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Scope and challenges of social work in Schools: Perspectives of teachers and social organizations

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Abstract

Social workers provide social, emotional and physical development services to children and also strive to modify the environment for the best interest of child. To do this effectively, social workers work with parents, teachers, schools and communities. The general public consider the social workers who work in schools as a stand in educator, psychotherapist, social planner, and liaison between school and home (Wang 2003). In India mainly social organizations are performing various child development activities in school. Again for the school children, teachers are not only educator and motivators but also play an important role to shape their lives. In order to understand the scope and challenges of social work in school in Indian context, research study had included both teachers and representatives of social organization, working for schools. Focused group discussions (with three to four teachers in each group) were conducted in fourteen government schools of Mysore city and responds from four social organisations, working in different schools in Mysore city, were taken using interview schedule. The study intends to present their views about child and school development areas. It also aims to understand the challenges faced by social organisations while working in schools and scope of social work in schools. It captures the understanding of educators on various terms like discipline, punishment, social work, community work, life skills etc. to suggest indirect social work intervention scopes for child development.

Keywords: School Social work, education, children, Social organisations

Introduction

‘School social workers pick up where teachers leave up’ (Gibelman 1995). School social workers focus on school-community-child-parent interaction and work to help children reach their potential through the most effective use of their educational opportunities (Higy, *et al.*, 2012) [4]. School social work has a unique approach to view student within the context of the classroom, the family, the community and his or her culture.

In USA, school social work celebrated its 100th anniversary as a specialized profession in 2006, but, still there is confusion and lack of knowledge exist among country and state school system about the role of school social workers (Higy, *et al.*, 2012) [4]. According to Wang (2003) [9], general public view school social worker as stand in educator, psychotherapist, social planner, liaison between home and school; this broad capacity of social workers has created confusion about the role of school social workers. School social workers often struggle to establish a formal and informal power base within school (Higy, 2012) [4] and they are often expected to do crisis intervention than encouragement to use their skills for prevention and planning of strategies (Allen-Meaers, *et al.*, 2000) [2].

An international survey of school social work (2012) [5] by International network for school social work has documented the status of school social work in different countries. According to this report, school social work started in 1970s in India. It also mentions that schools social workers in India work on attendance problems, emotional issues, behavioral issues, material needs, motivational needs, special education areas and child protection.

Objectives of study

To understand the views of teachers on child development issues.

To understand the challenges faced by social organisations while working in School.

To find out the scope of social work in Schools.

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Methodology

The study is explorative in nature and focus to understand the scopes and challenges of social work practice in schools. The target respondents were teachers and representatives of social organisations. There are total seventy eight (78) government upper primary schools in Mysuru Urban (<http://schoolreportcards.in/SRC-New/LocateSchool/LocateSchool.aspx>). Out of which fourteen (14) schools were included in the study using convenient non-probability sampling. A schedule was prepared to collect information from the school teachers (37) of 14 govt. schools using ‘focus group discussion’. Generally two or three teachers from each school participated to discuss and response to the questions. The schedule has five areas of discussion out of which three areas are presented in this paper, such as, basic information about school, child development areas, and teachers’ expectation from school social workers. From internet and responses of school teachers, four social organisations were chosen to include in

the study. An open ended interview schedule was used to record the views, opinions and suggestions of social organisations, regarding work with school children. The views discussed by teachers and opinions of social organisations are highlighted in the studies.

Analysis and discussion

1. Basic Information

All the 14 schools involved in this study are government upper primary schools. The ideal student teacher ratio is between 20 and 25 (Azim Premji foundation, 2010) [8]. The Right to Education Act also a mandates pupil teacher ratio of 30:1 to ensure that children learn better in the classroom. All the school (as shown in table no. 1.1) have student teacher ration within 30:1 and the average student teacher ratio is 19:1. Out of 14 schools, social organisations are associated with 9 schools and conducting various activities for the development of schools and children.

