

Teachers' Perspectives on Students' Psychosocial Needs and School Social Work in Public Secondary Schools: A Qualitative Study from Punjab, Pakistan

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Abstract

Adolescents in public secondary schools' experience multiple psychosocial stresses arising from academic, socio-familial, peer relationships, and environmental factors. Teachers are the first responders to such problems, but they lack psychosocial skills. This study aimed to explore teachers' perceptions of students' psychosocial needs, existing gaps in responding to these needs, and how school social workers could intervene. The current qualitative descriptive study used a phenomenological inquiry design based on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and a strength-based approach. The research procedure involved sixteen teachers from two urban and two rural public boys' secondary schools located in Bhakkar and Mianwali districts of Punjab province, Pakistan. Semi-structured interviews were held to obtain in-depth information from the participants. Each interview session lasted thirty to forty-five minutes and was conducted in the Urdu language. Data analysis was done using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis procedure and interpreted thematically. Five major themes emerged from the study, including multifaceted needs, behavioural and academic indicators of need, informal and limited teacher interventions, multiple system barriers, and appreciative perceptions of school social work. The findings highlight teachers' limited understanding of students' psychosocial needs and inadequate institutional mechanisms for addressing these needs. The study provides empirical evidence from four public secondary schools in the Punjab province.

Keywords: Psychosocial needs, school social work, secondary education, teachers' perceptions, Pakistan, qualitative study

Introduction

Adolescence is the most critical period of human development, when young people experience significant biological, psychological, emotional, cognitive and social changes. It is also a time when youth form their identities, establish more complex relationships with peers, negotiate expectations within families and communities, and make important decisions related to education and their futures. Schools therefore constitute an important social setting in which emotional and social experiences can either support or constrain students' engagement with learning. The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020) highlights the critical role of adolescence as a period characterised by the onset of mental health problems. It is essential to promote and prevent men-

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tal health conditions for this particular population. Moreover, the WHO and UNICEF recommend sustaining positive settings and multisectoral, integrated interventions to ensure the well-being of adolescents and children in the context of education, health, social services, family involvement, and social inclusion (WHO & UNICEF, 2021). In addition, the organisation notes that half of all mental health conditions start before the age of 14, which underlines the importance of early intervention and preventive measures aimed at children and adolescents (WHO, 2020). From an ecological perspective, students' experiences cannot be adequately understood by isolating the individual from the settings and relationships in which development occurs (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

In Pakistan, the psychosocial dimensions of schooling intersect with wider socioeconomic pressures. Evidence from rural and low-resource settings has highlighted the importance of school-based mental health and psychosocial support, while research on secondary-school dropout in rural Punjab has linked educational discontinuity to socioeconomic pressures, examination structures, and competing responsibilities (Hamdani et al., 2021; Mughal & Aldridge, 2017). Research on Pakistani schoolchildren has also documented bullying and emotional and behavioural difficulties, indicating that peer relationships and school experiences can have consequences for children's wellbeing (Naveed et al., 2020). Similarly, Najmussaib and Mushtaq (2023) found a meaningful relationship between behavioural problems and social-emotional competence among Pakistani schoolchildren. These findings suggest that behaviours observed in classrooms may be connected to broader social-emotional processes rather than being reducible to discipline or motivation alone.

Teachers are a unique group of people in this situation. Class teachers observe students' presence and absence, engagement, interaction with other students, behavior in class, and work. Therefore, they have the opportunity to act as informal psychological support providers. Studies among Pakistani teachers showed that they are most often aware of learning and behavioral problems that a child might have at school, but less frequently recognize emotional difficulties (Imran et al., 2018). On the one hand, such issues might only be labeled as misbehavior by the teachers and accordingly addressed through punishment measures. On the other hand, bringing psychosocial problems to attention and providing students with some psychological help from their teachers might be an unnecessary burden to these professionals.

School social work provides one possible professional response to this gap. Internationally, school social workers have developed roles that connect student support with family engagement, community resources, prevention, assessment, intervention, and coordination across service systems. Evidence syntheses indicate that school social work is increasingly organised around ecological and multi-tiered approaches and includes work with students, families, teachers, and school systems (Ding et al., 2023). Meta-analytic evidence has also reported positive effects of school social work interventions on some internalising and externalising outcomes, although academic outcomes have been more mixed (Franklin et al., 2009). These findings should not be transferred uncritically to Pakistan, where school social work is not yet an established professional role across public secondary education (Ranjha et al., 2014). Rather, they provide a conceptual basis for asking what such a role might need to accomplish in a context where teachers are currently carrying much of the relational and welfare burden.

Against this background, the present study examines teachers' accounts of students' psychosocial needs and their perceptions of the potential contribution of school social workers. The study deliberately uses a qualitative descriptive design rather than a phenomenological design.

Research Questions

The research questions were:

1. How do teachers in public secondary schools understand and describe students' psychosocial needs?
2. What gaps do teachers perceive in the current school system's capacity to respond to these needs?
3. How do teachers envision the potential role of a school social worker, and what barriers do they anticipate to its introduction?

Literature Review

Psychosocial functioning refers to the psychological and social factors that affect a student's learning, relationships, and coping mechanisms. Studies have shown that teachers' prosocial behaviours and practices improve students' psychosocial functioning. For example, positive relationships with teachers and the support they provide enhance emotional regulation, reduce behavioural problems, and improve social skills in secondary education (Shah & Rauf, 2024). School social workers worldwide work with teachers to provide services to students, such as needs assessments, counselling, parent consultations, responding to bullying, and crisis intervention, which reduces teachers' burden and increases educational attainment (Fazel et al., 2014; Durlak et al., 2011).

