

# Reframing The Roles Of School Social Workers In The Context Of Child-Friendly School Systems In India

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**ABSTRACT:** *Child-Friendly School (CFS) is a democratic environment based on children's rights, in which all students are accepted, teaching-learning processes are organised according to children's interests, health, safety, and protective measures are implemented for children, and gender-based discrimination is not permitted. The CFS concept is based on the CRC and is a comprehensive approach that connects all aspects of educational reforms and places the child at the centre of all organised and implemented activities (UNICEF, 2009). When a school provides a safe, clean, healthy, and protective environment for children, respects children's rights, and treats all children equally, it is designated as a Child-Friendly School. CFS's, in collaboration with their parents, staff, teachers, and administrators, strive to protect children's rights, improve the learning environment provided to them, and educate them by making various contributions to effective learning quality. School social work is a specialized area of practice within the broad field of the social work profession. School Social Workers are trained mental health professionals who can help with mental health issues, behavioural issues, positive behavioural support, academic and classroom support, consultation with teachers, parents, and administrators, and individual and group counselling/therapy. This review paper attempts to introspect on the current roles of School Social Workers in the context of Child-Friendly Schools. In light of Child-Friendly Schools, school social workers can play more important roles in schools with their skills, knowledge, and competencies, in addition to their current roles and functions. . With the help of existing literature and theoretical framework, this paper attempts to redefine the roles of school social workers in a broader context. This study will assist School Social Workers in redefining their roles in their schools, ensuring the quality of teaching-learning mechanisms, and contributing more effectively to the holistic development of students and the institution.*

**Keywords:** *School Social Workers, Child-Friendly School, School Education,*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Children of today are the citizens of tomorrow. To become a better citizen of the country, the first and foremost focus should be school education. It is regarded as a fundamental human right, essential to the development of both individuals and communities, within the

context of overall education. (Kaushik et.al, 2009. Earlier, the schools were considered to be a place where students can learn core subjects and get good grades. But the current legislations like Right to Education and National Educational Policy signifies the importance of the holistic development of a child rather than teaching the subjects and giving exams. Along with the other legislations, the above-mentioned policies created a paradigm shift in the h school education system of India. About 90% of young children between the ages of 4 and 8 are enrolled in some kind of educational institution. As children get older, the percentage of young children enrolled in either pre-school (Anganwadi, LKG, or UKG classes in private or government schools) or school (government, private, or other forms of school) rises, from 91.3 percent for 4-year-olds to 99.5 percent for 8-year-olds. Government pre-schools or schools enrol 56.8% of girls and 50.4 percent of boys in 4- and 5-year-olds, while private pre-schools or schools enrol 43.2 percent of girls and 49.6 per cent of boys. (ASER, 2019).

School education's main goal is to teach children how to think critically, attain high living standards, meet the demands of technological change, and advance citizenship and fundamental values. It equips our children to face the world more confidently and combat their life challenges in a more appropriate manner. The school education also helps in developing their personality and approach towards their life with the effective teaching-learning process. It's clear that through school education, we are preparing our children to become better person. Studies on the impact of early childhood (Delalibera & Ferreira, 2019; Garcia, Heckman, Leaf, & Prados, 2016) have shown that the investment made during this period is important for the contribution to the national economy as well as the individual and societal growth. Children need health care, healthy foods, education to fill their minds with valuable knowledge, non-exploitative and non-violent environments, as well as time and places to play, according to UNICEF (2014). Even though we have excelled in many fields of school education, there are still gaps. Several factors need to be addressed, such as the student dropout rate, the student-teacher ratio, the student-teacher relationship, the availability of resources, low primary enrolment rates, wide disparities between regions and gender, a lack of trained teachers, a lack of proper teaching materials, and poor physical infrastructure of schools, to name a few, that indicate poor performance. To address these issues in school education, UNICEF has introduced Child-Friendly School System in 2009. This concept has been developed in the context of UNCRC which considered to be a benchmark in addressing the rights of the children. CFS can be explained as a democratic environment focused on children's rights, in which all students are welcomed, teaching-learning processes are structured around the interests of children, health, protection, and protective measures are taken for children, and gender-based discrimination is not tolerated (Cobanoglu, F., & Sevim, S. 2019) . UNICEF created the CFS model, which focuses on its six basic components: pedagogy, health, gender sensitivity, community participation, inclusiveness, and protection.