Table 1.1: (Basic Information about govt. Higher Primary Kannada Medium Schools Mysore Urban)

| Sl. no | Number of students | Number of teachers | student teacher ratio | Support by social organisations | | | | | |
|--------|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|---|--------|------------|---------|------------------|-----------|
| | | | | Academic support (Kannada/English/Math/science experiment/env. Science) | Sports | Creativity | Library | Life skills edu. | materials |
| 1 | 71 | 4 | 18:1 | 1 | - | - | - | - | 1 |
| 2 | 685 | 27 | 25:1 | 1 | - | 1 | - | - | - |
| 3 | 140 | 5 | 28:1 | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| 4 | 270 | 9 | 30:1 | 1 | - | - | - | - | - |
| 5 | 72 | 5 | 14:1 | - | - | - | - | - | 1 |
| 6 | 10 | 4 | 02:1 | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| 7 | 32 | 4 | 08:1 | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| 8 | 50 | 5 | 10:1 | 1 | 1 | - | - | - | 1 |
| 9 | 120 | 9 | 13:1 | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| 10 | 252 | 9 | 28:1 | 1 | 1 | - | 1 | - | - |
| 11 | 60 | 8 | 08:1 | - | - | - | - | - | 1 |
| 12 | 25 | 4 | 06:1 | - | 1 | - | - | - | - |
| 13 | 94 | 7 | 13:1 | 1 | 1 | - | - | 1 | - |
| 14 | 300 | 13 | 23:1 | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| Total | 2181 | 113 | 19:1 | 6 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4 |

Mainly organisations are working for supporting academics by teaching math, science, English, kannada and by supporting slow learners and also by providing teaching materials and library facilities. Besides these, organisations also conduct sports for children and teachers, provide life

skills education and plat form for enhancement of creativity of children.

2. Views of teachers on child development

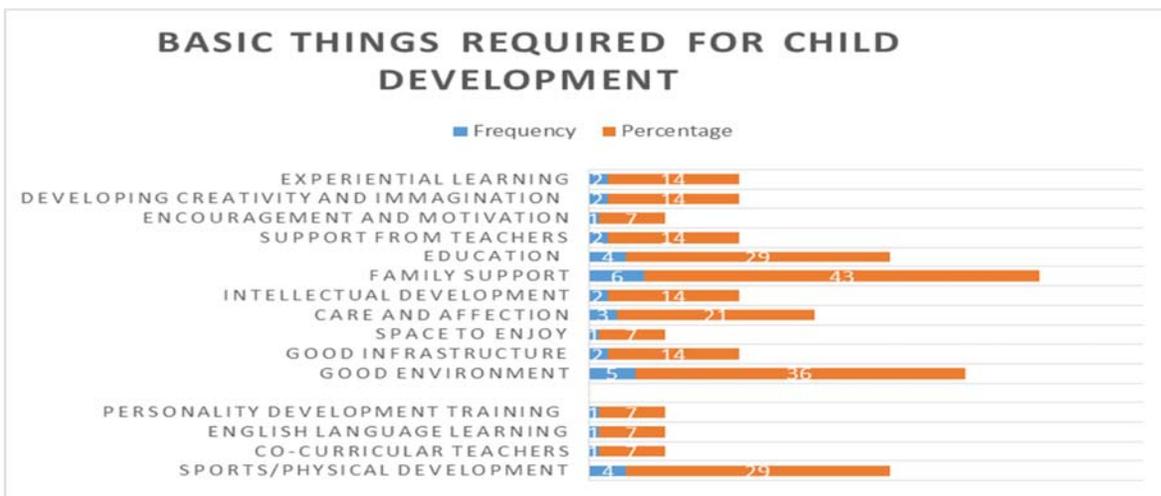


Chart 2.1: (Needs of children)
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Teachers give priority to family support, good environment, physical development and sports and education as basic things for child development. Here good environment refers to environment free from physical and mental abuse and conducive for education. Besides these, the groups talked about care and affection, need of motivation and encouragement, support from teachers and space to enjoy for

children to experience a good childhood. Teachers also suggested few elements of teaching methods for overall development of children which includes personality development trainings, co-curricular activities with proper training, developing creativity and imagination of children and providing them experiential learning facilities.