Evidence from Pakistan supports the relevance of this broader view. Naveed et al. (2020) documented bullying and emotional and behavioural difficulties among schoolchildren across seven Pakistani cities, while Najmussaqib and Mushtaq (2023) identified an association between behavioural problems and social-emotional competence. Hamdani et al. (2021), working in low-resource public schools in rural Pakistan, argued for scalable school mental health services and highlighted the importance of school-based systems in addressing children's mental health needs. Together, these studies suggest that psychosocial wellbeing should be understood as part of the educational environment rather than as an issue external to schooling.

Teachers are typically the first professionals to detect any changes in students' functioning as they are constantly exposed to the same individuals in a structured setting. However, identifying a potential issue is not the same as having the necessary professional expertise and authority to address it. The Pakistani literature provides relevant evidence. Imran et al. (2018) found that Lahore-based teachers could identify a range of behavioural and learning problems related to family, parenting styles, home environments, and media content, which were rarely acknowledged by the participants in an emotional context. Notably, the researchers also discovered the educators' awareness and training needs regarding children's social-emotional development.

School social work is located at the crossroads of education, social services, family, and community resources. Recent studies have shown that social workers in schools provide various services

to students, such as direct treatment, prevention, family support, consultation, coordination, and collaboration with teachers and other agencies (Ding et al., 2023). These services are relevant to the topic of students' psychosocial issues, which cannot be addressed within the educational system alone.

Evidence on outcomes is promising, but it should be tempered with caution. Franklin et al. (2009) conducted a review of school social work practice studies that analysed treatment outcomes. The results indicated that there were statistically significant effects for both internalizing and externalizing outcomes, whereas mixed results were found for academic outcomes. Kelly et al. (2010) provided a similar review and focused on describing school social work practice in response to intervention principles. Thus, it was concluded that school social work practice tends to be inherently systemic, emphasizing the importance of preventative intervention, high-quality interventions, and data-based practices. In my opinion, these data support the idea that school social work should not be considered as merely a counselling programme. Instead, it should be regarded as contributing to the system by building the school's capacity to address issues and help students by supporting the school in linking students and families to needed services.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by two complementary perspectives: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and the Strengths-Based Perspective. The decision to limit the framework to these two perspectives responds directly to the need for conceptual parsimony.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

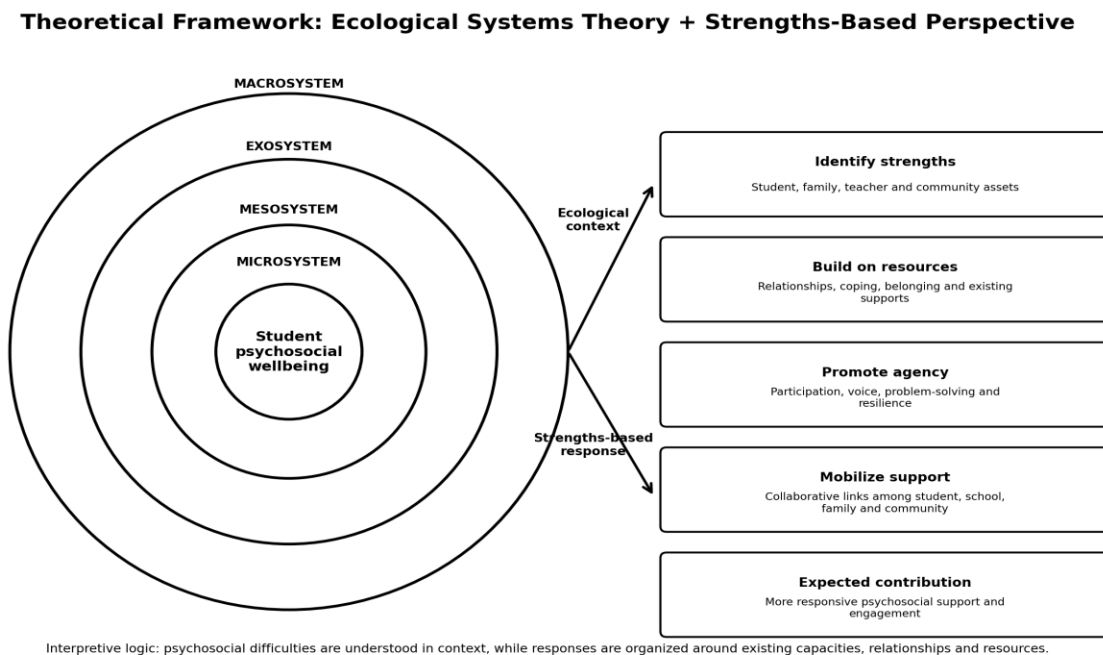
Bronfenbrenner's ecological model focuses on the fact that individuals' development proceeds through their interactions with the environment. His model includes several systems ranging from the immediate microsystem to larger systems, and each plays a distinctive role in a student's learning experience. The microsystem consists of the immediate environment with which students interact on a daily basis. It includes their family, school, teachers, and friends. The mesosystem represents the relationships between microsystems, for example, between school and family. Exosystem falls under the third level and consists of the environment that indirectly affects students, such as institutional resources and services. Lastly, the macrosystem includes overarching societal influences that may affect students. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) later developed the bioecological model further by emphasising proximal processes and the dynamic interaction of person, process, context, and time.