### **Child-Friendly Schools**

The idea behind Child-Friendly Schools is that for a child, the school should be about the love of mutual learning, the growth of their potential, and the enrichment of their lives, and it should be a very positive experience that can change their lives for the better. It prioritizes providing a safe environment for children to express their views as well as learning to obey rules and regulations and displaying respect for school authorities (UNICEF, SriLanka, 2010). At the classroom and school level, CFS applies the principle of Child's Rights to

education practice and management. The CFS basic education policy is the foundation for improving the standard of education for all students in primary and secondary schools (Frawley J, 2019). The CFS is a holistic approach that connects all facets of education systems and positions the child at the core of all structured and applied practices (UNICEF, 2009). When a school offers a secure, clean, nutritious, and protective atmosphere for children, respects children's rights, and treats all children fairly, it is designated as a CFS. CFSs, in collaboration with their parents, employees, teachers, and administrators, strive to protect children's rights, enhance the learning atmosphere in which they are placed, and educate them by making a variety of contributions to a high-quality learning environment (Cobanoglu, F., & Sevim, S. 2019).

Being it a multidimensional approach, Child-Friendly School comprises of five major dimensions

- Right based and inclusive
- Promotion of Effective Teaching and Learning
- Safe, Protective and Healthy School
- Gender-Responsive
- Building Linkages and Community Participation (UNICEF, 2009)

The **right-based inclusive approach** promotes the rights of children in the schools which include the inclusive mode of education. It emphasises the importance of a school's differently abled-friendly approach, such as the installation of ramps and rails, well-defined paths, and the promotion and practices of human and child rights etc It also encourages schools to have at least one teacher qualified in Special Education Needs (SEN) and to have a library with braille and large print books. This dimension also means that school administrators are required to protect children's rights.

The second dimension discusses **the promotion of effective teaching-learning in the school**. In a child-friendly school, the teachers must create an atmosphere for effective teaching-learning mechanisms. The effectiveness is the key viz in keeping the basic documents, updating the progression of the students with parents, the importance of extracurricular and co-curricular activities, active engagement of students etc. It also takes into account the drop out rates and absenteeism among the students, creatively developed teaching pedagogies, customised attention for the students and effective use of ICT tools. Identification of slow and advanced learners, mentoring the students, promoting access to the library also reflects the aspects of this dimension.

Thirdly, CFS focuses on **Safe, Protective and Healthy** aspects which is the major concerns of all the stakeholders of a school viz students, teachers, parents, administrators and the community around the school. The school must take appropriate safety measures for the students such as an erecting fence around the school, security facilities and prohibition of smoking and drinking in the school. The schools possess sufficient latrine facilities, access to clean drinking water, adequate handwashing facilities and availability of first aid kits for the children. This component also includes discussions on health and hygiene habits as well as mental health promotion. In the contemporary world, the counselling and mentoring sessions for the children are contributing to the safe, protective and healthy aspects of CFS.

**The gender responsive** dimension is very much relevant in the contemporary scenario. It makes the school has to become more gender-friendly. The gender parity in the enrollment of

the students as well as the recruitment of the teachers is few indicators of the gender responsiveness of a school. Keeping the gender parity in the decision making bodies of a school such as the Staff council, School Management Council, ensuring equal rights for boys and girls irrespective of their gender and developing gender-sensitive classrooms are significantly contributing to this component. A child-friendly school must advocate and promote gender-sensitive learning pedagogies in its classrooms.

