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## School Social Workers in India: Ignored but Crucial Professionals

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### Abstract:

*Social work has ample scope in education settings. School social workers are one of the many professionals who facilitate the education process so that the students gain maximum benefits from their schooling. As professionals working closely with children and their families, social workers play a valuable role in ensuring children's well-being. The present paper highlights the significance of school social work in the country. Using case studies, the paper reflects the critical role played by school social workers in resolving varied range of crisis situations faced by children that hamper their learning. In contrast cases from those schools where social workers are not appointed, have been presented so as to vividly illustrate the roles of social workers. Findings show the role of school social workers in helping students improve their academic achievements and social, emotional and behavioural competence.*

**Keywords:** School, social work, child development, social development, education, community, mental health

### 1. Introduction

The schools are places where children acquire education. However, this social institution is not free of stressors and factors that create and perpetuate inequality, frustration, anxiety, misery and sufferings among the children. In the school system social workers come across wide range of problems such as bullying, aggression, violence, caste and gender based discrimination, alcoholism, drug addiction, infatuations, love betrayals, emotional upsurges, depression, anxiety, inferiority-superiority, health issues, differential mental and learning capabilities and heightened parental expectations for academic excellence, emotional and social mal-adjustments arising out of children coming from families in conflict or broken families, physical, mental and social disabilities. School social workers handle these cases as part of their job profile.

School social work is a vital component of most of the schools in the Western countries and social workers play crucial role in ensuring mental health and social well-being of children in the education setting. However, in India, it is still in its nascent stage. School social work has received meager research attention in the Indian setting.

In this backdrop, the present study was conceptualized with the aim to document and examine the tasks performed by school social workers in private and government schools. The study also looks into those schools (private as well as government) not having social workers and analyzes the differences in the schools in terms of tasks involved in facilitating teaching-learning environment.

### 2. Objective

The primary objective of this research is to identify different and diverse benefits of social worker's involvement on child's learning. Emphasis has been on examining the roles social workers play in facilitating children having problems in their surroundings that hamper their learning. Social workers deal with a range of psychosocial issues faced by children. The study aims to document such cases from two types of schools – those with social workers and the ones where social workers are not appointed. In connection, the following specific objectives are delineated:

- To trace the psychosocial issues among the school children, handled by social workers.
- To examine the effectiveness of teachers as 'counsellors or social workers' handling the psychosocial problems faced by pupils in the school.
- To compare the documented cases of malfunctioning among children and interventions offered by social workers and teachers.
- To appraise the relevance and efficiency of school social workers involved in facilitating teaching-learning environment.
- To present an overview of the school social work service and make recommendation for its future practice.

### 3. Sample Design

The study is located in Delhi. It has adopted Descriptive Research Design with qualitative approach. Using stratified random sampling, two types of schools were taken up – private (thirty two) and Delhi government schools (thirty two). Out of which (eight) private and (eight) Delhi government schools were taken from each zone. In the second layer of stratification, each type of school has been divided on the basis of presence or absence of social workers. So, out of eight private schools, four with social workers and four without social workers were covered in the study. Similarly, four government schools with social workers and four without social workers were included in the study. Interviews were done with school social workers in private and government schools to document their roles and tasks. Alongside, the principals, teachers, students and parents from schools with social workers and those without social workers were interviewed.

### 4. Case Study

Nikita (name camouflaged) a student of 9<sup>th</sup> class. She failed twice in the same class. Teachers used to make her sit in the last row of the class (especially at the time of inspection) as she, invariably, would raise her hand to reply, on asking question, but never gave correct answer. One day a teacher called her and asked the problem. Till that time, none of the teachers or any other person has tried to understand her problem. From there, the teacher got to know that the girl is having hearing problem. Nikita could understand the concepts when she was made to sit in the front row as she was able to listen properly. The teacher discussed the matter with her mother but she refused to consult the doctor as it was a matter of a 'girl'. Instead she said, "jipadege to padhlegi par mein machine nahilagwaugikyonkishaadibhikarnihai. Who jyadajarurihai or waisebhiitna to uskosunta hi hai" (if she is able to study without hearing aid, it is fine, otherwise I will not get any hearing aid...she has to get married, which is more important than studies. As such she is not totally deaf). Despite enough persuasion, the teacher could not be able to convince her mother. And Nikita continues to suffer from this problem.