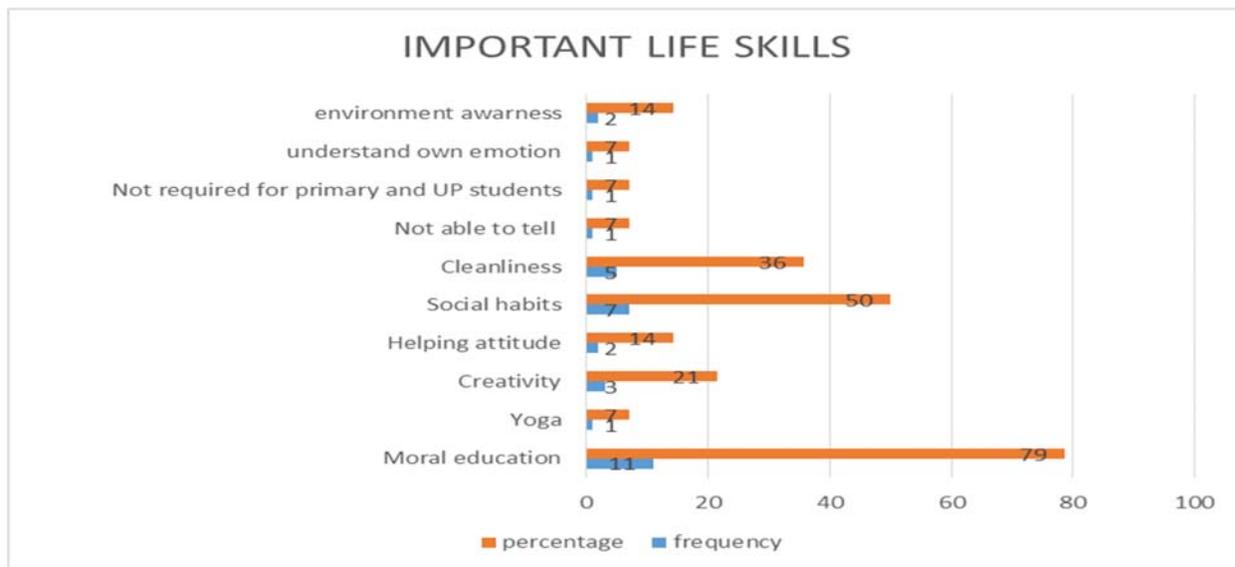


Chart 2.2: (Life Skills)

Teachers discussed moral education and good behavior and manners, social habits and cleanliness as most essential life skills to be learned by students. Two groups specifically talked about environment awareness, i.e. knowing how to reuse, recycle and consciously use resources and need of developing helping attitude in children. In one schools teachers could not understand the term 'life skills' and in another school teachers said that these skills are not

necessary for primary and upper primary students and need to be provided in high school. Mostly teachers showed their concern for learning social behaviors but apart from these, there are life skills such as decision making, critical thinking, problem solving, empathy, and resilience, etc., which will help children to understand, analyze different life situations and to enhance resilience. But none of the group discussed about these vital skills.