Lastly, **building the linkages and Community Participation** are contributing to the existence of a child-friendly school. The schools can take initiative to develop linkages with the government and non-government organizations in the nearby communities. These linkages would enable the school to associate with the programmes as well as obtain assistance as required. The neighbourhood community plays a pivotal role in a Child-Friendly School. The stakeholders of these neighbourhood communities assist the school authorities in the physical and social development of the school. They develop an own feeling which warrants that safeguarding of the school and its premises are the responsibilities of the neighbouring communities.

These dimensions signal that Child-Friendly Schools "seek to be inclusive for all children, effective in their teaching and learning pedagogies, health-promoting in a harmless atmosphere, gender-responsive, participatory by actively engaging students, parents, and communities, and assisted by a policy environment that works toward Child-Friendly School goals." (UNICEF, 2009). Considering the major stakeholders of the CFS system, most of the discussions comes under the purview of students, teachers, parents, school administrators and neighbouring community members. This paper tries to articulate the inclusion of School Social Workers to the major stakeholders of CFS. School social workers play an important role in solving the different problems that arise in the classrooms. They play a crucial role in advancing the schools' mission, which is to provide an effective environment for teaching, learning, and the development of competence and self-awareness for the students. As we evaluate the functions and effectiveness of School Social Workers, it is clear that they can potentially enhance a school into more child friendly.

### **School Social Work**

Within the wide field of social work, school social work is considered to be an area of practice. School social workers are professionally trained mental health practitioners who can help with mental health and behavioural issues by providing constructive behavioural support, academic and classroom support in consultation with students, parents, teachers and administrators. Students who are dealing with mental, emotional, social, behavioural, and/or family problems that are affecting their academic performance and overall well-being are helped by school social workers. School social workers focus on interactions between schools, communities, adolescents, and parents to help children achieve their full potential by making the best use of their educational opportunities (Higy, et al., 2012). The School social workers act as a link between the teachers, parents and the community to help the students in the best possible manner with the knowledge and skills which he/she has. They serve as first aid for the students who are dealing with serious emotional and behavioural problems.

The effort to trace the historical development of school social work found that Immigration, life challenges, socioeconomic conditions, and poverty adversely affected the growth and expansion of access to education for all children in the twentieth century, which fueled the profession of school social work in the different parts of the world (Allen-Meares, 2006 &

Agresta, 2004). During the Great Depression (the 1930s), social workers refocused their earlier commitment to improving school conditions and serving as a liaison between home, school, and community; as a result, school social workers explored a specialised role in providing emotional cum social support for vulnerable youths (Hall, 1936). The term visiting teacher was replaced with the term school social worker in the 1940s and 1950s, and the profession followed a more curative and personalised approach towards particular children within the schools (Agresta, 2004). The status of school social work in various countries was recorded in an international survey of school social work conducted by the International Network for School Social Work in 2012. School social work in India began in the 1970s, according to this article. It also says that in India, school social workers deal with issues like absenteeism, mental health issues, behavioural issues, material needs, motivational needs, special education, and child safety.

A school social worker may perform a broad range of tasks that help children cope more effectively. National Association of Social Workers (2010) has listed few

- Conducting biopsychosocial and social history assessments
- Assessment of Students' drug use, social networks, physical and emotional functioning, academic challenges, peer problems, suicidal/homicidal ideation etc
- Creating and implementing care and discharge plans that encourage student autonomy
- Providing direct therapeutic interventions for clients such as individual or family
- Delivering crisis management services, which includes safety assessments.
- Advocating for student services and students' best interests
- Case management services, such as referrals to community resources and consultation with other practitioners, are provided.
- Organize home visits and resolving the ethical dilemmas (NASW, 2010)

Assisting the students to perform better, developing the intervention plans in consultation with teachers and parents, utilizing the community resources for the best exposure for the students, the school social workers try their level best to help the students. When you look at the tasks mentioned, it's clear that the majority of them are related to children's mental health issues. In light of Child-Friendly School Systems, this paper attempts to suggest a few tasks that school social workers can perform, especially in the context of India's school education system.