For this study, the ecological perspective provides a way of interpreting teachers' accounts without locating psychosocial difficulty solely within the student. Academic stress can be experienced in the classroom microsystem; family-school communication may operate at the mesosystem level; availability of community services and school staffing can shape the exosystem; and cultural expectations, socioeconomic conditions, and education policy can operate at the macrosystem level. This ecological framing is therefore directly relevant to teachers' descriptions of family stress, peer conflict, school constraints, rural access barriers, and the absence of formal psychosocial personnel.

Strengths-Based Perspective

Ann Weick, Charles Rapp play a major role in the formal development of the strengths-based perspective in social work, and subsequently Dennis Saleebey played a major role in developing, expanding, and popularising this perspective in his first published work in 1992, the *Strengths-Based Perspective in Social Work Practice*. The Strengths-Based Perspective provides a complementary interpretive orientation by resisting an exclusively deficit-based understanding of students, teachers, families, and communities. Applied to the present study, the strengths perspective shifts the interpretation of teachers' accounts in two ways. First, teachers are not represented simply as inadequately trained professionals who cannot manage psychosocial needs; their close relationships with students, informal support strategies, and contextual knowledge are treated as existing assets. Second, school social work is conceptualised not as replacing these assets but as mobilising and connecting them. The combined framework therefore links ecological assessment with strengths-based action: understand the student within interacting systems, identify existing capacities and resources within those systems, and build collaborative responses around them.

Figure 1. Integrated theoretical framework



Source: Presented by the first author in his PhD thesis (unpublished)

Figure 1 summarises the interpretive logic. The ecological component maps the nested contexts in which psychosocial experiences occur, while the strengths-based component guides attention toward assets, relationships, agency, and resource mobilisation. Together, the perspectives support a non-deficit interpretation of student behaviour and a collaborative conception of school social work.

Research Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative descriptive research design was employed to explore teachers' perceptions of students' psychosocial needs and the potential role of school social workers. Qualitative description is appropriate when the purpose is to provide a comprehensive account of participants' perspectives in relatively close proximity to the data, rather than to generate a formal theory or reconstruct the essence of a lived experience.

Study Setting and Case Selection

The study was conducted in four public boys' secondary schools located in Bhakkar and Mianwali districts of Sargodha Division, Punjab. These four schools were selected purposively to provide variation across districts and urban and rural settings: one urban and one rural public boys' secondary school in Bhakkar, and one urban and one rural public boys' secondary school in Mianwali. Thus, the study comprised four schools in total, not four schools per district.

Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to recruit teachers who had direct and continuing contact with Grade 9 and Grade 10 students. Sixteen teachers were selected in total: eight from Bhakkar district and eight from Mianwali district. Four teachers were recruited from each of the four participating schools, thereby ensuring equal representation of the urban and rural cases within each district. The reasons why the sample size was decided on for this study were not based on calculations that would determine the statistical power. Explanations for the choice are linked to qualitative research where there is an emphasis on obtaining detailed and informative accounts from participants rather than seeking a representative sample. The number of 16 teachers was decided upon to enable having a sufficient amount of variation within the cases while also having a limited enough number to allow for thorough analysis of interview data. The choice also reflects the aim for equal representation from the two districts with 4 teachers in each and four teachers per school. One can argue that the decisions were informed by information power which suggests that the determination of the sample size in qualitative studies should be based on the study's objective, the level of specificity of the sample, the richness of the data generated by the participants, and the analytic strategy used to analyze the data rather than any particular statistical criteria (Malterud et al., 2016). As such, the choice of 16 participants was also informed by the fact that during analysis, the researchers were able to reach thematic saturation which meant that additional interviews would not have generated new codes or themes. Therefore the number was appropriate as it enabled a purposive sample needed to capture sufficient variation while also allowing for a manageable amount of data to analyze.

Table 1: Schools and participant structure reported in the study

School	District	Setting	Participants	Total
S1	Bhakkar	Urban	4 teachers (Grades 9–10 class)	4
S2	Bhakkar	Rural	4 teachers (Grades 9–10 class)	4
S3	Mianwali	Urban	4 teachers (Grades 9–10 class)	4
S4	Mianwali	Rural	4 teachers (Grades 9–10 class)	4
Total	Two districts	Urban + Rural	16 teachers (8 per district)	16

Data Collection

All sixteen interviews were conducted by the first author. The participants were qualified master degree teachers with 6-15 years of teaching experience. The interviews were thirty to forty-five minutes long. The first author conducted the interviews individually in Urdu in the staff room of the school with the permission of the headmaster and a written consent from each participant. The study and interviews were conducted independently by the author. The available research records do not document the nature of any prior professional or personal relationship between the interviewer and participants, so no assumption is made about this relationship. The Urdu interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into English, while the original Urdu transcripts were retained alongside the translations.

Data Analysis

Coding was predominantly inductive at the initial stage so that participants' descriptions and meanings could guide the development of codes rather than forcing the data into predetermined theoretical categories. The two selected perspectives were then used at the interpretive stage to examine how themes related to nested ecological contexts and existing strengths and resources. A second reviewer cross-checked the coding and participated in discussion and refinement of the emerging thematic structure; differences in interpretation were resolved through discussion until agreement was reached on the wording and boundaries of the final themes. Urdu interviews were translated into English by the researcher while the original Urdu transcripts were retained for source comparison. A formal back-translation procedure was not documented in the available research records.