Many children due to weak eyesight or hearing problems go undetected and are considered moron or slow learners. Few teachers, due to their sensitivity, are able to detect such problems in their pupils. However, they may not have ample time to persuade parents to consult the doctor. This shows the need of school social workers. Had there been a social worker, Nikita's life would have taken a meaningful direction. Let us look at another case where a boy in a reputed private school of Delhi lost interest in his studies and paid heavy price of his small mistake.

A boy named Rohan (name camouflaged) was studying in a reputed school of Delhi in class 10<sup>th</sup>. He was having an affair with a girl of 9<sup>th</sup> class of the same school. One day both of them were caught alone on the roof of the school by a school teacher. The teacher, instead of talking them in confidentiality and discussing the matter in a matured way, highlighted the issue so much that everyone one in the school got to know about them. They were ridiculed and disdained publically. Their parents were called and questioned on the values inculcated in them. The incident not only affected the integrity and self-concept of the two children but also disturbed them mentally so much that they couldn't handle the disrespect and shame. The girl changed her school and the boy, who was otherwise academically very bright, got very poor marks in 10<sup>th</sup>. Due to this, he could not get admission in any other school and he had to take admission in I.T.I.

Adolescence is considered as a stage of 'developmental-crisis'. Sexual attraction is a common feature of this stage. Teachers failed to understand and empathize with their adolescent students and it had serious repercussions.

Preeti (name changed) studies in a government school of Delhi in class 11<sup>th</sup>. She used to steal money from her teachers' purse and from the students' bags. She was caught stealing many times, but every time, she cries foul and pretends to faint. Gradually, the entire school came to know about it. Teachers and students are clueless regarding handling of the problem. The problem still persists as teachers are not in a position to do anything due to strict laws.

Ashok (name changed) studies in 11<sup>th</sup> standard in a government school of Delhi. He was average in studies and a well-mannered boy. On the farewell day of 12<sup>th</sup> class, his friends made him to drink and also provoked him to use abusive language for the principal. Under the influence of alcohol, he went to the principal's office and started abusing him. The principal called up police and his parents. However the matter was sorted out in some way. But after that incident, his peers and other students started avoiding him and teachers also started scolding him on trivial issues. Ashok now feels lonely, alienated and rejected. He is unable to concentrate on his studies too.

Reena (name camouflaged), is now in 7<sup>th</sup> class, studying in a government school in Delhi. Since the beginning, she was very irregular in the school. She would come to school only twice or thrice a month or whenever there are exams. Although she was not good in studies but still teachers have to promote her to the next class due to no-detention policy. Teachers called her parents several times but they never came to school. Teachers are helpless and clueless in this and many such similar cases.

In all above mentioned problems, children are suffering but parents and even teachers who are consider their menders could not able to help them out. As we see in this contemporary globalized world, the role of parents is shrinking, especially in providing moral values or emotional support, especially when both the parents are engaged in economic pursuits outside home. Adults in parental role are undergoing various kinds of social, psychological and economical pressure. As a result, to overcome these pressures, parents have to work harder and for longer durations. This leaves them with very little time for socialization of their children. Children, at a very young age, are sent to crèches and play schools. A few decades back, a child would go to school after attaining five years of age but now trend has changed and children are initiated into school system as early as at two years or even younger. This is because of change in the lifestyle of people. For instance, more women now prefer to be gainfully employed over their roles in home making and parenting. Therefore, parents need to make some arrangement for the child care and early initiation into school system is their

preferred choice. Parental preoccupation with their jobs, reducing family size, loneliness, none to care and share and such other factors are resulting into increased sense of anxiety, stress and insecurities among the children. However some schools offer the scope of fulfilling this gap between parent-child communication and interactions by appointing school social workers.

Educationists have stressed that for optimum development of children there should be strong inter-linkage between the school system and the parents or families. Social workers working in the school setting are the connecting link (Robinson, 1978). Oftentimes, there are gaps in the relationship of the pupil with his/her school or within the family or between the school and the family – all these affect the development of children. The gaps between the school system and the family have repercussions on gaining benefits of education. Social workers have been professionally trained to fill-in these gaps in the school setting.