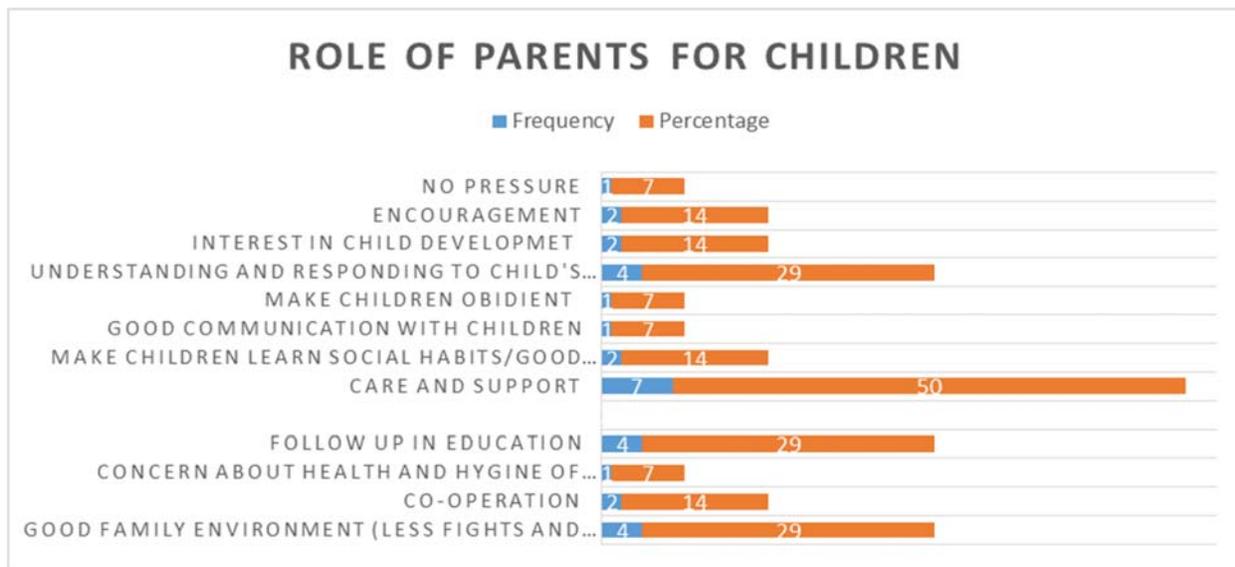


Chart 2.3: (Responsibilities of Parents)

Maximum groups talked about need of 'care and support' from parents which is a very commonly used term and base of parents-child relationship. Specifically teachers shared the

need of maintaining good family environment in terms of communication among each other in the family. Parents' communication style with child also matters as children learn

informally from the home environment. They also asked parents to follow up child’s education and understand the needs of child to respond accordingly. There should be interest among parents to know approaches to deal with various developmental issues of child. As family is the main socialization institution, it is expected from the parents to correct them constructively and to teach them social habits. To grow and to perform in any field, everyone need encouragement and encouragement from family members give confidence. Child faces different challenges with regards to academic performance, role clarity, making friend

outside, avoiding and accepting people and situation, etc. So encouragement from parents can help him to grow. In few groups teachers discussed about importance of parents concern about health of children and the take care of their health needs.

The reason of raising this question is to understand the expectations and suggestions of teachers about parents’ role for their children and also to find out the percentage of parents actually concerned for children as per the views of teachers.