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis: familiarisation with the data; generation of initial codes; searching for potential themes; reviewing themes against coded extracts and the full dataset; defining and naming themes; and producing the analytic narrative. Coding was conducted manually. A second reviewer cross-checked the coding and participated in discussion and refinement of the emerging thematic structure. The analysis combined attention to participants' accounts with theoretically informed interpretation. The themes were not treated as mechanically 'emerging'; rather, they were developed through an iterative process of coding, comparison, interpretation, and refinement (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was evaluated regarding its credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability following the Lincoln and Guba's framework (1985). Credibility was achieved through prolonged participation, member-checking, and intercoder reliability. First, credibility was enhanced by interacting with the sampled schools throughout the research process and confirming the generated themes with one of the groups under study. Second, the study was subjected to cross-verifiable coding. Further, transferability was achieved by providing a comprehensive description of the sampled environment and case structure. Detailed coding procedures were also described to allow further replication by other researchers. Further, I relied on manual coding and thematic integration. Additionally, since my sample was not generalized but used for exploratory purposes, the findings were limited to the sampled schools. I cannot generalize the findings to represent all public schools in Pakistan.

Ethical Considerations

The study received approval from the relevant institutional review body before data collection. Participants provided written informed consent and were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw without consequences. Pseudonyms and non-identifying labels were used in reporting. The ethical approach also recognised the sensitivity of discussing students' emotional, family, and behavioural difficulties and avoided presenting identifiable information.

Reflexivity and Reporting Transparency

Because qualitative interpretation is shaped by the researchers' decisions about what to code, compare, and foreground, transparency about analytic procedures is essential. The present article therefore distinguishes participants' reported perceptions from the authors' theoretical interpretation. The study is reported in accordance with established qualitative reporting principles, including attention to sampling, data collection, analysis, reflexivity-related transparency, and the relationship between evidence and interpretation (Tong et al., 2007).

Study Findings

Five interrelated themes were identified across the 16 teacher interviews: (1) multidimensional nature of students' emotional and social needs; (2) behavioural and academic expression of the unmet needs; (3) informal and time-limited teacher response; (4) structural, cultural and resource barriers; and (5) envisioned functions of school social work at the case schools. Validating samples to illustrate the themes have been taken from the English-language interview transcripts of the individual participants.

Theme 1: Multidimensional Nature of Students' Emotional and Social Needs

The participants across the four schools found a variety of needs related to students' social and emotional context. These needs were grouped into three main strands: academic/examination stress; socio-economic/ familial stress; interpersonal/digital conflict.

Sub theme 1.1: Academic and Examination Related Stress

Issues such as examination performance, lack of academic preparation, and parental pressure occurred in both urban schools and for students who were struggling with their academics in rural schools.

"Students who don't do well and stop joining in with the class or try to skip exams have shown signs of examination anxiety and lack of self-confidence." (Participant UT01)

"I see stress arising from academic competition and comparison by parents in the form of panic before exams and excessive frustration over small mistakes." (Participant UT05)

Sub Theme 1.2: Economic and Family-Related Pressure

Widespread issues of poverty, transportation constraints and student retention were highlighted by participants from the rural schools as issues that have a direct impact on students' engagement.

“Often see how transportation issues and socioeconomic issues affect kids in my classroom: they are fatigued, they don't do homework, they don't want to participate.” (Participant RT02)

“In my classroom, I see the results of financial insecurity and worries about students leaving school. When students talk about their work responsibilities and when there are absences because of family duties.” (Participant RT06)

According to responses to the above sub themes, Academic pressure was embedded within broader expectations surrounding examinations and educational success. Teachers' accounts suggested that stress associated with examinations could coexist with economic and family pressures, making it difficult to interpret academic underperformance in isolation. The ecological interpretation is especially useful here: the classroom is the immediate setting in which academic difficulties become visible, but some of the conditions producing stress may originate in family or economic systems outside the school.

Sub theme 1.3: Peer and digital conflict

Participants in urban case study schools reported rising amounts of peer harassment, as well as digital conflict, citing that conflict happening online often seeped into school dynamics.

“I do see conflicts and interpersonal problems often, and these are reflected when online harassment manifests itself in the classroom setting.” (Participant UT02)

Peer relationships constituted another important domain. Conflict, bullying-like interactions, social tensions, and digital communication were understood as capable of affecting students' emotional states and classroom participation. This finding is consistent with evidence that bullying and emotional and behavioural difficulties are present among Pakistani schoolchildren (Naveed et al., 2020). The contribution of the present study is not to estimate prevalence, but to show how teachers make sense of these issues as part of the everyday psychosocial environment of secondary schooling.

Collectively, these narratives suggest a systematic variation in teachers' specific foci and concerns for the psychosocial needs voiced in their schools: the rural teachers described their focus on economic hardship and issues related to access, whereas the urban teachers described their focus on performance pressure, comparison and (gradually more as one goes down) on conflict faced online.

Theme 2: Behavioural and Academic Indicators of Unmet Needs

Participants noted that there were a series of common behaviours that showed up when unmet psychosocial needs were present, such as social withdrawal, lack of engagement, heightened aggression or emotional reactivity, and poor academic performance, as well as irregular attendance, which was associated with a higher risk of dropping out. The significance of this theme lies in

the interpretive move from behaviour to context. Rather than treating withdrawal or aggression only as discipline problems, teachers connected such behaviours to family, economic, relational, and emotional pressures.

