

SCHOLASTIC CHALLENGES OF CHILDREN: A PERSPECTIVE OF TEACHERS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO KARNATAKA STATE

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ABSTRACT

Scholastic difficulties among school-age children represent one of the most pressing concerns within educational and social welfare systems in India. This study examines teachers' perceptions of the scholastic challenges faced by students in Karnataka State, approached through the theoretical and applied lens of social work practice. A descriptive research design was employed with a sample of 123 school teachers drawn from government and aided schools across Karnataka. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analysed through descriptive statistics and the Kruskal-Wallis H test to explore gender-based differences in teacher perceptions. Findings reveal that nearly all teachers unanimously identified deficits in students' prior knowledge as the most critical academic barrier, while disruptive classroom behaviour was also widely acknowledged as a significant impediment to learning. Gender-based analysis demonstrated statistically significant differences between male and female teachers in perceptions of teaching style, foundational knowledge gaps, parental involvement, and socio-economic disadvantage as contributors to student academic difficulties. The study reinforces the vital role of school social work in addressing scholastic problems through multi-level interventions that include remedial programming, family engagement, behavioural support, and community-based resource mobilisation. Implications for school social work practice, policy, and professional development are discussed.

Keywords: scholastic problems, school social work, teacher perceptions, Karnataka, academic challenges, children, educational interventions, gender differences

1. Introduction

Education is widely acknowledged as the single most powerful instrument of social transformation and human development. In the Indian context, access to quality schooling is enshrined as a constitutional right under the Right to Education Act (2009), reflecting the nation's commitment to ensuring that every child is afforded the opportunity to realise their academic potential. Yet, despite significant policy advances, a large proportion of children continue to struggle with scholastic difficulties that undermine their learning, emotional well-being, and long-term life chances (Kumar, 2010). These challenges are particularly pronounced in Karnataka State, where structural inequities in resource distribution, linguistic diversity, and wide socio-economic disparities create a complex landscape of educational disadvantage.

Scholastic problems refer to a broad spectrum of difficulties that impede a child's ability to engage with, participate in, and benefit from formal schooling. These include cognitive challenges such as learning disabilities, limited foundational knowledge, and poor academic self-efficacy; environmental factors such as poverty, family instability, and inadequate study conditions; and systemic issues such as overcrowded classrooms, insufficient teacher training, and lack of supportive services (Anand & Chhaya, 2012; Bhattacharya, 2014). The interaction of these multiple layers of disadvantage renders scholastic failure not merely an individual deficit but a socially produced outcome that demands systemic intervention.

Within this framework, the social work profession occupies a distinctive and indispensable position. School social workers serve as critical bridge-builders connecting students, families, communities, teachers, and institutional systems to co-create enabling environments for learning (Constable, 2006). Unlike purely remedial or psychological approaches, social work brings a person-in-environment perspective that situates the child's academic struggles within the broader socio-structural context of their lives (Germain & Gitterman, 1996). This ecological orientation is particularly well-suited to addressing the multidimensional nature of scholastic problems, which rarely stem from a single cause and almost never yield to single-pronged solutions.

Teachers, as the primary professionals in daily contact with students, occupy a uniquely important position in the early identification, understanding, and initial response to scholastic difficulties. Their perceptions of the causes, patterns, and severity of these challenges shape their instructional choices, referral behaviours, and willingness to collaborate with support professionals including school social workers and counsellors (Brophy & Good, 1974; Sharma

& Malhotra, 2017). Despite this, teacher perspectives on scholastic problems have received relatively limited systematic attention in the Indian research literature, particularly in the context of Karnataka State.

This paper addresses that gap by presenting findings from a study of 123 school teachers in Karnataka, examining their perceptions of scholastic challenges from a social work perspective. The study analyses key demographic characteristics of the teacher sample and explores both points of consensus and gender-based divergence in perceptions of the structural, pedagogical, and family-related determinants of student academic difficulty. The implications of these findings for social work practice, school-based intervention design, and teacher professional development are discussed throughout.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Understanding Scholastic Problems in Children

Scholastic problems encompass a diverse range of difficulties that hinder academic functioning. Rutter and Yule (1975), in their foundational work on reading retardation and general reading backwardness, established empirically that scholastic underachievement is rarely the product of a singular cause but emerges from the confluence of neurological, environmental, and socio-familial factors. This multifactorial view has remained central to the field. In the Indian context, Mukherjee (2002) documented the widespread prevalence of learning difficulties among primary school children, noting that inadequate pre-school preparation and low parental literacy significantly compounded children's struggles in the formal school environment.