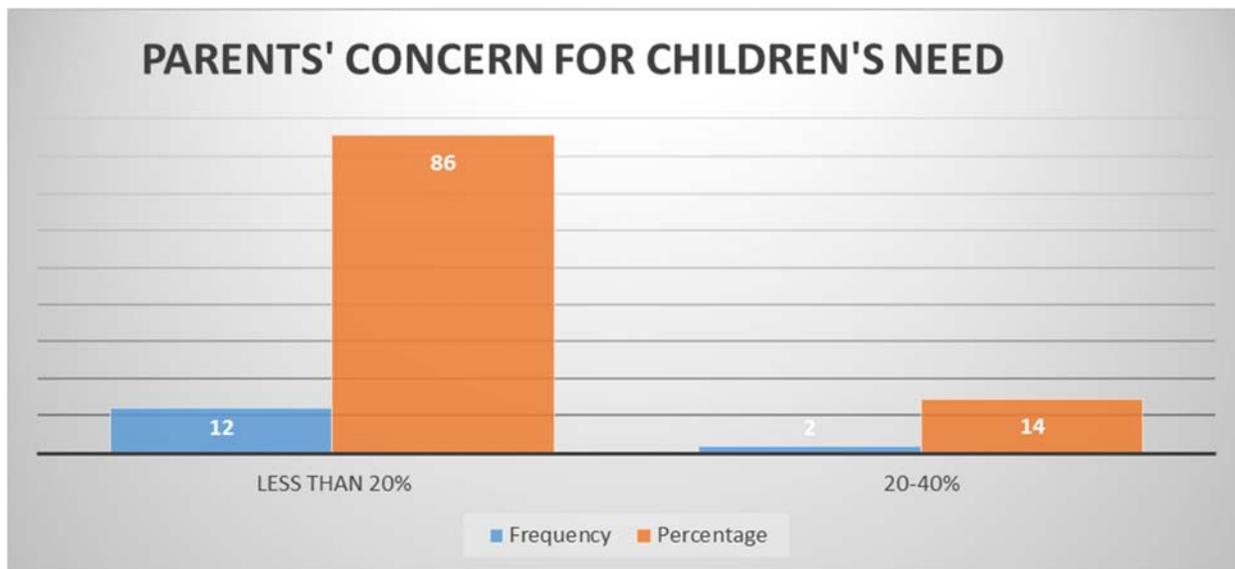


Chart 2.4: (Parents’ concern)

As per the experience of teachers not more than 40% parents are concerned for socio-emotional-educational-physical needs of children. Twelve (12) groups out of fourteen (14) said less than 20% parents show concern for their child’s development. As most of the parents are half educated and the children are first generation learners, there is very less chance for the children to get proper motivation from parents. Although few parents have interest to help their

children but they are forced to give more time for work and do not get enough time to spend with children. Teachers also realise the need of educating parents about their roles and child’s developmental needs. Here, they also shared about parents’ workshop, home visits and other activities as various strategies and felt the need of social workers to facilitate this process.

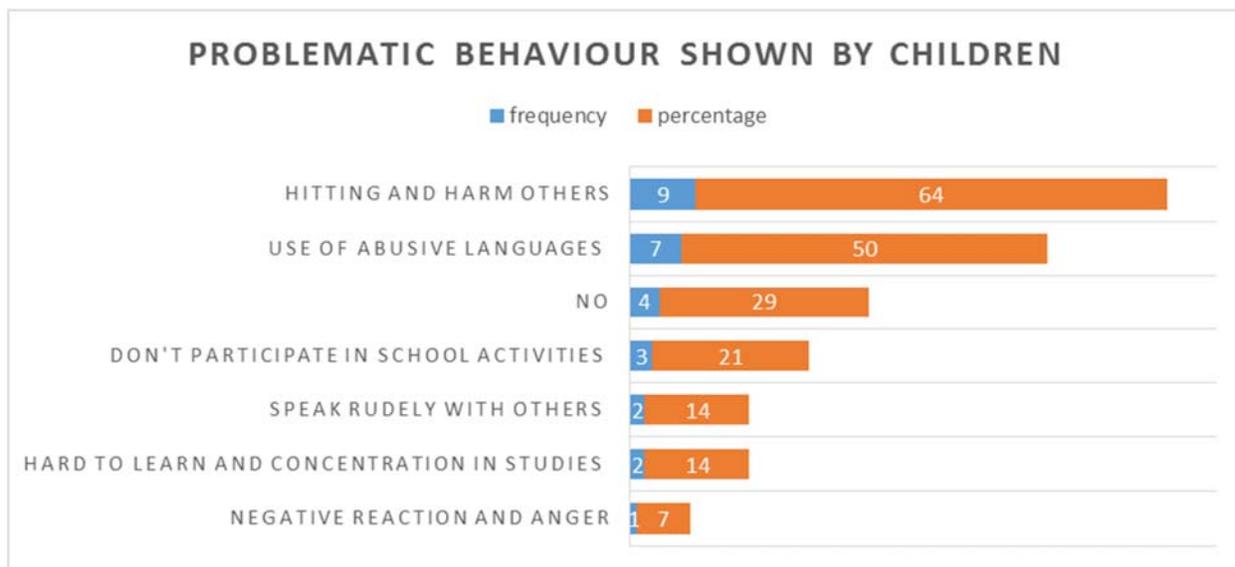


Chart 2.5: (Problematic behavior shown by Children)

