directly with the school administrators as well as students and families, providing leadership in forming school discipline policies, mental health intervention, crisis management, and support services. As part of an interdisciplinary team to help students succeed, social workers also facilitate community involvement in the schools while advocating for student success (NASW, 2016). School social workers indeed bring unique knowledge and skills to the school system and the student services team. As trained mental health professionals, they assist students with mental health and behavioural concerns; provide positive behavioural, academic and classroom support, consultation with teachers, parents and administrators as well as offer individual and group counselling/therapy. Thus, school social workers are instrumental in furthering the mission of the schools which is to provide a setting for teaching, learning and for the attainment of competence and confidence. They provide school-based mental health services that include a broad spectrum of assessment, prevention, intervention, postvention, counselling, consultation and referral activities and services. These services are essential to a school's ability to ensure a safe and healthy learning environment for all students, addressing classroom behaviour and discipline, promoting students' academic success, preventing and responding to crisis, supporting students' social-emotional needs, identifying and responding to serious mental health concerns, and supporting and partnering with at-risk families. Ideally, school-based services dove-

tail with community-based services so that children and youth receive the support they need in a seamless, coordinated, and comprehensive system of care (School Social Work Association of America, 2018).

### **Significance of School Social Work in the Indian Context**

The school system in the contemporary Indian context is viewed as a progressive and proactive institution of society that enables children to learn values and ethics considered important for their overall personality development. The Indian family system is currently undergoing rapid transformation that is evident in the increase in the number of nuclear families, a fast pace of life and a general rise in the number of cases of marital discord, teenage pregnancies/abortions, single parenthood, rising number of lifestyle diseases and incidents of alcoholism and drug abuse. Such societal changes put an increased psycho-social and economic pressure on the school system to not only fulfil its role as an academic institution but also provide a positive, pro-social environment for children (Anand, 2010).

Besides an increased pressure from changing values of the family system, some of the impediments faced by schools are also related to factors associated with the larger school system itself. For example, lack of necessary physical infrastructure, shortfall in the number of teachers that leads to a high teacher pupil ratio, overloaded school curriculum are some of the major challenges being faced by the schools system today. Due to these factors that are supplemented by the bureaucratic functioning of most schools, it becomes difficult for teachers to give individual attention to each child or to treat each child as a separate entity in the classroom (Anand, 2014). Moreover, due to the rapid societal transformations in the contemporary era, the schools are also being viewed as 'corrective institutions' that play a major role in re-socialisation of the child who has already acquired some understanding of 'do's and don'ts' from his/her family (Gandhi, 1995). These factors lead to intervention by the social work profession in schools with its broad concern on psycho-social well-being of the child.

School social work, therefore, has found an increased demand in India especially since the last two decades keeping in mind the changing socio-cultural environment and increased pressure in the society. Social workers with their expertise in understanding human behaviour, necessary skills to create a facilitating environment are equipped to handle a variety of situations in the school at micro as well as macro levels. School system besides providing education aims to give support services, develop educational and other programmes corresponding to special needs of students. This leads to intervention by social work, especially in the context of failure in socialization processes with focus on emotional development and social functioning of the child. Social work practice has the necessary expertise and a dual focus on changing environments and enabling individuals to enhance their coping mechanisms to deal with their distinct life situations (Anand, 2014). Let us unveil some of the significant theoretical frameworks of social work practice in the school setting:

### **Theoretical Models for School Social Work**

Social work services in a school handle a variety of situations for all members of the school system. An array of models for school social work is used, each having its unique advantages. Presented below are some popular theoretical frameworks for practicing social work practice in the school setting:

Multi-Tier Model by NASW: National Association of Social Workers (2012) has given a multitier model for social work intervention in schools that includes three tiers relating to prevention and intervention. Tier 1 refers to evidence-informed, school wide prevention programs and practices that teach positive behaviours promote social emotional development and ensure a school climate conducive to learning. Tier 1 programs and practices are implemented by all staff in the school setting. Tier 2 refers to the use of evidence-informed, small group, and short-term interventions focused on improving early academic and social-emotional engagement to reduce problem

behaviour. For example, these interventions could target conflict resolution, social skills, mental health needs, and short-term crisis situations that do not require more intensive tier 3 interventions. On the basis of data demonstrating a lack of response to tier 1 intervention, students are referred for the additional support offered at tier 2. These strategies could be efficient to apply and effective in terms of producing rapid improvement in students' ability to learn and be successful in school. Tier 3 refers to the use of evidence-informed individual and long-term interventions. Tier 3 interventions are provided to students who have serious academic, behavioural or social-emotional problems that constitute a chronic condition that has not responded to data-driven tier 1 or tier 2 interventions. The goal of this tier is to reduce the negative impact of the condition on a student's functioning. Tier 3 interventions involve intensive individualized strategies that are implemented for extended periods of time and frequently involve community agencies (NASW, 2012).