“Not addressing these needs results in students losing focus in the group, and a quick decline in academic performance occurs with high performing students dominating the group.” (Participant UT05)

“Students often become withdrawn or aggressive in the classroom when these needs are not met, and teasing often fosters social fragmentation and conflict with peers.” (Participant UT08)

Whereas in the rural case studies, the most common form of the emergence was a loss of motivation due to economic hopelessness rather than excess emotionality.

"Neglecting these requirements diminishes student morale and attendance. Furthermore, peer dynamics deteriorate as students increasingly focus on the disparity between those who remain in school and those who depart" (Participant RT06).

Teachers tended to interpret these behaviors as manifestations of deeper, unfulfilled needs most of the time regardless of the kind of stress and this was especially evident in the way they were uniform across all four schools.

This pattern reflects in the Pakistani literature as well. Imran et al. (2018) identified teachers could easily recognise student's behavioural and learning problems but not their emotional ones unless specifically prompted. The similar conclusion was made by Najmussaib and Mushtaq (2023) who established the correlation between student behavioural problems and their socio-emotional competence. Thus, it could be said that the observed pattern is explained by a mechanism of school's field of view being penetrated by problems students display in their behaviour and, subsequently, their psychosocial issues.

From a strengths-based standpoint, these behaviours should not be reduced to deficits in the student. Withdrawal may signal a need for safety or connection; aggression may indicate unresolved conflict or stress; irregular attendance may reflect competing family or economic demands; and declining motivation may reflect a weakening fit between the student and the school environment. Such interpretations do not excuse harmful behaviour, but they broaden the range of possible responses available to educators.

Theme 3: Current, Informal, and Time-Bound Teacher Responses

Across all cases, participants described their current interventions for student distress as informal, ad hoc, and reliant upon individual initiative rather than institutional protocol. Those participants reported that they handle student distress in an improvisational and unstructured way, and this involves more individual judgement and effort than institutional protocol. This typically involves offering students advice after class, making contact with parents, or encouraging students, rather than using student support procedures.

One of the respondents responded that *"Currently, we primarily provide informal guidance to students after class. However, we lack the necessary time and professional training to address more profound emotional challenges"* (Participant UT03).

Several teachers reported that even their best efforts, including interventions with parents, can backfire if the family's view of the outreach is negative and that the outreach is seen as a condemnation, rather than an invitation to support.

In the present, Participant UT04 commented that *“we mostly reach out to parents or have one-on-one discussions with students, but some parents see this as a complaint and not an opportunity for constructive support.”*

In rural settings, teachers reported additional logistical issues: while teachers reported trying to understand a student's home situation before taking action, they are not able to effectively do this in addition to their instructional duties, as they do not have the resources, for instance, to make home visits.

“An attempt is made to find out the cause of the problem before taking disciplinary action, however the school does not have personnel who are specifically tasked to handle or address familial issues properly.” (Participant RT01)

Despite efforts to be supportive and encouraging, most recognised that this did not work when academic, family or economic pressures were acute.

“At the moment, we are mainly concentrating on getting students through to matriculation, but this willingness is not effective if there is a lot of financial instability in their families.” (Participant RT06)

Teachers described themselves as responding to students' difficulties through informal relational strategies. These practices reveal an important relational asset within the school. Teachers are not passive observers of psychosocial difficulties. They already possess knowledge of students and use that knowledge to provide support.

However, these responses were constrained by workload, limited specialist preparation, and the absence of formal psychosocial structures. The result is a form of informal welfare provision that depends heavily on individual teacher initiative. This creates variability in what students may receive and can place additional responsibilities on teachers whose primary role remains instruction. Mughal and Aldridge (2017) documented the wider problem of competing demands within rural Punjab schooling, while Khurram et al. (2025) similarly reported teachers' concerns about handling non-academic student problems in the absence of professional school social workers.

The strengths-based interpretation is particularly important here. The appropriate response is not to displace teachers' existing relational contribution but to strengthen it.

Theme 4: Structural, Cultural and Resource Barriers

Teachers found that there were a variety of barriers which prevented them from responding to students' psychosocial needs, such as a lack of trained personnel, time and class size restrictions, cultural stigma, geographical challenges and a lack of structured training for addressing non-academic student challenges.

Sub-theme 4.1: Absence of trained staff and time constraints

Main barriers are large classes and a lack of trained counsellor/school social workers, and teachers to complete the syllabus first.

“In addition to the large class sizes, lack of specialised counsellors or school social workers is a major obstacle, as is the pressure placed on teachers to focus on completing the syllabus”. (Participant UT05)

Sub-theme 4.2: Stigma and Cultural Barriers

Stigma relating to emotional issues and poor collaboration between teachers and parents are the key challenges identified, and there is also a lack of a confidential referral pathway. About this, two of the respondents commented that:

“Stigma associated with emotional health issues and poor partnerships between families and schools are primary obstacles, and educators aren't connected with a confidential referral system.” (Participant UT08)

“Lack of mental health awareness among students and reluctance of students, and lack of formal training for teachers in case management are significant barriers.” (Participant RT02)

Sub-theme 4.3: Accessibility in rural areas and geographic limitation.

Distance between schools and villages is one of the main obstacles, as well as parents' working schedules, teachers' inability to visit homes or to handle cases of social factors that interfere with teaching duties.