School social workers are an integral link between school, home, and community in helping students achieve academic success. They work directly with the pupils having problems in adjusting in their social environment, coping with studies, anxiety, issues related to developmental tasks, scholastic backwardness, truancy, school phobia. Social workers deal with school administrations as well as students and families and facilitate school system in achieving its objectives. School social workers play wide range of roles preventive, management, supportive, promotive, mental health intervention, crises-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.

Across the globe, schools are increasingly becoming the main public institution for social development. Earlier the educational institutions in the traditional societies used to provide the knowledge to select few. Education was not the right of all the children but the privilege that only few elite families could afford for their children. Now-a-days, schools are aiming to make the social order more egalitarian and based on equality. Thus, schools are working towards including the traditionally disadvantaged children (based on caste, class, gender,) who were excluded from the opportunity of education. They are raising standards for educational outcomes to prepare citizens to participate in a multi-cultural world, where diversity is respected and which is bound by rights based approach.

In this situation, the school social worker is becoming a useful professional to assist children who are marginalized – whether economically, socially, politically, or personally – to participate in the process of empowerment through education. Social workers help in making the education process effective. To do this, their central focus is working in partnership with parents on the pupil in transaction with a complex school and home environment.

In the globalized world, the roles of school social workers are becoming broader and more complex. In a classroom, children from all sections of society, with differential sets of abilities and capabilities, problems and challenges are present. Social work practice rests on a wide range of skills such as counseling, networking, referring, educating, advocating, and so on. School social workers may work one-on-one with teachers, families, and children to address individual situations and needs. They become part of joint efforts to make schools safe and educational process enriching for everyone. There is a scope of school social workers to work with teachers too on their mental health issues, particularly in the light of ever-expanding roles and challenges encountered by the teaching community in the present social setting.

Further, in Indian setting, we do not have common school system. There are private schools and government owned and government aided schools, each type having its own set of strengths and challenges. Government schools, largely caters to children coming from economically weaker sections. Here, the school faces challenges in terms of school drop outs and maintaining quality education. School social workers often have to deal with problems like lack of motivation among parents, no conducive home environment for studies, resistance in sending girl children to school, first generation learning and such others (Gandhi, 1990).

In private schools, with the government's inclusion policy, an increased level of heterogeneity is seen among the pupils of same class and school social workers may encounter problems like bullying, drug addiction, familial problems impacting academic performance, emotional and sexual problems, adjustment with peers from different cultural backgrounds, and so on.

Talking about the status of school social work in India, Gandhi (1990) observes that many social work practitioners and educators have believed that school social work in India has not become a movement and it is still at the experimental stage. The education departments of central and states governments have not yet accepted this service as an integral part of their school system. It is only a few private or aided schools in prominent cities which have employed social workers in their schools. The growth achieved so far is attributed to the efforts made by colleges of social work, child guidance clinics, associations of trained social workers, few progressive educationalists and local Parent Teachers associations (Gandhi, 1990).

Some research studies in India (Joshi, 1996; Aggarwal and Kapoor, 1998) also suggest that family awareness on the importance of education and parental participation in children's education contribute to better academic performance of children's in school. The school social workers indeed can play significant role in enhancing conducive family environment for effective learning.

Bowen (1996) in her article "A role for school social workers in promoting student success through school family partnership" highlights a social work intervention that enhanced parents' ability towards creating home conditions, which help in learning and promoting family involvement in home learning activities. The intervention was carried out by both teachers and parents with the academic and behavior problems of the five targeted kindergarten and first grade students. The findings support other research studies indicating that parents' educational involvement promotes students' achievement.

In another study, Henderson and Berla (1994) observe that students' school performance at the beginning of the intervention was assessed by teachers' qualitative descriptions of academic social behavior. Parents' perceptions of performance were also documented before the intervention began. The assessment of students' performance during and at the end of the intervention was based on the perceptions of teachers and parents. Parents and teachers perceived a variety of favorable results because of the social work intervention. Most significant of these results were improvement in students' academic and social behaviors and improved parent-

teacher communication. Other notable positive effects of interventions included more positive teacher's perceptions of student's future progress and parents' increased knowledge of their children's learning styles and need, greater self-esteem among students and greater parental satisfaction with school.

Result of the intervention suggest that school social workers can promote student and school success by directly facilitating school family communications and ensuring that educational resources are shared with parents.