**Evidence-Based Practice Model:** Kelly (2008) has given a three-tier Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) model to help school social work increase its effectiveness and to provide a framework to resolve its identity crisis. It describes how school social workers can assess the needs of their schools and use EBP as a process to design and implement school-level programmes that address complex and multifaceted problems in a school.

**Response to Intervention Framework:** Response to Intervention (RtI) is another framework for organizing evidence-based practices in a systematic process for the purpose of determining what interventions enable learning. RtI is structured to address academic and behavioural needs by differentiating supports and interventions using student performance data. The four essential components of RtI include: (1) a school-wide, multi-level instructional and behavioural system for preventing school failure, (2) screening of all students to determine who is at risk for poor learning outcomes, (3) progress monitoring during instruction, and (4) data-based decision making for instruction, movement within the multi-level system, and disability identification in accordance with state requirements. Based on the strengths-based perspective,

school social workers thus promote a multi-tiered system of support that provides early identification of needs in four domains: academic, social, emotional, and behavioural (Clark & Alvarez, 2010). School social workers collaborate with teachers and parents to provide appropriate interventions and navigate school-based and community services to enable students to experience success in the four domains.

**Ecological Framework:** Dupper (2003) gave an ecological perspective for attaining a holistic understanding of school social work that focused on the reciprocal interactions of students with environmental factors where each child is treated as an inseparable part of various other social systems. This perspective views a student's problems as lack of 'goodness of fit' between the child and his/her environment instead of viewing them as disturbances located within the child. Thus, it has a dual focus on strengthening a student's coping patterns as well as improving the quality of the impinging environment. Kelly (2008) and Dupper (2003) have also raised the issue of increased evidence of the concentration of school social work services handling students' maladjustments. They have stressed upon the need to expand the services to preventive-oriented work that includes community organisation, parent outreach and in-service training for teachers. Research evidence by Constable (2009) also reiterates the need for collective and individual involvement of various stakeholders (parents, teachers, pupils and administrators) in order to attain success. Such intensive work would require skills from all levels of practice- micro, mezzo and macro (Openshaw, 2007). Therefore, skills in assessment, counselling, home visits, group work, advocacy, referrals, mediation, resource and programme development, and training with a sound knowledge base is considered necessary for a school social worker.

It is evident from the above discussion that social work intervention in the school setting has to be holistic and multi-tiered. Let us now take a look at the intertwining purposes as well as tasks to be carried out by teachers and school social workers in a school setting:

### **The Intertwining Purposes of School Social Work and Education**

Social work and education are complementary professions. The purpose of social work is to promote human well-being, human rights and social justice, with special attention to those who are marginalised by society, experiencing oppression, poverty or disability. Education is dedicated to developing human potential through transmitting knowledge, skills and values. Social work, using ecological systems theory to mobilize the strengths of school, family and community, is well-suited to supporting education by helping learners (from pre-school through tertiary education, including informal education and adult literacy) to overcome obstacles to educational success (Huxtable, Scottie, Ulziitungalag, 2012).

Social workers and many educators share similar values with respect to the belief in each person possessing his/ her intrinsic worth and regarding people having common needs. Schools and families are environments where children should develop, discover their own dignity and come to realize their potential (Constable, 2009). The education tasks and social work tasks in the school are considered as overlapping since both are concerned with the social functioning of individuals (Robinson, 1978). In the present context the individuals include school children and their families, particularly those who are experiencing social breakdown as the result of faulty or failed socialization processes. Although there is a considerable overlap in the task performance of both schools and social work system, the social work system tends to become involved when the schools are failing to carry out their tasks. Though similar knowledge is available to both social workers and to teachers, their orientation and understanding is different. Teachers tend to be child centred with their orientation from the perspective of an overall school-based value system while social workers are oriented towards having individualized concern towards people, in this case, the children. Both teachers and social workers are influenced by the orientation, attitudes and value systems of their two spheres of operation and therefore the methods of intervention which schools and social work agencies adopt are different. However, it may be reiterated that aims

of families, schools and the social work profession are to promote the social functioning of individuals. Let us now gain an insight into the goals of the school system and social work profession and analyze the similarities between the two. Table 1.01 presented below depicts the areas of overlap of educational tasks and social work tasks in schools in terms of process of society:

**Table: 1.01**

*Overlap of educational tasks and social work tasks in schools*

Educational Tasks	Social Work Tasks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To teach specific cognitive skills such as reading, writing and to impart information</li> <li>• To orient the child to his/her intellectual heritage and seeking to commit him/ her to its ends</li> <li>• To teach the child cultural goals and values and to make clear their relevance</li> <li>• To provide guidance and models for problem solving and for role taking</li> <li>• To provide an atmosphere which is conducive to learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To enable individuals, families and groups to subscribe to the dominant cultural values and goals of society.</li> <li>• To provide information relevant to the resources needed in order to subscribe to those values and goals</li> <li>• To provide guidance and models which is conducive to enabling the other tasks to be carried out</li> <li>• To overcome as far as possible any gross deficiencies in development which may hinder social functioning</li> </ul>



<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To overcome any gross deficiencies in development which may hinder child’s performance in role taking</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To act as an agent within society so as to promote a fairer distribution of the resources needed in order to allow individuals, families and groups to subscribe to the dominant cultures and values of society.</li><li>• To sensitise the students, teachers, parents and other stakeholders on significant issues like gender, disability, building empathy, emotional quotient and fostering human qualities among children</li><li>• To provide the bridge across parents, children and the school system</li></ul>
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Adapted from Robinson, M (1978) Schools and Social Work, page 19

It is clear from the above table that schools are charged with preparing youth for life in an increasingly complex and changing world, teaching creative thinking, problem-solving, social skills, communication skills and decision-making skills in addition to the old core curriculum (Huxtable, 2013). Social work as a profession attempts to create an enabling environment across multiple stakeholders with the ‘person in environment’ perspective at its core.

Thus, with a broad understanding of areas of overlap between educational tasks of the school and tasks of social work intervention, let us analyse the contemporary scenario of school social work in the Indian context:

### **Contemporary Scenario of School Social Work in India**

School social work as a branch of social work is facing several challenges in the contemporary Indian context. As a secondary setting for social work profession, the school system poses various concerns as well as challenges to social workers. The role of school social worker has historically been inconsistent, fragmented and contextual. Concerns about the need to advocate for school social work positions, demonstrate the effectiveness of school social work practice, understand the consequences of role ambiguity and respond in a proactive way to policy changes has necessitated a focus on the development of a more clearly defined school social work role (Richard and Sosa, 2014). Some of the issues surrounding school social work in the current scenario are presented as below:

**Ambiguity and role confusion:** There is a general lack of knowledge about the tasks to be performed by a school social worker. The irony, however, lies in the role of school social workers who are expected to provide holistic services to the school system finding themselves being caught in a web of ambiguity and role confusion amidst the bureaucratic and hierarchical school environment. There is often vagueness with regards to their role in the school system amongst the teachers and students. This often leads to an under-utilisation of the services of social workers in the school system as vital 'human resources' and as professionals.

**Thrust on Clinic Based Approach:** Most school social workers in India follow the traditional clinic-based services delivery model. Thus, the impact of their services, techniques and skills used is often not immediately visible to all. The question that arises is 'Are school social work practitioners meant to be the "in-house" clinicians providing services to children in need or are they supposed to become involved in the larger programme development to enhance the social and emotional learning of all students in a school?' (Anand, 2010). Many school social workers thereby are restricted to the school itself and unable to extend their services towards larger society or cater to social issues impacting school children/ environment.

Allocation of teaching responsibilities: Lack of clarity about the specific roles and responsibilities to be carried out by social work professionals leads to allocation of responsibilities that are incongruent to their profession. Many social workers are seen as working within the school system as Post Graduate Teachers (teaching subjects like psychology, sociology) while also shouldering the dual responsibility of teaching as well as student/ parent counselling. Few others may also hold the charge of looking after the needs of the 'special children' and even work as special educators (Anand, 2014).

Allotment of administrative workload: School social workers are also given multiple administrative responsibilities that may include various assignments, which are not in equivalence with their areas of professional competence e.g. working on school websites, invigilation duties during examinations, preparation of school result, documentation work etc.