“The major difficulties mentioned are the physical distance between the schools and the rural areas, and also parents' working schedules. In addition, their heavy workload and academic commitments make it difficult for teachers to be able to go on home visits or to deal with cases concerning social welfare.” (Participant RT07)

Sub Theme 4.4: Lack of Structured Psychosocial Support Skills

Urban educators reported that they had a clear lack of structured competencies to respond to pressure caused by institutional culture, parental expectations and the complexities of digital conflict, which is hard to monitor. One of the respondents said:

"Primary obstacles include a result-oriented institutional culture and parental pressure. Furthermore, educators lack formal training in psychological support strategies." (Participant UT04)

Another respondent said that *"Key barriers involve a deficiency in guidance regarding digital conduct and students' concerns regarding disclosure and students' fear of being exposed. Additionally, teachers typically identify conflicts only after they have escalated."* (Participant UT06)

In rural settings, educators identified structural poverty and the absence of career or social guidance function within the school as systemic challenges that exceed their individual capacity to address.

One rural school teacher informed that *“The following are important barriers identified by participants: Poverty and career/career-related and social guidance are important barriers as educators are not able to resolve complicated familial issues alone.”* (Participant RT05)

Teachers felt that barriers to intervention existed at different levels. One of the main problems they mentioned was the lack of qualified psychosocial workers. In addition, the absence of funds and resources and the resulting difficulties in providing services in remote areas were significant challenges. Moreover, teachers believed that cultural norms and traditional values could hinder open discussion of family problems and the acceptance of help from outside experts.

These barriers to children’s services can serve to illustrate the worth of the ecological framework. A teacher might identify a child’s need at the microsystem level, but be unable to act on it effectively if no services are available at the exosystem level or if there are cultural barriers to seeking help at the macrosystem level. The issue, therefore, is not only that teachers may need additional knowledge, but also that the school administration may not have the resources or connections to address students’ needs in an organised manner.

The finding has implications for implementation. Introducing school social work without defining responsibilities, referral pathways, confidentiality procedures, workload arrangements, and community sensitisation could reproduce existing ambiguities rather than resolve them. Teachers’ concerns therefore point toward the need for system-level planning rather than a narrow addition of another job title.

Theme 5: Envisioned Functions of School-Based Social Work

Responses to the specific questions about what a school social worker might do were similar across the four cases and fell into several groups; the first centred on early screening and identification, the second on individual counselling and/or assisting in building confidence, the third on peer mediation, the fourth on liaison with families and parents and the fifth on gaining referrals and coordinating referrals.

Sub Theme 5.1: Early Screening and Identification

One of the teachers commented on the potential role of social work in school as, *“If students experienced recurring emotional or social problems, they could be screened through a school social worker to provide guidance to teachers and support to students prior to a problem becoming serious”* (Participant UT01)

Sub Theme 5.2: counselling, confidence-building and mediation

Two teachers expressed their views about the possible role of social work in secondary schools like that. *“Students might be more willing to talk with an individual who is trained and neutral, who could offer confidence building activities and individual support.”* (Participant UT04)

“This could be done in a school social worker’s role, to be able to mediate conflicts, give social emotional education, this would help because students need a place today to report issues early.” (Participant UT06)

Sub Theme 5.3: Family and Parent Liaison

An urban teacher commented that “A school social worker has mental health counselling support for students and informs parents about realistic expectations of students' learning and schooling; this would help because it would assist in lessening anxiety of the student and help to avoid excessive focus on learning, while keeping an eye on the students' academic work.” (Participant UT05)

Sub Theme 5.4: Referral Coordination and Dropout Prevention

“A school social worker could offer guidance and referrals and provide parent counseling would be helpful as it could lower the risk of dropping out, early help.” (Participant RT06)

Teachers were generally positive towards the idea of school social work, provided that it was considered as an adjunct to their efforts. They identified screening or early identification, counselling and mediation, home-school contact, and referrals, as well as consultation with community agencies as components of the role. Such an understanding of the school social worker's role is similar to the modern conceptualization of the position as a cross-system professional, as opposed to a clinical one (Ding et al., 2023).

Family liaison was arguably more critical in this case, as many of the problems that teachers identified would not be solved by any actions taken within a classroom only. Thus, a social worker can act as a link between school/family/community and remove some of the responsibility and stress from teachers while addressing the issue. The same reasoning applies to the ecological perspective, as the problem was found to affect multiple systems, and therefore one single system cannot solve it entirely.

The strengths-based perspective adds a second dimension to this role. A school social worker should not approach families only as sources of problems or students only as recipients of services. Instead, practice can identify family capacities, supportive relationships, community resources, and student agency, and then connect those assets to formal support. The envisioned role is therefore one of coordination, empowerment, and capacity-building as well as direct assistance.

In all sixteen interviews, the participants viewed the school social worker as a supplementary role to that of the teacher-student relationship. The school social worker was found to be a professional who could take on more specialised roles than the teachers, such as ongoing family liaison, confidential case management and referrals to external services, which were outside the scope of the teachers' pedagogical training and classroom capacity. Teachers are better able to combine academic programming and emotional support when social workers are able to recognise the emotional obstacles affecting academic performance.

Discussion

The results of this research reveal that the public secondary school teachers of *Bhakkar* and *Mi-anwali* districts recognise a high need for psychosocial intervention in their students' lives, but the strategies they take to address this need are found to be informal, improvised ones, not institutional. This pattern is similar to literature about under-resourced educational systems, in which

teachers, who are often not trained to recognise psychosocial issues, tend to label issues in terms of academic achievement and problem behaviour in the classroom. This was similar to what was observed with teachers in Lahore, who always reported problems with learning and discipline but seldom showed an interest in intervening on the basis of unprompted observation of any emotional problems that were not explicitly mentioned (Imran et al., 2018).