But due to the absence of a close school, home and community liaison our education system suffers from number of impediments, specific among them are – high dropout rates, mental health problem, adjustment problems, biasness in favor of children from higher socio-economic strata and schools catering for the elite group having no touch with social realities.

Even in contemporary times, there is a debate among the educators and practitioners of social work whether social workers have been able to carve a special place for them in school setting or are still struggling for their identity and recognition. But below mentioned cases are the evidence for their special place in the schools-

Anil (name changed), student of class 10<sup>th</sup> was average in studies. But before three month from Board Exams he took so much stress that he lost his confidence and came under depression. He was in so much depression that he could not be able to solve small and easy sums of Math. The Math teacher referred the case to the social worker. She consoled by saying

“Scoring good marks does not mean successful life, neither one set of exams are criterion of judging one's caliber. There are many students who are good in studies but could not able to perform due to various reasons but this does not mean end of their lives. Exams are conducted to see understanding level of student, not to make him depressed.”

By taking continuous sessions and encouraging the child, the social worker able to help out the child to overcome his depression. And Anil did reasonably well in his Board exams.

Sarita (name changed), was a student of class 7<sup>th</sup> of a private school in Delhi. She was below average and an aggressive child. On trivial issues she used to get angry and beat other children of the class. The class teacher referred the child to the social worker. The social worker made rapport with Sarita and took some sessions with her to know her problems. She got some links as her brother used to study in the same school and was brilliant in his studies as well as in other co-curricular activities. The social worker paid home visit and got to know that Sarita gets less attention by her parents as most of the attention was taken by her brother. The social worker handled the case very well by taking sessions with the girl, her parents, concerned teachers and with her brother and made them realize that being a child she also needs attention. Now she is still average in studies and has become less aggressive.

Bharti (name changed), is a student of 11<sup>th</sup> class in a private school and is having good academic records. Everything was going well but before her final exams she met with an accident and could not give her exams as she was on bed rest for about five months). That made her repeat the class but it affected her significantly as she saw other class mates sitting in 12<sup>th</sup> standard and she was sitting with her juniors. That deteriorated her academic performance too. The class teacher referred the case to the social worker. She took various sessions with the girl and her parents to console her. She was made her understand that there are many students who themselves drop their year to get admission in various institutions. So losing a year is not a big deal. And that was an accident because of which it happened to her otherwise she is good in studies. So in this way social worker helped her in adapting to the situation.

Porush (name changed) is a student of class 4<sup>th</sup> in a reputed school in Delhi. The boy was suffering from some kind of skin problem. Though the problem was not communicable but many a times he suffered from itching in between the class and at that time he had to apply oil on that portion. According to the doctor, he will overcome with this problem after 2-3 years. Although he was a brilliant child, his class teacher observed that he is losing interest in the studies and started sitting alone in the class. He also stopped taking initiative in the class. She discussed the matter with the social worker. Social worker suggested to her to find out the reason as being class teacher it would be easier for her (as the children were small). The class teacher came to know that his classmates tease him because his could not do many things due to his skin problem like swimming, playing in mud, etc. The teacher informed the same to the social worker. The social worker studied the case in depth. First she built up confidence and acceptance of the problem in the child. Alongside, she took session with the class on the day when he was absent. She cautioned the teachers, para teaching staff, students, not to make him feel rejected. In all this, she also involved the parents as they would also help their child. This apart, the social worker also organized activities in which Porush mingled with other classmates. With the efforts taken by the social worker, the child again improved in his studies, make many friends and was able to come out of his problem.

Anita (name changed) is a student of class V. She was an intelligent child and one year back she got admission in a reputed school under 25% quota for Economically Weaker Sections. But in continuous two assessments she got very less marks. She also remained quiet in the class. The class teacher discussed the matter with the social worker. The social worker took three to four sessions with the girl and found that she felt inferiority complex with other children as she comes from the lower economic background. This factor not only created complex in the child but also developed hesitation in her. The social worker took individual sessions with the girl, joint sessions with the teacher and the girl, and organized various activities to make her mingle with her class mates and made her comfortable in the school environment.

While concluding all, it may be stated that school social work has a great potential to make the school system conducive for all the children, and make the education process more meaningful. It has the capacity to realize the Right to Education (and quality education) for all. Hopefully, the social planners and policy makers soon recognize the value of school social work and make provisions to ensure their presence in each and every school of the country.

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