Kauffman and Hallahan (2005) distinguished between specific learning disabilities, which have neurological substrates, and general academic underachievement, which may be more environmentally driven. In both cases, early identification and targeted intervention are consistently identified as the most effective strategies to prevent the entrenchment of failure. In Karnataka specifically, studies have highlighted how the transition from mother-tongue medium instruction to English-medium education in middle school creates acute knowledge gaps and contributes substantially to dropout and disengagement among students from rural and low-income backgrounds (Nambissan, 2010; Ramachandran, 2004).

2.2 The Role of Teachers in Identifying and Addressing Scholastic Difficulties

Teachers are often the first professionals to notice signs of scholastic difficulty. Their perceptions, attributions, and responses to struggling students have been shown to significantly influence whether and how those students receive support (Good & Brophy, 2003). Research by Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1997) found that teachers who attribute academic failure to student effort or motivation tend to adopt less supportive pedagogical strategies than those who recognise structural and environmental contributors. This attribution bias has important implications for teacher training and for the role of school social workers in reframing how educational difficulties are understood and addressed within schools.

Sharma and Malhotra (2017) found in their study of Delhi schools that teacher perceptions of student behaviour, parental involvement, and prior academic preparation were strong predictors of referral to counselling and special education services. Male and female teachers differed significantly in the weight they assigned to family factors versus instructional factors, a pattern also observed by Saxe (2003) in his cross-cultural analysis of educator perspectives on student learning. These gender-inflected differences in perception matter because they shape the nature of support offered to struggling students and, therefore, whether that support proves effective.

2.3 Social Work in Educational Settings

School social work as a formal profession emerged in the United States in the early twentieth century as part of the progressive movement to address the social conditions affecting children's access to education (Costin, 1969). In India, the integration of social work into educational settings has been more gradual, but the need for such integration has been increasingly recognised by policy bodies including the National Policy on Education (1986, revised 1992) and the National Curriculum Framework (2005), both of which acknowledge the importance of psycho-social support in schools.

Constable (2006) described school social work as operating across three domains: direct practice with students and families, consultation and collaboration with teachers and administrators, and community engagement and resource linkage. Each of these domains is directly relevant to the problem of scholastic difficulties. Allen-Meares, Washington, and Welsh (2000) emphasised that effective school social work requires not only clinical competencies but also structural analysis skills — the ability to identify and challenge institutional barriers that reproduce educational disadvantage.

In the Karnataka context, Anand and Chhaya (2012) highlighted the potential of community-based social work approaches to address educational marginalisation among scheduled caste and tribal children. Their findings demonstrated that parental engagement mediated by trained social workers significantly improved children's school retention and academic performance. Similarly, Bhattacharya (2014) documented how school-based social work interventions targeting both the home and classroom environment were more effective than classroom-only programmes in reducing academic difficulties among urban disadvantaged children.

2.4 Gender, Teacher Identity, and Pedagogical Perception

The relationship between teacher gender and pedagogical orientation has been a subject of sustained enquiry in educational research. Research by Skelton, Francis, and Smulyan (2006) suggested that female teachers are more likely to employ relational and nurturing approaches to struggling students, while male teachers may be more inclined to attribute difficulties to individual student factors such as effort and motivation. These tendencies, however, are mediated by institutional context, training, and experience, and should not be overgeneralised.

In the Indian context, Dutta and Sahoo (2018) found that female teachers in government schools were more likely to identify family and socio-economic factors as the primary drivers of academic underachievement, while male teachers placed greater emphasis on cognitive readiness and instructional pacing. These differences were statistically significant and held even after controlling for subject specialism and years of experience, suggesting that gender socialisation plays a genuine role in shaping teacher perception independent of professional variables.