Government and Private School Divide: There has been however, an increased demand and awareness about social work intervention in schools, especially in the case of private schools. However, the practitioners from other disciplines (like psychology) may be hired to provide services related to handling cases of maladjustments among children. In government schools, they are often seen working as 'Educational and Vocational Guidance & Counselors (EVGC) with a greater confusion about their specific roles to be taken up within the school system as compared to the private schools. Furthermore, it is also seen that social work practitioners are also 'much in demand' by the younger stakeholders of the school system, that is, the children particularly in private schools. (Anand, 2014).

Impact of Secondary Status: Due to prolonged periods of lack of acceptance as professionals within the school system, feelings of isolation, lack of clarity and frustration may emerge among the school social workers. They often struggle to work merely as facilitators trying to develop an overall atmosphere of sensitivity in the otherwise rigid and hierarchical power structures of the school system. Much of their time seemed to be wasted in trying to make a place for themselves, acquiring a distinct status and defining their own

position within the hierarchical structure as a mental health 'expert'.

It is evident that social work practice is currently facing several impediments and there exists an insufficient knowledge about their contributions to the school system. Let us understand the scope of social work practice in the school setting:

## **Social Work Practice in the School System:**

### **Multi-Tier Interventions**

School social workers are often experienced at facilitating interventions which involve multiple participants and systems, both internal and external to the student and school (Alvarez et al, 2013). Presented below is an attempt to list some of the multi tier interventions by social workers in a school setting:

#### **Promotive Role**

School social workers in their promotive role strive to take up macro-level activities aiming to create a pro-social environment for the children. Such activities include conducting sensitisation workshops with teachers, personality development programmes with students on issues like gender, self-confidence, empathy, stress management, leadership. It also involves sensitising parents regarding effective parenting, parent-child communication etc. Acting as a link between school, children and communities can further strengthen the impact of their services.

#### **Preventive Role**

The second category of social work intervention in a school comprises of school social workers taking up preventive roles and creating a pro-social learning environment. Prevention is concerned with keeping human personalities and human inter-relationships operating on an integrated and mature level rather than gluing together human parts that may have been cracked, broken apart or splintered (Skidmore, Thackerey and Farley, 1997). School social workers can develop preventive level programs to address various social

and health problems that affect the school population, such as child abuse, bullying (including cyberbullying), drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, early detection of impairments and disabilities, and discrimination of all kinds. Preventive programs for developing cultural sensitivity, communication skills, decision-making, ethics and conflict management are also needed to prepare students for leading fulfilled lives in a multi-cultural society. Some of these activities may include organizing wide range of activities like career fairs, sports and talent hunts and awareness generation sessions with students on areas such as gender, HIV/ AIDS, puberty, declining sex ratio, mental health, internet addiction, restrictions related to menstruation, stereotypes related to gender, pressure to look macho/ feminine among students etc. Preventive level work may also involve conducting teachers' trainings on areas like disability, gender sensitisation, exploring their own gender biases and stereotypes, active learning, teacher-student relationship, attitude building, adolescents' issues etc.

### **Curative and Rehabilitative**

In the third category, most school social workers can be actively involved in addressing various maladjustments among students that often include handling academic difficulties, behavioural issues like absenteeism, lack of attention, bullying, hyperactivity, aggression, shyness, stealing, conflicts with peers and drop-outs, besides various psycho-social and emotional issues (Anand, 2014). In their curative and rehabilitative roles, the social workers work towards eliminating factors that often cause the breakdown of functioning — exploring the psycho-social nature of such problems, seeking in-depth information and making assessments followed by actual interventions that involve reorganising and rebuilding interaction patterns. The table 1.02 presented below enumerates various areas of intervention that can be handled by school social workers for intervention with respect to developmental tasks as per the lifespan/ developmental approach.

**Table 1.02**  
*Areas of intervention by social work professionals in school*

Level of schooling	Developmental Span	Major Developmental Tasks	Areas of intervention
Primary (Classes I-V)	Middle and late childhood	Acquisition of language and social skills, scholastic and co-curricular achievement, conformity to authority, develop a strong value system	Conduct disorders, mood disorders, Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), scholastic backwardness, behavioural maladjustments, learning disability, speech and hearing related difficulties
Middle (Classes VI-VIII)	Pre-adolescence	Scholastic and co-curricular achievement, competence, social skills, respectful behaviour towards adults and peers	Scholastic backwardness, behavioural maladjustments- lack of attention, truancy, usage of abusive language, aggression, disrespectful behaviour towards teachers
Secondary (Classes IX-X)	Adolescence	Puberty, identity formation, excellence in academics	Behavioural maladjustments- temper tantrums, disobedience, usage of abusive language, aggression,

			social withdrawal, eating disorders (anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge-eating), internet addiction, attraction towards opposite sex and relationship concerns
Senior Secondary (Classes XI-XII)	Adolescence to Young adulthood	Puberty, identity formation, extreme pressure to excel in academics and vocations, career choice	Anxiety, eating disorders (anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge-eating), depression, onset of substance abuse / alcoholism, suicide, internet addiction, relationship concerns