Behavioral problems need to be understood from the causes of the problem rather than just describing the symptoms. There are students in need of learning support, in need of redirection and positive practices, and students in need of specialized intervention and treatment. Mostly teachers complained about the emotional outburst of students in terms of physical fights and use of abusive languages. There are also students who do not show interest in any activities and always stay behind the scene. According to teachers of three schools, some students talk rudely. Teachers feel along with parents' support these children also need to be corrected through light punishments. In one school, teachers shared about children's unacceptable sexual behavior and asked to meet few standard five students exhibiting such behaviors. According to these children they got interest to see pornographies as they saw other youth in the community, watching these in the internet center and discussing about the videos. Teachers are also worried about these children and they could not really find out proper method to deal with such behavioral issues.

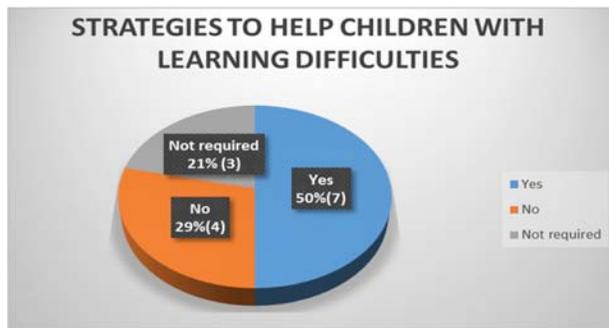


Chart 2.7

Rehabilitation Council of India mentions a screening for learning disabilities for class I to VII in ten panchayats in Kerala, done by the Institute for Communicative and Cognitive Neurosciences (ICCONS), Kerala, revealed that 16% of these school children have a learning disability. One in 200 people in India have autism, while an estimated 30 million people are known to be dyslexic (TOI, Jan 27, 2012). Most of the work in the areas of learning difficulties are done by private organisations and social organisations. In seven schools, teachers said that around 10% of children face difficulty in reading and writing and in three schools teachers shared that the percentage of children with learning difficulties is more than 20%. In three school teachers said there were no child with any type of learning difficulties. By looking at the reviews and researches, it indicates two things, either the teachers do not want to say about existence leaning issues or they don't know what exactly learning difficulties mean. It demands to educate these teachers about learning difficulties and the pattern. Again teachers of seven schools said that they have strategies to deal with learning difficulties of students and all of them shared that they provide extra class to these children. Whereas teachers of three schools said they want information and strategies to help these children.

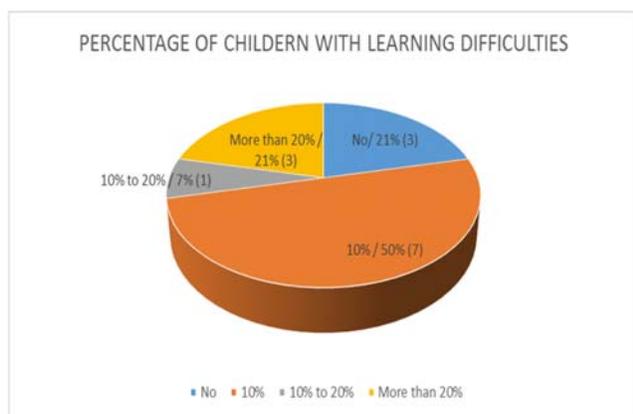


Chart 2.6: (Regarding Learning Difficulties of children)

