

# Social Work Practice in Schools: Handholding Perspective

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**Abstract:** *This paper focuses on fortifying social work practice in schools. School Social work is necessary in the contemporary world due to numerous reasons such as epidemiological upturn in health-risk behaviours, unsafe environment, physical/verbal/sexual abuse, children in difficult circumstances and so on. Multidisciplinary team work is vital for overcoming such difficulties and empowering the school children. School social worker must understand the academic/fieldwork/research linked to the child and his/her environment in various disciplinary intensities. Handholding and support by school social worker based on tangible assessment, suitable intervention package and follow up is required. Social work practice in Indian scenario ought to make headway in policy implementation based on models that fit the regional and cultural contexts. Theoretical knowledge and field practice on school social work at individual, family, school and community level has to be integrated into Social Work Education.*

**Key Words:** *Social work, schools, children, handholding, support.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Social work practice is an inevitable part of social work profession. It is a unique approach and focuses on safe environment and equities in schools. School social work is a broad area of practice that responds to the needs of the individual in the schools and to assist in the student's overall development. School social workers work with students, school authorities, teachers, staff and parents (Brand, 2008).

Social work practice in school was started in the year, 1906 in the United States of America and it has now developed preventive/protective policies & legislative measures in school level practice. Development of social work practice in schools was initiated by private agencies and local organisations (Allen-Meares, 2013; Kelly, 2008). School social work is a broad area within social work practice and entails collaboration between social worker and school authorities for the better future of students (Franklin, Kim, & Tripodi, 2009). The social worker focuses on the individual, family and school level interventions and promotions.

Subsequently, School social work can be seen as an emerging profession in India though the social workers active participation in schools (Dash & Mohan, 2015; Mann, 2015) who started working on health-risk behaviours and the need of protection for children in schools. School social work practice in India needs to bridge the gaps of all round development from cultural aspects, geographical conditions, caste, and socio-economic-political conditions in the current scenario. National Educational Policy 2020 clearly mentioned that every child needs proper monitoring with the help of well-trained social workers/counsellors in the schools (MHRD, 2020).

Children attend schools for personal overall growth and development as individuals. School children are mainly categorized into primary, upper primary, high school and higher secondary. UNESCO institute for statistics (2018) report on compulsory school age children by World Bank Income Groups is given in table-1. The statistics reported that 258 million children and youth are out of school (UNESCO, 2018b).

In the Indian scenario, 202 million school children were enrolled under compulsory education in 2018 (UNESCO, 2018a) however, School dropout is one major drawback among marginalized children. More than a quarter of school children left schools due to various reasons in India (UNICEF, n.d.).

**Table - 1** Population of compulsory school age children (both gender) across globe.

World Bank Income Groups	Compulsory school age children (number)
Low income countries	118 467 399.0
Lower middle income countries	522 592 941.0
Middle income countries	884 110 581.0
Upper middle income countries	361 517 640.0
High income countries	146 039 988.0

Source: (UNESCO, 2018a)

## 2. METHODOLOGY:

This paper aims to promote practices in schools. Foremost theories, difficulties, assessment tools/modules and intervention packages are discussed in this paper. The materials were collected from previous scientific literature/articles related to the concerned topic. Major areas covered in this paper are health risk behaviours and environment of school children.

## 3. MAJOR THEORETICALS - SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN SCHOOLS:

Child development practitioners need to understand the theories/models/approaches which are the backbone of effective practice. Environment is one of major factors for each individual's development. Children need environmental support like relationship, linkage, ideologies and culture. The child's environment is mostly centred on the home, school and neighbourhood. Ecological theory by Urie Bronfenbrenner points out that each individual is influenced by various systems in his/her environment, whether directly or indirectly such as micro, meso, exo and macro (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

Human or child development focuses on strong affection and relationships. Bowlby's Attachment theory mentioned about protection, response, care, consistency, nurture (Bowlby, 1978). Cognitive development theory by Jean Piaget has indicated four stages such as sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete and operational stages of development. Theory focuses on how children attain knowledge and the nature of intelligence (Badakar et al., 2017).

Behaviour theory helps to understand addiction, genetic risk factors, deviant behaviours, school dropout, delinquency, poor nutrition and hygiene, violence, premature sexual relationships and low self-esteem (Karaman, 2013). Strength based approach helps to overcome the day to day problems and move forward in life. Individuals must strengthen their self capacity, social network, motivation in life to overcome unwanted thoughts and negative energy (Isaksson & Sjostrom, 2017). Some of the major theories are mentioned for the practice of social workers in schools.