3. Rationale and Objectives of the Study

Despite the growing body of literature on scholastic problems and school social work, there is a notable paucity of studies that examine teacher perceptions of academic challenges in Karnataka State through an explicitly social work-oriented analytical framework. Most existing studies in the region focus on either student outcomes or policy analysis, without systematically documenting how the professionals most proximate to students — their teachers — understand and make sense of the difficulties that children face. This gap is significant

because effective social work intervention in schools depends on accurate diagnosis of how educational problems are perceived by key stakeholders, including teachers.

The present study was therefore designed with the following objectives:

1. To examine the socio-demographic profile of school teachers participating in the study.
2. To assess teacher perceptions of academic challenges and barriers to learning faced by students.
3. To explore gender-based differences in teacher perceptions of the determinants of scholastic difficulty.
4. To discuss implications of the findings for school social work practice and policy in Karnataka.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study employed a descriptive survey research design, which is appropriate when the aim is to systematically document and describe the characteristics, perceptions, and attitudes of a defined population (Kothari, 2004). Descriptive designs are widely used in social work research when the goal is to generate evidence that can inform professional practice and programme development rather than to establish causal relationships. The cross-sectional nature of the data collection allowed for analysis of patterns across the teacher sample at a single point in time.

4.2 Study Area and Sample

The study was conducted in Karnataka State, India, which is characterised by significant linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic diversity across its districts. Government-aided and private unaided schools in selected districts of Karnataka formed the study setting. A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure representation across subject disciplines, gender, and levels of teaching experience. The final sample comprised 123 school teachers who provided complete and valid responses.

4.3 Data Collection Instrument

A structured questionnaire was the primary instrument for data collection. The questionnaire was developed through a review of existing literature on scholastic problems and teacher perceptions, drawing particularly on the frameworks of Constable (2006), Allen-

Meares et al. (2000), and Sharma and Malhotra (2017). It comprised two sections: (a) socio-demographic information including age, gender, years of experience, educational qualification, and teaching subject; and (b) Likert-scale items measuring teacher perceptions of academic challenges and barriers to student learning on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The instrument was reviewed for content validity by subject matter experts and pilot-tested before deployment.

4.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were computed for all demographic and perception variables. To examine whether teacher gender produced statistically significant differences in perceptions of scholastic problem determinants, the Kruskal-Wallis H test was applied. This non-parametric test was selected because the data did not meet the assumptions of normality required for parametric equivalents (Field, 2013). A significance threshold of $p < .05$ was employed throughout.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary and written informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by removing all personally identifying information from the data. The study protocol was approved by the relevant institutional review board. These ethical safeguards are consistent with the principles of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics (2017) regarding the conduct of research involving human participants.

5. Results

5.1 Socio-Demographic Profile of Teacher Participants

5.1.1 Age Distribution of Teachers

Table presents the descriptive statistics for the age of the teacher participants. The sample comprised 123 teachers with ages ranging from 28 to 60 years. The mean age was 42.67 years ($SD = 11.30$), suggesting that the majority of participants fall within the middle-aged professional category. This finding is consistent with the observation of Darling-Hammond (2000) that mid-career teachers, who combine relatively fresh academic credentials with accumulated pedagogical experience, are often best positioned to recognise and respond to the

diverse learning needs of students. The substantial standard deviation of 11.30 reflects meaningful age diversity within the sample, which in turn captures a range of generational perspectives on teaching and student support.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics — Age of Teacher Participants (N = 123)

Statistic	Value
N	123
Minimum Age (years)	28
Maximum Age (years)	60
Mean Age (years)	42.67
Standard Deviation	11.30

5.1.2 Gender Distribution of Teachers

Table shows the gender composition of the teacher sample. Female teachers constituted a slight majority at 51.2% (n = 63), while male teachers comprised 48.8% (n = 60). This near-equal representation is a methodological strength of the study. Saxe (2003) has argued that gender balance in teacher samples is important for research that seeks to understand how instructional approaches and responses to student difficulty vary across gender lines. The balance achieved here lends confidence to the gender-comparative analyses reported in subsequent sections.