The first finding was that teachers understood psychosocial need as multidimensional rather than reducible to a single emotional or behavioural problem. Academic and examination pressure, family and economic stress, peer conflict, and difficulties associated with changing social and digital environments were described as overlapping influences on students' school experiences. This interpretation is broadly consistent with Pakistani evidence showing that teachers recognise behavioural and learning difficulties in relation to family and social circumstances (Imran et al., 2018) and with research linking socioeconomic pressure and school discontinuity in rural Punjab (Mughal & Aldridge, 2017). International literature likewise emphasises that adolescent well-being is shaped by interacting with school, family, peer, and community conditions rather than by individual characteristics alone.

The present paper adds to this literature by demonstrating how teachers make ecological connections when telling about their practice. Instead of regarding manifestations of withdrawal, aggression, school avoidance, and lack of motivation as intrinsically disruptive behaviors, participants related these tendencies to situations in which students were involved and circumstances under which the behaviors occurred. This perspective aligns best with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory because students' classrooms and peers represent their immediate microsystem, family – school relations pertain to another aspect of the mesosystem, institutional and community resources signal broader ecological contexts or macrosystem, and cultural and socioeconomic forces underpinning these relations constitute the overarching system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). From this perspective, the contribution of the present study to social work practice in the Punjab context becomes evident. When addressing students' adjustment problems, a school social worker should consider the client's whole environment instead of focusing on the individual in isolation from others. It was especially critical in the context of the participants' discussions because poverty and limited access to essential services often undermined students' school experience directly through their families' circumstances.

The second study finding was about psychosocial difficulties' manifestation through the students' behavior and participation in school. Teachers noted that withdrawal, aggression, and a decrease in motivation, attendance, and engagement could be some of the red flags. This observation can be related to the results of the study by Imran et al. (2018), which stated that in the Pakistani context, teachers tend to encounter students' psychosocial issues primarily through behavioral and learning domains. It aligns with the findings of Najmussaib and Mushtaq (2023), who revealed that social-emotional challenges often underlie Pakistani students' behavioral problems.

In parallel, the results of the study provide an additional cautionary note regarding the interpretation of observed behavior as necessarily indicative of unacceptable conduct. From an ecological perspective, behavior is best seen as a point where different influences converge in the school setting. This consideration is linked to the fact that disciplinary actions usually target only the manifest part of the problem. At the same time, a school social worker can intervene in the con-

text where behavior occurs and bring in factors outside of school into the discussion. By doing so, he/she would help address the entire issue, not just the manifestations of a problem. The value of such an approach is especially evident when there are factors beyond the control of teachers and students alike, such as family issues, financial problems, and other social concerns.

This interpretation aligns with the findings of Imran et al. (2018), who revealed that teachers' understanding of children's difficulties was closely related to the family and social contexts, and the teacher's awareness and training level. The interpretation also corresponds to the recent Sargodha study by Khurram et al. (2025), which reported teachers' perceived need for school social work services. The current study builds on these findings by emphasising the secondary-school teachers' perception of school social work, with their most positive responses associated with the concept of school social work, which does not replace but rather supplements teachers' roles.

The third was that the interviewed teachers were already performing some of the work of informal welfare workers. Their close and continuing contact with students allowed them to observe developments, listen to students' problems, discuss possibilities for help, and try to provide that help. This is an argument about strengths within the school environment. It is, simultaneously, a caution about professional welfare workers who are reliant upon the irregular and contingent support of their colleagues.

This interpretation resonates with the findings of Imran et al. (2018), who reported that the awareness and training of teachers play a critical role in addressing various issues. It also aligns with the results of Mughal and Aldridge (2017), who revealed the negative impact of non-academic tasks on the workload of teachers in rural Punjab. In addition, this conclusion expands the discussion to emphasize the need to position school social work as complementary to the efforts of teaching staff. Indeed, teachers have relational access and domain-specific knowledge that a new professional, such as a social worker, does not have. Therefore, the latter can provide specialized services, including assessments, counseling, family counseling, referrals, and follow-up while complementing the efforts of teachers. This interpretation focuses on strengths, as it highlights the fact that the intervention will be geared towards the capacities that the school already has while building the professional infrastructure.

The implication is that school social work should not be introduced as an additional method or mean. On the contrary, the process should not be limited to counselling exclusively. An appropriate approach should be developed based on early identification of needs, providing with short-term psycho-social services, engaging families, consulting, referring, mobilizing resources, responding to crises, involving teachers in the process and preventive activities. Franklin et al. (2009) found out the empirical evidence of school social work being effective in some emotional and behavioral outcomes, although the inconsistency of results related to academic achievements do not allow claiming its positive influence on grades. The fact that social work with students helps maintain the school environment, which positively contributes to involvement, well-being, and opportunities for all, is more evident and has more consistent results.

The fourth theme was teachers' responsiveness to students' psychosocial problems was dependent upon structural, cultural, and resource factors, including the lack of trained psychosocial personnel, limited specialist skills, accessibility issues, time constraints, and a perceived stigma or a lack of willingness to accept help. This theme resonated with the reviewed literature, primarily

studies conducted in low-resource settings, in which the availability of school-based social services was found to be limited by various factors, including human and financial resources and school culture. It also aligned with the findings of the reviewed literature on the educational setting in Pakistan, in which schools are reported to have multiple roles and responsibilities alongside teaching and learning.