## 4. DIFFICULTIES OF SCHOOL CHILDREN :

School children face common challenges in the society such as:-

- Difficulties in physical health
- Difficulties in mental health problems (Chaudhury, Chaktaborty, & Giri, 2006).
- Difficulties in their Environment

## 5. ASSESSMENT OF SCHOOL CHILDREN:

Assessment is a skill for understanding others' difficulties using tools and methods such as interview, structured questionnaire, observation and so on. Multidisciplinary team are an integral part of assessment on various problems of school children. Common queries need to be enquired during assessment and take the responses of not only the child, but their parents and teachers. Assessments can be made using quantitative, qualitative or mixed method. School social workers need to know common questions/tests (Srinath, Jacob, Sharma, & Gautam, 2019). Assessments should follow either International Classification of Diseases (ICD 11) or Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders diagnosis (DSM 5) for medical or psychiatric related assessment (APA, 2013; WHO, 2018). Psychological tests and medical tests should also be included in consultation with respective recognized authority/field. Along with problem assessment, there should be an assessment on the strengths and pro-social behaviours of school children.

Major structured scales for the assessment of school children are Indian Adolescent Health Questionnaire (Long et al., 2013), Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997), Depression Anxiety Stress scale (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995), Brief Impairment Scale (Bird, 1999), Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents (Sun & Dunne, 2011), Resilience scale – 14 (Wagnild & Young, 1993), General Health Questionnaire (Goldberg et al., 1977), Parenting Styles Questionnaire (Baumrind, 1971), Family Environment Scale (Vohra, 1997), Indian Disability Evaluation and Assessment Scale (MSJE, 2002) and WHOQOL-BREF (WHOQOL-Group, 1998).

## 6. INTERVENTION PACKAGES FOR SCHOOL CHILDREN:

Interventions start with a statement of child assessment. The Counsellor or school social worker can plan for intervention as per the consent of client and caregiver. The major therapies/programmes related to school children are play therapy (Shrinivasa, Bukhari, Ragesh, & Hamza, 2018), Behavioural Therapy (Evans, Sarno Owens, & Bunford, 2013; Higa-McMillan, Francis, Rith-Najarian, & Chopita, 2016), Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (Yeo & Choi, 2011), Crisis Intervention (TCDSB, 2006), Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (Perepletchikova et al., 2011), Group Therapy (Ezhumalai, Muralidhar, Dhanasekarapandian, & Nikketha, 2018). Educational, counselling, psychotherapy groups (Shechtman, 2004). Cognitive-behavioural group therapies (Ninan, Hirisave, & Girimaji, 2019), Parent Management Training (Sukhodolsky, Smith, McCauley, Ibrahim, & Piasecka, 2016), Supportive Therapy (AACAP, 2019), Motivational Interviewing (Strait, n.d.), Life Skills Education (Sekar.K, Manoj, Kavitha, Aravind Raj, 2008; WHO, 1994), Student Enrichment Programme (Sekar, 2010), Career Guidance (Marimuthu, Navaneethakrishnan, Alagu

Meenakshi, & Uma, 2018), School Mental Health Programmes (Hendren, Weisen, & Orley, 1994). Intervention package depends on detailed assessment and actual challenges of school children and contextual environment.

## 7. SIGNIFICANCE AND HEADWAY OF SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN SCHOOLS IN INDIA:

The current scenario shows that social work practice in schools is more significant due to various reasons. Epidemiological studies in India revealed that the prevalence rate of health-risk behaviours are increased among school children (Das, Chattopadhyay, Chakraborty, Dasgupta, & Akbar, 2015; Harikrishnan, Sobhana, & Arif, 2016) such as mental health issues (Harikrishnan, 2020; Harikrishnan, Arif, & Sobhana, 2017; Nair, Ganjiwale, Kharod, Varma, & Nimbalkar, 2017), social phobia (Harikrishnan, Arif, & Sobhana, 2016), lack of social support (Harikrishnan & Sailo, 2020), academic stress and depression (Jayanthi, Thirunavukarasu, & Rajkumar, 2015).

A review on depression studies in clinic-based studies, school-based studies and in community found high prevalence rate of health-risk behaviours (Grover, Raju, Sharma, & Shah, 2019). Reviews on health, environment and school social work practice among school going adolescents suggest the requisite to promote and implement holistic strategies (Harikrishnan & Sailo, 2020; Harikrishnan & Sailo, 2019a, 2019b). Interventional studies depict positive growth and development among school children (Bhave et al., 2016; Harikrishnan, Kavitha, Sekar, & Marykutty, 2018). School social worker can facilitate handholding support to school children, teachers and parents for child development. Health risk prevention and promotion of environmental safety in the school premises is essential. Child and Adolescent Mental Health (CAMH) in India need to focus on prevention of negative mental health and promote mental wellbeing (Hossain & Purohit, 2019).

## 8. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Social worker need to understand the theories, field and research exposure from schools.
- Full time school social worker needed for different age groups.
- Policy level changes need to focus on long term intervention packages.
- Social work practice in schools needs to be integrated in under graduate and post graduate courses in the Social Work Education.

## 9. CONCLUSION:

Day to day changes in technology and modernisation is enormously affecting the school children. Therefore school social worker have a major role in different types of schools in India such as ensuring vital policy changes, strategic planning for handholding support from school social worker along with multidisciplinary team. School social workers can promote capacity building for the first respondents (teachers and parents) of school children.

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