Table 2 Gender Distribution of Teacher Participants

Sl. No.	Gender	Frequency	Percent (%)
1	Male	60	48.8
2	Female	63	51.2
Total		123	100.0

5.1.3 Years of Teaching Experience

Table presents the distribution of teaching experience among participants. Experience ranged from 2 to 25 years, with a mean of 7.88 years (SD = 6.12). The large standard deviation underscores the heterogeneity of the sample, encompassing both early-career teachers and those with over two decades of classroom experience. This breadth is valuable for a social work-oriented study because, as Brophy and Good (1974) noted, teachers at different career stages tend to hold differing attributions for student academic difficulties, with novice teachers

more likely to attribute problems to individual student deficits and experienced teachers more likely to recognise structural and contextual factors.

Table 4.3: Descriptive Statistics — Years of Teaching Experience (N = 123)

Statistic	Value
N	123
Minimum (years)	2.00
Maximum (years)	25.00
Mean (years)	7.88
Standard Deviation	6.12

5.1.4 Educational Qualifications

Table presents the educational qualifications of teacher participants. The majority held a graduate degree with a B.Ed. (65.9%), followed by a master's degree (29.3%). A smaller proportion held postgraduate degrees in education or doctoral qualifications (4.9%). These findings indicate that the sample is academically qualified and broadly meets the professional standards prescribed for school teachers under the National Council for Teacher Education regulations. Postgraduate qualifications, in particular, have been associated with stronger subject content knowledge and more nuanced understandings of student learning needs (Darling-Hammond, 2000), characteristics that are relevant to the quality of support teachers can provide to academically struggling students.

Table 4: Educational Qualifications of Teacher Participants

Sl. No.	Qualification	Frequency	Percent (%)
1	Graduation with B.Ed.	81	65.9
2	Master's Degree	36	29.3
3	M.Ed. or Ph.D.	6	4.9
Total		123	100.0

5.1.5 Subject Specialisation

Table 5 shows the distribution of teachers by teaching subject. Kannada teachers were the most represented (27.6%), followed by English (23.6%) and Mathematics (18.7%). The predominance of language and mathematics teachers reflects the curricular priorities of the Karnataka school system, where Kannada as the state language and English as a functional lingua franca are accorded particular importance. Sports (8.1%), Hindi (8.9%), and Computer

Science (3.3%) were also represented. Social Science, Biology, and Physics teachers were fewer in number. The diversity of subject representation is methodologically valuable because subject specialism influences how teachers diagnose and respond to student academic difficulties, with language teachers and mathematics teachers, for example, tending to identify different types of scholastic barriers (Sharma & Malhotra, 2017).

Table 5: Teaching Subject Distribution of Teacher Participants

Sl. No.	Subject	Frequency	Percent (%)
1	Kannada	34	27.6
2	English	29	23.6
3	Hindi	11	8.9
4	Social Science	6	4.9
5	Biology	2	1.6
6	Mathematics	23	18.7
7	Physics	2	1.6
8	Sports	10	8.1
9	Computer Science	4	3.3
10	Other	2	1.6
Total		123	100.0

5.2 Teacher Perceptions of Academic Challenges

5.2.1 Students Lack Prior Knowledge to Succeed

Table 6 reports teacher responses to the statement that students lack the prior knowledge necessary to succeed academically. The finding was striking in its unanimity: 95.9% of teachers strongly agreed and 4.1% agreed, with no teacher selecting a neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree response. This represents an almost unprecedented level of consensus in survey research and signals a deeply shared professional concern among Karnataka school teachers about the foundational knowledge gaps that students bring into the classroom.

Table 6: Students Lack Prior Knowledge to Succeed (N = 123)

Sl. No.	Response	Frequency	Percent (%)
1	Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
2	Disagree	0	0.0
3	Neutral	0	0.0
4	Agree	5	4.1
5	Strongly Agree	118	95.9
Total		123	100.0

These findings are consistent with the argument advanced by Mukherjee (2002) that inadequate preparation in foundational literacy and numeracy at the pre-primary level creates cumulative knowledge gaps that progressively widen as children advance through the school system. From a social work perspective, this finding has direct implications for the design of school-community interventions. Kauffman and Hallahan (2005) have similarly documented how deficits in prior knowledge interact with poor instructional differentiation to produce academic disengagement and, ultimately, school failure. School social workers are well placed to facilitate diagnostic assessment processes, bridge learning programmes, and parent education initiatives that address knowledge gaps before they become entrenched.

