

# **The Role of School Social Work in Integrating Conflict Resolution Education (CRE) in Indian Schools**

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## **Abstract**

School Social Work and Conflict Resolution Education (CRE) are closely connected fields within social work education and Practice. The aim is to improve children well-being, build their critical and emotional strength, harmonious, peaceful, supportive and inclusive school environment. While school social work is still growing as a profession in India, it holds great promise for addressing various psychosocial issues of personal and social level. In context of children in school setting it can be related to student behavior, peer conflicts, sense of exclusion and deeper inequalities. At the school system CRE helps students learn life skills that allow them to manage interpersonal and social conflicts in healthy manner through non-violent and creative approaches. In this context this paper explores how school social workers, who work at the crossroads of education, mental health, and community life, can play a key role in bringing CRE within Indian schools. The paper draws inspiration from the Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and the four CRE approaches given by Bodine and Crawford's to offer practical insights on how to implements CRE. Combining the approaches together offers a framework on how social workers can include peer mediation, teach life skills, improve classroom environments, and coordinate also whole-school well-being programs. Through a culturally grounded lens, the study argues for a multi-pronged strategy of combining policy advocacy, collaboration, and traditional Indian conflict resolution practices to institutionalize CRE and build conflict-resilient school ecosystems. This research reinforces the transformative potential of integrating social work within educational ecosystems.

**Keywords:** School Social Work, Conflict Resolution Education, Transformative Learning, Social Work

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## Introduction

*“If we are to teach real peace in this world, and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with the children.” — Mahatma Gandhi*

In an increasingly conflict-ridden world, the need to build peace from the ground up, that is, starting with schools has never been more urgent. In a study of 667 6th–10th graders in Chandigarh, a Union Territory in India, 25.6% student reported involvement in bullying with 16% as victims, 5.2% as perpetrators, and 4.3% as both bully and victim. Data also showed that mostly bullying was verbal (55.1%), followed by physical (32.7%) and relational (25.2%) (Malhi, Bharti, & Sidhu, 2014). Newspapers are also continuously filled with articles like ‘Brawl between 2 students of West Delhi School turns ugly’ where the father of one of the boys allegedly arrived at the school with bouncers and thrashed the other boy to teach him a lesson’ (The Times of India, 2024). In another news article a Class 9 student was critically injured after being allegedly stabbed by a classmate in Odisha (The Times of India, 2024). These news are becoming far too common and point to the growing emotional turbulence among children. They also highlight the absence of effective and preventive frameworks within the school system to address it.

The socio-emotional well-being of students has become a growing concern in Indian schools. The challenges have increased after the COVID-19 pandemic, with rising social inequality, community tensions, and academic pressure impacting students immensely, the feeling of constant discontentment in an increasingly materialist and consumerist world. With an increasing complexity within society, the conflicts among students have also become more frequent and complex. In an increasingly privatized and globalized economy governed by being ‘marketable’, the schooling systems and values have been compromised. Valuing skills like empathy, communal harmony, giving back to society, and compassion are missing from the schooling culture. Many schools are still using punishment-based disciplinary mechanisms rather than focusing on open dialogue or emotional support for the students.

As a call for solution, Conflict Resolution Education (CRE) offers a powerful alternative. It encourages participation, dialogue, and empathy, and teaches students practical life skills to

handle disagreements peacefully. It includes healthy practices of negotiation, mediation and decision making. CRE helps young people understand and resolve conflicts in dynamic and holistic ways, thereby supporting a positive and inclusive school climate (Education, 1998). Many countries around the world have already adopted CRE in schools through peer mediation programs, restorative circles, and many other full-school strategies. In contrast, India's efforts remain scattered and extremely limited. However, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2020) and the National Curriculum Framework for Secondary Education (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2023) now opens the door for change. The visionary frameworks have promoted life skills, emotional learning, inclusive education, and participative dialogue among students to create space for CRE to become part of regular school practice.

This paper looks at how school social workers, with their training in human behavior, systems thinking, and support work, can lead this change. It reviews important CRE models, examines challenges like lack of recognition and training, and suggests practical, culturally relevant ways for social workers to intervene and move forward. The study shows that using school social work as a way to bring in CRE is not only a good idea, but also creates a space for building peaceful, inclusive, and emotionally strong schools in India using the expertise of social workers as 'helping professionals' who are trained in implementing impactful case work, group work and counseling practices. The paper further critically appraises the challenges that one will face in making this happen. The challenges like a lack of clear roles for social workers, limited training, old-fashioned discipline systems, and poor implementation of national policies have been explored in detail in the study.