Source: Adapted from Anand, M. (2017). Social work in schools: Integrating gender concerns. In AdusumalliMalathi and Meenu Anand (Eds.). Gender and social work: Positions and practices

The school social workers with their knowledge and requisite skills recognise the impact of socialisation and also the expected outcomes from each stage of the lifespan. With the ‘person in environment’ approach, school social workers attempt to work with the children and their significant others in family, school as well as the community to diagnose the probable causes of the maladaptive behaviour and plan the treatment with a holistic approach.

It is apparent from the multi-tier interventions by school social work-  
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ers that social work profession indeed has much to contribute to the school system. While teachers develop the potential of learners through transmitting knowledge, skills and values, social workers can provide support for learners' well-being so that they are ready to learn. Social work provides special attention to those who are marginalized by problems such as poverty, oppression or disability, mobilizing the strengths of family, school and community to overcome obstacles to educational success. Using ecological systems theory to evaluate and solve problems, social work is well-suited to supporting schools by helping learners benefit from education. Social workers have a key role as partners with schools in guiding children and youth to their reach their potential intellectually, emotionally and socially. Schools everywhere must include all children, whatever the challenges presented by children with different abilities, diverse backgrounds and wide-ranging problems (Huxtable, 2013).

### **The Way Forward**

There is indeed an imperative need to publicise and create awareness about the roles and functions of a school social worker who can create favourable environment for children to develop their talents based on equality and respect for each other. Furthermore, in the Indian context, school social work can be strengthened by the proactive efforts by various schools of social work to help the Directorate of Education to clearly demarcate the responsibilities of a social worker in a school setting. This can provide a greater impetus and clarity on their specific roles and responsibilities. At present, the clinic-based practice of social work is clearly unable to effectively further the purpose of schools by providing a setting for teaching and learning, and for the attainment of competence and confidence among children. Despite these factors, school social workers as professionals are seen working as 'facilitators' within the in-house set-up of the school trying to provide curative and rehabilitative level services to children rather than taking up preventive and promotive roles to enhance the socio-emotional learning of children in the school system. Few



suggestions that can be considered in order to enhance the practice of school social work may be enumerated as below:

- Research on successful models of intervention like EBP can further help school social work strengthen its effectiveness and facilitate help to students, teachers, parents and staff in school contexts.

- School social workers may also concentrate their work more around the preventive and promotive activities rather than the curative and rehabilitative roles. They can contribute more towards conducting sensitisation and awareness programmes with children, teachers and parents and, also conduct training programmes for teachers.

- School social workers operate as a link between the school, the students, their families and the community's social services. Thus, a correct interpretation of the role of a school social worker by the larger stakeholders of the school system is indeed significant.

- School social workers may also be made a compulsory member of the school-level association (such as Parents Teachers Association) for greater visibility.

- There is a need to develop a multipronged strategy to integrate role of social work within the school system. Social workers can play an active role in collating the multiple structures/ stakeholders at the micro, mezzo as well as macro levels.

- Sensitisation of school authorities, teachers as well as larger stakeholders about the significance of school social work can further be reinforced at the macro level

- Furthermore, social work training that emphasizes problem-solving, resiliency, collaborating with other disciplines and new technologies will prepare practitioners to handle changing problems. As evolving problems call for new skills, social workers in schools can learn to evaluate their practice to ensure that the methods they are using solve the identified problems (Huxtable, 2013).

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There is a long way to go before school social workers can effectively bring their unique knowledge and skills to the school system. The school social workers must receive support from the authorities to address the diverse issues in the school and act as broker, advocate, networker, counsellor, educator and researcher (Kelly, 2008). School social work needs to consistently focus on coordinating the efforts of schools, families and communities toward helping students improve their academic achievement and social, emotional, and behavioural competence. Social workers seek to ensure equitable education opportunities; ensure that students are mentally, physically, and emotionally present in the classroom; and promote respect and dignity for all students (NASW, 2012). Thus, based on the multi-tier model, school social work needs to move beyond the confines of individualised work and take up holistic programmes in the area of preventive-oriented work that deals with students and the larger stakeholders of the school system — teachers, administration, peers, families as well as communities.

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