5.2.2 Students Do Not Dedicate Enough Time to Studies

Table 7 presents teacher responses to the proposition that students fail to invest sufficient time in their studies. In notable contrast to the previous item, the majority of teachers (71.5%) disagreed with this statement, and 3.3% strongly disagreed. Only 17.9% agreed and 2.4% strongly agreed, while 4.9% were neutral. This indicates that teachers do not, as a whole, attribute scholastic difficulties primarily to student laziness or lack of effort. This is an important and encouraging finding from a social work perspective because deficit-based attributions, which locate the cause of academic failure in the individual student's choices or character, are associated with less supportive and more punitive teacher responses to struggling students (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997).

Table 4.7: Students Do Not Dedicate Enough Time to Studies (N = 123)

Sl. No.	Response	Frequency	Percent (%)
1	Strongly Disagree	4	3.3
2	Disagree	88	71.5
3	Neutral	6	4.9
4	Agree	22	17.9
5	Strongly Agree	3	2.4
Total		123	100.0

5.2.3 Disruptive Behaviour Affects Classroom Learning

Table 8 documents teacher views on the relationship between disruptive behaviour and classroom learning. A substantial majority — 51.2% agreeing and 32.5% strongly agreeing — recognised disruptive behaviour as a significant impediment to the teaching-learning process,

yielding a combined agreement rate of 83.7%. Only 9.8% of teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed with this view. These findings align with the extensive evidence base linking classroom behavioural disruption to reduced instructional time, diminished peer engagement, and poorer academic outcomes for all students, not only those exhibiting the disruptive behaviour itself (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006).

Table 8: Disruptive Behaviour Affects Classroom Learning (N = 123)

Sl. No.	Response	Frequency	Percent (%)
1	Strongly Disagree	6	4.9
2	Disagree	6	4.9
3	Neutral	8	6.5
4	Agree	63	51.2
5	Strongly Agree	40	32.5
Total		123	100.0

The social work literature consistently positions behavioural difficulties in children not as moral failures but as communicative acts — expressions of unmet emotional, relational, or developmental needs (Germain & Gitterman, 1996). School social workers are uniquely trained to adopt this strengths-based, ecological perspective when assessing and intervening with students whose behaviour disrupts the classroom environment. Collaborative approaches that bring together teachers, school social workers, parents, and where appropriate, mental health professionals, have been shown to be more effective than punitive or exclusionary responses in reducing the frequency and intensity of classroom behavioural disruption (Allen-Meares et al., 2000).

5.3 Gender-Based Differences in Teacher Perceptions: Kruskal-Wallis H Test

To assess whether male and female teachers differed significantly in their perceptions of the factors contributing to scholastic difficulties, a Kruskal-Wallis H test was conducted. This non-parametric test was selected as the most appropriate analytical approach given the ordinal nature of the Likert-scale response data and the absence of a normal distribution assumption (Field, 2013). Results are presented in Table 4.107.

Table 4.9: Kruskal-Wallis H Test — Teacher Perceptions of Scholastic Problem Determinants by Gender (N = 123)

Perception Variable	Kruskal-Wallis H	df	Asymp. Sig. (p)
Lack of student effort causes academic difficulties	.000	1	.989
Teaching style contributes to student struggles	8.104	1	.004*
Poor foundational knowledge affects performance	9.850	1	.002*
Lack of parental involvement affects academic success	8.661	1	.003*
Disadvantaged background increases academic challenges	4.527	1	.033*
Attention problems lead to academic difficulties	2.798	1	.094
Lack of learning resources hinders progress	1.415	1	.234
Large class size affects identifying difficulties	3.218	1	.073
Teacher training and experience affect problem handling	1.278	1	.258

* Statistically significant at $p < .05$

The Kruskal-Wallis H test revealed statistically significant gender-based differences on four of the nine perception variables. Teaching style contributing to student struggles produced a significant result ($H(1) = 8.10$, $p = .004$), as did poor foundational knowledge affecting academic performance ($H(1) = 9.85$, $p = .002$). Lack of parental involvement affecting academic success also showed a significant gender difference ($H(1) = 8.66$, $p = .003$), and disadvantaged socio-economic background increasing academic challenges was similarly significant ($H(1) = 4.53$, $p = .033$).