The theoretical significance of these barriers is that they cut across levels beyond the individual teacher. Limited referral resources and staffing are school- and community-level ecological factors; stigma and help-seeking expectations are grounded in cultural norms; and the lack of a defined professional role reflects policy and system factors. The practical implication of these findings is that teachers' help-seeking "limitations" should not be interpreted as individual inadequacies. Strengths-based inquiry would explore how available resources and relationships might be linked to additional professional support. This perspective may inform the Pakistani context, both by reframing the issue and broadening the solution set, such that the focus is not on social workers per se, but on developing school-based linkages, confidentiality protocols, role definitions, community engagement, and other factors.

This orientation can also prove useful in the implementation of social work in contexts where such activity might be met with resistance, e.g., because the involvement of a school social worker is seen as presenting an evaluation of teachers or families. By focusing on collaboration, school social work does not oppose but adds to existing approaches, thereby respecting and supporting cultural practices and the responsibilities of teachers and families.

The fifth finding was that teachers felt that school social work was a valuable intervention if its role was properly differentiated and complementary to the other existing relationships in the school. Specifically, the participants associated the roles of the school social worker with early identification, counselling and mediation, liaison with families, and coordination and mobilisation of resources. In general terms, these results corresponded with international definitions of school social work as a field of professional social work practice with children, families, teachers, the school system, and the community (Ding et al., 2023; Kelly et al., 2010). In line with this, Franklin et al. (2009) found that school-based social work interventions had a positive effect on some behavioural and emotional outcomes, but the evidence was mixed for academic outcomes. With this in mind, the current findings do not suggest that school social work interventions are inherently beneficial for achieving positive academic results.

The more valuable contribution is in the way the role fits within the context in which it is deployed as identified by teachers. The preferred option is neither a parallel disciplinary role in a school nor counselling as an auxiliary post. It is a cross-system role that cuts across classrooms, families, and communities and encompasses observation, assessment, referral, and resource-linking functions. In the Punjab context, this would have to be designed with a beginning in mind, taking into account issues such as accessibility from rural areas, staff recruitment and retention, confidentiality, culturally appropriate behaviour, caseloads, and referral options. A more realistic option is to introduce this structure in different school settings and observe how each context interprets and adopts these roles so that they can be fine-tuned to institutional and community-specific needs. Thus, the theoretical contribution consists of taking up ecological and strengths perspectives to scope out a possible role set for school social workers in the Indian context.

Implications of the Study

Implications for School Social Work Practice

- Define school social work as a complementary service that works in tandem with teachers to enhance their relationships with students rather than replacing them.
- Prioritize early identification, psychosocial assessment, brief counseling, mediation, family consultations, referrals, and mobilization of resources.
- Use ecological assessment to identify variables in the family, peers, classroom, community, institution, and culture, as appropriate.
- Base case planning on the student's strengths, relating factors, resources, and families, as well as the community.
- Establish confidentiality, referral, and safeguarding policies, procedures, and collaboration strategies with relevant professionals before presenting the proposal.

Implications for Teacher Training

Teacher training should be aimed toward recognizing and referring rather than attempting to make teachers clinical experts. Concise professional development could include the necessary information about psychosocial red flags, building supportive talk, brief responses in the classroom, limits and confidentiality, talking with families, referring, and collaboration with school social workers. This approach will enhance the endogenous resources identified in the study, as well as reduce the potential for teachers to feel personally responsible for complex psychosocial issues.

Implications for Education Policy

The proposed policy should set standards for school social work practice, including those relating to the social work roles, the coordination mechanisms and structures, class sizes or ratios of caseloads, and referral resources to health and social service providers. Some pilot testing of different models in a range of urban, rural, and urban contexts before any formal nationwide implementation should be done. In addition, the sensitisation process should be considered, at least in certain populations, to address stigma.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted that might affect interpretation of this study's results. First, the study used a small purposive qualitative sample of 16 teachers. Although the sample was evenly distributed, with eight teachers in each of the two districts, it cannot be generalised to all teachers in public secondary schools. The study was focused on gaining an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon within the specified context. Second, the study was also limited to only two districts in Punjab. The results should not be extrapolated to cover all public secondary schools in Pakistan. Lastly, the study was conducted in boys' secondary schools. It remains unclear whether the psychosocial experiences and perceptions of school social work in these schools are generalisable to girls' schools or mixed-gender schools.

Conclusion

This qualitative descriptive study indicates that teachers in the participating public secondary schools understand students' psychosocial needs as multidimensional and closely connected to family, economic, peer, and school contexts. Teachers already provide informal relational support, but their capacity to respond systematically is constrained by time, training, resources, and the absence of dedicated psychosocial personnel. Within these four cases, teachers viewed school social work as a potentially complementary role focused on early identification, psychosocial support, family liaison, referral coordination, and resource mobilisation.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides the primary explanatory framework for understanding how students' psychosocial experiences are connected to interacting family, school, peer, community, institutional, and broader social contexts. The Strengths-Based Perspective provides a complementary interpretive orientation by emphasising the capacities, relationships, and resources that teachers and schools already possess. Considered collectively, the presented perspectives contribute to an emerging understanding of the social work model that builds on and enhances available resources. The study neither claims nor aims to promote the development of an identical model for school social work in Pakistan. It provides limited but useful insights for further research, pilot interventions, and cautious policy consideration in the context of four boys' public schools located in two districts of Punjab.

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