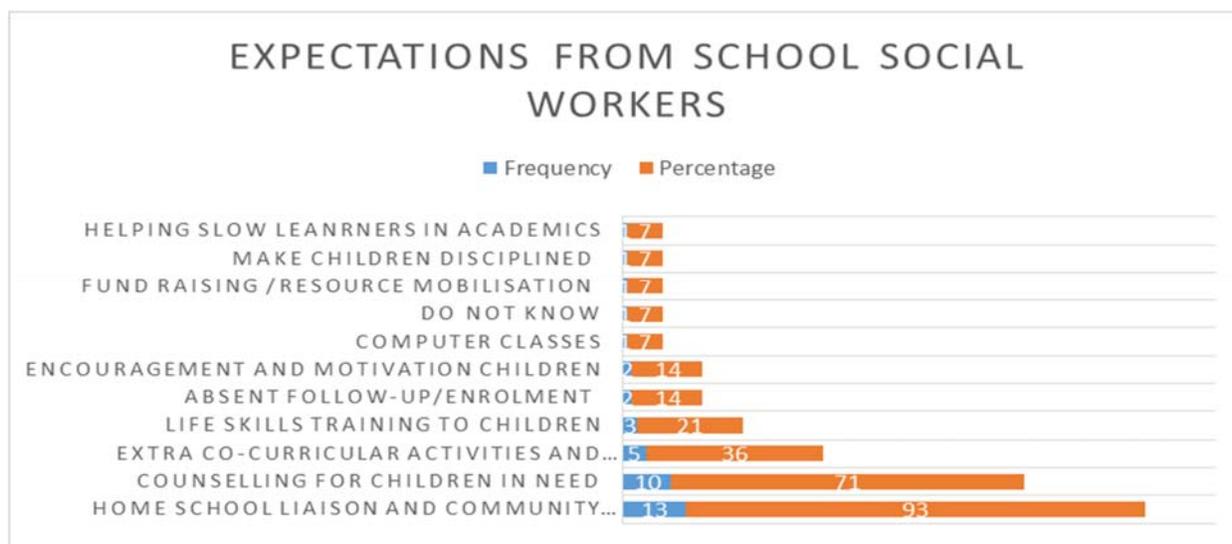


Chart 2.8: (Expectation from social workers)

The purpose behind putting this question before teachers is not only to know their expectations from social workers but also to understand how they perceive the role of social workers in schools. In thirteen schools teachers spoke about

the importance of home-school liaison and social workers role in making this successful. As mentioned already the discontent of teachers about the parents' responsibilities towards children, demands the intervention of social

workers. Counselling services were also prioritized by teachers but they feel counselling is necessary only for children having some harmful behavior and leaning problem and all children do not need such service. Some teachers talked about need of life skills training for students by social workers as they feel this will help children as well as the society. In five schools teachers want social workers to take care of creative talents of students and to provide them platform to show their talent. More than dropout issues, irregularity of children is a matter of concern among teachers. Hence, they recommend social workers to help schools with regard to absent follow up. In one group teachers asked about fund raising and resource mobilization for poor children who can't afford their higher studies. There are also few teachers who do not know about social work and who want social workers to make children disciplined.

3. Views of Social Organisations

Services by social organisations in School

Four social organisations namely, Pratham, Keriya Pushpa Family Helper Project (KPFHP), Magic Bus and Children's Movement for Civic Awareness (CMCA) were included in the study as these organisations are associated with different schools in Mysore. Except CMCA, all other three organisations are only working for government school children. Pratham works with 50 govt. schools, KPFHP with 17 govt. schools, Magi bus with 43 govt. schools and CMCA works with 17 private schools and 33 government schools. Organisations are largely working for govt. school children, as in cities, mainly children from poor and lower middle strata come to govt. schools for education and these organisations want to reach to the children who are deprived of developmental needs. Pratham is providing qualitative inputs for academic improvement of children, Keriya Pushpa Family Helper Project is working for educational improvement of slow learners and also with parents to indirectly support child development by educating parents and community. Magic Bus conducts sports and physical activities mainly for children and sometimes for the teachers to inculcate education and life skills through activities. Children's Movement for Civic Awareness teaches civic sense to children through activities.