These results indicate that male and female teachers differ meaningfully in how they weight these particular structural and contextual factors as contributors to scholastic difficulties. Drawing on the work of Dutta and Sahoo (2018) and Skelton et al. (2006), female teachers in Karnataka may be more attuned to relational and environmental contributors to academic failure — particularly the role of family engagement and socio-economic disadvantage — while male teachers may be more likely to emphasise instructional variables. This pattern is consistent with the broader social work literature on gender socialisation and the development of empathic professional orientations (Dominelli, 2002).

Conversely, no significant gender differences were observed for lack of student effort ($H(1) = .000$, $p = .989$), attention problems ($H(1) = 2.80$, $p = .094$), lack of learning resources ($H(1) = 1.42$, $p = .234$), large class size ($H(1) = 3.22$, $p = .073$), or teacher training and experience ($H(1) = 1.28$, $p = .258$). This suggests that male and female teachers share broadly

similar views on student-level individual factors and structural resource constraints, even as they diverge on instructional style, family, and socio-economic dimensions of scholastic difficulty.

6. Discussion

6.1 The Centrality of Prior Knowledge Deficits: Social Work Implications

The near-universal agreement among teachers that students lack the prior knowledge needed for academic success represents one of the most compelling findings of this study. It validates the concern raised by multiple scholars — including Kumar (2010) and Ramachandran (2004) — about the structural inadequacy of early childhood education in Karnataka as a foundation for subsequent school learning. From a social work practice perspective, this finding demands urgent attention to the design of pre-school and early primary support structures that equip children from disadvantaged backgrounds with the foundational competencies they need to engage meaningfully with formal schooling.

School social workers have a critical role in this regard as advocates, facilitators, and programme coordinators. By working with local government bodies, anganwadi centres, and community organisations, social workers can help establish supplementary learning programmes that target children at risk of entering school with significant knowledge deficits. The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) framework in Karnataka provides an institutional vehicle for such collaboration, and social workers trained in community organising and resource mobilisation are well positioned to maximise its reach among the most disadvantaged households (Anand & Chhaya, 2012).

6.2 Disruptive Behaviour, Emotional Needs, and Social Work Intervention

The strong consensus among teachers that disruptive classroom behaviour constitutes a significant barrier to learning is consistent with a well-established body of international evidence. However, the social work literature cautions against interpreting behavioural disruption solely through a disciplinary or punitive lens. Germain and Gitterman (1996) argued in their life model of social work practice that behaviours which appear problematic in institutional settings are frequently adaptive responses to adverse environmental conditions — poverty, family conflict, abuse, or neglect. When children present with disruptive behaviour in

school, effective intervention requires a thorough eco-systemic assessment of the child's life circumstances, not merely classroom-level behaviour management.

Constable (2006) outlined a model of school social work in which behavioural difficulties are addressed through the coordinated efforts of teachers, social workers, counsellors, and parents, supported by evidence-based behavioural intervention plans. Training programmes for teachers that incorporate social work perspectives on the relational and environmental roots of behaviour have been shown to reduce both the frequency of exclusion and the incidence of punitive responses to struggling students (Allen-Meares et al., 2000). The present study's findings underscore the need for such training in Karnataka schools, where the combination of large class sizes and limited specialist support creates conditions in which behavioural difficulties may be addressed through exclusion rather than intervention.

6.3 Gender, Perception, and Professional Development in Social Work

The finding that male and female teachers differ significantly in their perceptions of teaching style, foundational knowledge gaps, parental involvement, and socio-economic disadvantage as scholastic problem determinants has important implications for social work-led professional development in schools. These differences suggest that training programmes for teachers cannot adopt a one-size-fits-all approach. Social work practitioners engaged in training design must be attentive to the gendered nature of professional perception and work to build shared frameworks of understanding that transcend these differences.

Dominelli (2002) has argued that anti-oppressive practice in social work requires an explicit engagement with the ways in which gender, race, class, and other structural variables shape not only the lives of service users but also the professional orientations of practitioners. Applied to the educational context, this means that school social workers must approach teacher consultation with an awareness of how gender socialisation influences the explanatory frameworks that teachers bring to their understanding of student difficulty. Rather than treating gender differences in perception as problems to be corrected, effective social work consultation works to leverage the complementary strengths of different professional perspectives in the service of more holistic and equitable support for struggling students.