### **School Social Workers and Child-Friendly School System**

Child-Friendly Schools systems aim to transfer the schools into more child seeking and child-centred. It is evident that with the expertise and skills of a school social worker, he /she can contribute to the holistic development of children and developing a child-centred environment in schools. To discuss with **right based and inclusive school**, social workers advocates for the proper practice of child rights in the school, which is considered to be the primary duty of them. They should not permit violations of the right to education, basic amenities for the children and rights ratified by UNCRC. The school social worker who studies the Juvenile Justice Act and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offenses Act should take action to educate school officials, parents, and teachers about the scope and application of the laws for the children's safety. Being a practice area of social work, inclusive education and the roles of social workers are widely discussed. The negative perception towards inclusive education is very normal in our society. The Indian society has

an approved feeling that differently-abled students should be treated differently than regular students. The position of the school social worker is critical in shifting the attitudes of school authorities and teachers on inclusive education. They should convince different school stakeholders of the efficacy and influence that inclusive education can make on the campus. They may also persuade school authorities to make differently-abled-friendly improvements to the school's infrastructure, such as the installation of rails and stairs, the stock of braille books, and so on.

In the second dimension of **promotion of effective teaching-learning**, the school social worker can assist the students to get the most out of their school experience. They can pinpoint the social and psychological factors that contribute to low academic performance and developmental delays in poor social interactions. They may also create a bespoke behavioural management framework for each classroom, allowing teachers to gain a greater understanding of their students. School social workers may assist teachers in developing individual intervention plans for both advanced and slow students. They can devise programmes to encourage students to participate actively in extracurricular and co-curricular activities, thus increasing their morale and competence. Scheduled home visits to students who show absenteeism and continuous support to the slow learners are some of the tasks which can be effectively performed by the School social worker.

To make a school **safe, protective and healthy**, school social worker can make significant contributions. They can recommend suitable and safe travel pathways for students and, in consultation with other stakeholders, take the required measures to eliminate drug abuse from the school. A school social worker can organise workshops on the effects of drug abuse in our lives and create clubs and platforms in the school to combat it. They can also support these students by providing counselling, life skill sessions, and referral services. In coordination with the neighbourhood communities and police/excise personnel, they can take significant steps to eliminate the accessibility and abuse of drugs. The school social worker can also advocate for the basic amenities for the students such as latrine facilities, safe drinking water and handwashing facilities which contribute to cultivating a healthy lifestyle among the children. They can collaborate with other organisations and take initiatives to arrange sessions on road safety, self-defence, hygiene etiquettes and reproductive health. These programmes, in addition to counselling and mental health promotional activities, may be carried out by the school social worker to make the school more child-friendly.

Cultivating the **gender-friendly schools** are the need of the hour and school social worker significantly make an impact creating it. In the world of gender mainstreaming and inequality, it is an undisputed fact that school must be gender friendly. In collaboration with other organisations, school social workers can organise activities to teach gender neutrality in the classroom. They may also organise gender equity programmes in schools in their leisure time. They can also advocate for physical, learning and socialization spaces based on their age and class. Advocating for gender neutrality among stakeholders, commemorating national/international days to encourage gender equality, and suggesting gender-friendly infrastructure changes are only a few of the activities to which school social workers may contribute creating gender-friendly schools.

**Building the linkages and Community Participation** will be one major area that school social workers can explore a lot. Every school has their community resources such as neighbourhood, clubs and forums, non-government organisations, government organisations

etc. The School social worker can collaborate with these organisations and use their resources for the best of the children and schools. These collaborations further leading to financial aid for the deserving students, seeking their expertise in teaching-learning methodologies and resolving the infrastructural issues of the schools. These resources also serve as a support system for several school-related issues.

## 2. CONCLUSION

School social workers have a significant impact on the school system in terms of children's holistic development. They can explore the various opportunities available to them for transforming the school into a child-centred and child-seeking learning centre by looking at the dimensions and indicators of Child-Friendly schools. The CFS framework has provided school social workers with a great deal of potential and clarity in redefining their current roles and functions in the school and contributing to the holistic growth of children in schools.

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