Challenges social organisations face in Schools

The main challenge discussed by social organisations in schools is problem of Involving teachers in the activities and class to make the programme sustainable. Many teachers consider that workers of social organisations as their replacement and they engage themselves in other works when facilitators are there in the class. Social organisations sometimes feel lack of initiative from teachers' side. As the schools have the authority to say no to them anytime, they compromise sometimes to sustain in the school. Some representatives of organisations said that school teachers expect help in administrative work from them. Many times it's a challenge for them to make head teacher believe in their values, methods and activities. Some teachers have prejudices regarding the term 'NGO' for which they do not come forward to work in association with social organisations.

Sometimes social organisations fail to explain quantitatively the expected outcome of their services before government authorities and hence face challenge to get permission to work in school. According to them the person sitting with

power in the government office or in the school matters. If the head master or the govt. authority understand, value and believe their work, then they get co-operation to work for the schools and children.

Social organisations also face challenges in the community, when they try to conduct programmes like workshops for parents and activities for children in the community. Recognition from the school can be helpful for them to introduce themselves in community and to mobilize resource for conducting programme. This will also help the schools as the teachers want co-operation from the parents in child development.

Scope of Social Work on School

Social organisations have shared various services for improvement of school environment and development of children.

- ✓ Supporting inclusive education by providing infrastructure requirements and intervening at policy level.
- ✓ Assessing abuse and neglect and take steps accordingly
- ✓ Conducting home visits, parents meetings, and facilitation home school liaison
- ✓ Providing counselling services
- ✓ Conducting exposure visits for children
- ✓ Providing life skills education to students
- ✓ Career guidance for children
- ✓ Providing awareness programme on various scholarship programme
- ✓ Identification and intervention of children according to their learning levels

Home-School liaison is discussed by teachers as a major area of intervention but this will be successful only when schools will support the social worker. Teachers talked about behavioral problem of children. Although social organisations are providing life skills education to children but some children (at least 5 to 10% in every school as discussed by teachers) need professional help to overcome the negative anxiety. Each faulty approach to make them correct actually makes them more stubborn and difficult to handle. Teachers also do not get any other way to help them and prefer giving punishment. Parents also feel helpless. Case work and group work practice with these students are need to be planned by professionals. Although Right to Education Act bans punishment, teachers feel little punishment is required to make students disciplined. They criticize the people who are not managing class daily and preaching 'no punishment'. Here, social workers who believe in democratic class room principle and no punishment policy should discuss about these approaches and methods with the schools. Along with this they can also discuss about various life skills, benefits and methods to inculcate these life skills in students with teachers as teachers are only giving priority to manners and social behaviors. Healthy discussion among teachers and social workers helps both to learn from each other. But many times 'I know everything' and 'I don't need' become hindrance for such discussions.

Social organisations shared that tracking the development of children is a challenge for them. This is obviously a complex process. Social workers need to work with parents and teachers along with child to track the overall development of each child. Without this social work practice in schools cannot get acknowledgement. Apart from this, social workers

need to think about some standard scientific tools for overall child development tracking.

To formalize social work in schools, social organisations talked about need of political and administrative will. Apart from this, they felt sharing of knowledge among different nationalized and local organisations, working in schools, will be helpful to segregate work and avoid duplicity in services for same population. Organisations also mentioned that collective effort to approach government authorities and education department to formulate agenda for working in schools would be helpful. For improvement of social work services in schools, continuous action oriented research was also recommended by social organisations.

Conclusion

In India, many social organisations are established by people who are not social work professionals but the work done by these organisations deserve appreciation and recognition as they are bringing lot of innovation into the formal social work practice. On the other hand, there are also organisations who need guidance to develop proper agenda for intervention. Some agenda of work and programmes of these organisations are matching with teachers' demand, few things are not yet in their agenda and there are few areas which need to be taken care by the collaboration of schools and social workers together.

Suggestions for further research

- Effectiveness of interventions for behavior modification of school students
- Parents' involvement in child development
- Bridging the gap between legislation and policy and the actual practice related to child development and protection
- Community role in school work

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