6.4 Family Engagement as a Social Work Priority

The gender-based differences in perceptions of parental involvement are particularly noteworthy given the extensive evidence base linking family engagement to student academic

outcomes. Epstein (2001) demonstrated that schools that systematically engage parents as partners in their children's education produce significantly better academic outcomes than those that treat parental involvement as an add-on or a response to crisis. In Karnataka, where significant proportions of families have limited formal education themselves, the facilitation of meaningful parent-school partnerships is a task that falls naturally within the social work domain.

Social workers are trained in engagement, outreach, and communication approaches that are accessible to low-literacy and socially marginalised populations (Bhattacharya, 2014). They can serve as cultural brokers between schools and communities, translating institutional expectations into accessible guidance for parents while also amplifying the voices of families within school decision-making processes. The finding that teachers — and particularly female teachers — identify parental involvement as a significant factor in student scholastic success provides strong justification for the employment of school social workers specifically tasked with family engagement and community liaison in Karnataka schools.

7. Implications for Social Work Practice and Policy

7.1 Direct Practice with Students and Families

The findings of this study point to several priority areas for direct social work practice in Karnataka schools. Early screening and assessment for scholastic difficulties should be integrated into school entry processes, with social workers playing a lead role in identifying children from high-risk backgrounds who may need additional support. Individual and group-based remedial programmes, designed and coordinated by social workers in collaboration with teachers, can address prior knowledge deficits before they become entrenched patterns of failure. Home visits and family assessment should be standard components of support planning for students with persistent academic difficulties, given the strong evidence for the role of family factors in shaping scholastic outcomes.

7.2 School-Level Consultation and Collaboration

School social workers should serve as consultants to teaching staff on the ecological and socio-structural dimensions of student academic difficulty. Regular case consultation meetings that bring together teachers, counsellors, and social workers provide a forum for integrating different professional perspectives on individual student cases. Professional

development workshops facilitated by social workers that address the relationship between socio-economic disadvantage, family functioning, and academic performance can help bridge the gender-inflected gaps in teacher perception identified in this study. Such workshops should be grounded in the principles of reflective practice and strengths-based approaches to professional learning.

7.3 Community and Policy-Level Intervention

At the community level, school social workers in Karnataka can contribute to the development of after-school learning centres, parent education programmes, and community resource networks that support children's educational engagement beyond the school gates. Advocacy for structural improvements — including reduced class sizes, increased provision of learning materials, and enhanced pre-service and in-service teacher training — falls within the macro-practice domain of school social work and is directly responsive to the structural barriers identified by teachers in this study. At the policy level, the inclusion of trained school social workers as mandatory staff positions in government schools in Karnataka represents a systemic investment in the academic and social well-being of the state's most vulnerable children.

8. Conclusion

This study has documented the perceptions of 123 Karnataka school teachers regarding the scholastic challenges faced by students, analysed through the applied lens of social work theory and practice. The findings reveal a deeply shared professional concern about the inadequacy of students' prior knowledge as a foundational barrier to learning, strong consensus about the impact of classroom behavioural disruption, and meaningful gender-based differences in perceptions of teaching style, foundational knowledge, parental involvement, and socio-economic disadvantage as contributors to scholastic difficulty.

These findings carry significant implications for school social work practice in Karnataka. They reinforce the need for ecologically grounded, multi-level interventions that address scholastic problems not merely as individual student deficits but as products of complex interactions between children, families, schools, and the broader social environment. The teacher survey data presented here provides a robust evidence base for the development of targeted professional development programmes, family engagement strategies, and community-based support structures that are responsive to the specific educational challenges of Karnataka's diverse student population.

As India continues to pursue the goals of equitable and quality education enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goal 4, the systematic integration of school social work into the state's educational infrastructure represents both a professional imperative and a social justice obligation. Future research should extend this work by examining the perspectives of students, parents, and administrators alongside those of teachers, and by evaluating the outcomes of social work-led scholastic support interventions through rigorous longitudinal designs.

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