## **Literature Review**

### **Role of School Social Workers**

The National Association of Social Workers ((NASW), 2025), have outlined some guiding principles for school social workers. According to the practice standards, school social workers play a crucial role in promoting student well-being through a holistic and equity-focused approach. They are trained to understand how social, emotional, and environmental factors affect

learning. This enables them to engage with students and families in culturally responsive ways. Through the principles of social justice, they advocate for fair access to education by identifying and addressing systemic inequities. Their work spans a multi-tiered system of support, through which they implement school-wide prevention programs (Tier 1 level), targeted group interventions (Tier 2 level), and intensive individualized support for students under special circumstances (Tier 3 level). Through this model, school social workers not only provide direct services but also build the capacity of educators, families, and communities to create supportive, inclusive school environments.

School social workers play a prominent role in bridging the gap between students, families, school staff, and the broader community to enhance students' learning, well-being, and social adjustment. Their practice is grounded in a deep understanding of the dynamic factors including academic, social, emotional, familial, and cultural influences on student behavior within schools. Globally, these professionals provide targeted support to students facing a wide range of challenges, such as learning disabilities, low self-esteem, peer-related issues, substance abuse, legal conflicts, and strained parent-child relationships (Ding, et al., 2023). They also contribute to building inclusive educational environments by celebrating cultural diversity and fostering respect for everyone. In their daily work, school social workers promote resilience, confidence building, and self-efficacy among students. The practice being rooted in their ethics, adopts a strengths-based perspective, recognizing each student's unique capacity for growth, problem-solving, and achievement. By working collaboratively with educators, caregivers, and allied health professionals, social workers help reduce barriers to education and empower students to reach their full potential (Early & Vonk, 2001).

School social workers use schools as a central hub for delivering preventive and early intervention programs targeted not only at students, but also at parents and staff. Their scope of work encompasses improving academic outcomes, addressing psychological distress, enhancing school climate, and strengthening parent-teacher-student interactions. Recent literature emphasizes the growing importance of school social work in the post-pandemic context, especially in addressing mental health concerns and adapting to evolving educational demands (Capp, Watson, Astor, Kelly, & Benbenishty, 2021).

A number of qualitative as well as quantitative researches highlight the effectiveness of school social work interventions. For instance, Early and Vonk (2001) reviewed 21 controlled outcome studies and concluded that school-based interventions contribute significantly to improving students' interpersonal skills, emotional regulation, and peer relationships. School social workers also address a wide range of student needs, including mental health, aggression, school attendance, depression, self-esteem, and sexual health concerns. Similarly, in conflict-affected regions, the role of school social workers becomes even more critical as schools often function as safe spaces for children experiencing trauma and instability. Duman and Snoubar (2016) highlighted that in war and conflict zones, children are not only exposed to violence and displacement but also suffer long-term emotional, behavioral, and developmental challenges. Here school social workers serve as essential first responders by providing psychosocial support, and restore a sense of safety, while rebuilding trust in institutions. Therefore, by adopting a trauma-informed and systems-based approach, school social workers can integrate CRE strategies to help students process conflict constructively, even in high-stress and conflict ridden environments.

In 'Creative Marginality: Exploring the Links between Conflict Resolution and Social Work' by Jay Rothman, Randi Rothman, and Mary Schwoebel (2001), they explore the space of 'creative marginality' between the overlapping disciplines of conflict resolution and social work. The authors argue that while both fields have evolved independently, they share core values like empowerment, self-determination, and client-centered practice. Through models like problem-solving, transformative, and systemic approaches, both disciplines address individual and collective needs. However, the lack of structured dialogue between the two has limited the integration of their complementary insights. They push for a theoretical 'cross-fertilization'. The paper suggests that social workers and conflict resolution practitioners can enrich each other's practices, particularly in contexts like mediation, community disputes, and structural injustice. The authors use Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and Rothman's identity-based conflict resolution model to propose new frameworks that integrate social work's strengths-based and systemic approaches with the empowerment and transformation goals of modern conflict resolution. They further highlight mediation as a key overlapping practice and emphasizes the potential of shared concepts like client ownership, reflexivity, and structural change, to enhance

practice in both areas. Lastly, it advocates for more interdisciplinary collaborations to address deep-rooted social conflicts and promote equity, healing, and meaningful change within communities and systems.

A key theoretical underpinning of school social work is the ecological systems framework, which enables practitioners to address issues holistically, from the individual to the classroom, family, school, and community levels (Huxtable, 2022; Rothman, Rothman, & and Schwoebel, 2001; Ding, et al., 2023). This systems-based approach allows school social workers to implement timely interventions, mobilize resources, and coordinate services across various tiers of need. Therefore, school social workers play a vital role in supporting Education for All, especially in countries where poverty and child labor limits the school enrollment ratio. They help families enroll children, provide for basic needs like meals, and ensure regular attendance. In contexts where education is already free and accessible, their focus often shifts to addressing absenteeism, school refusal, health issues, or dropout prevention. Sadly, their roles are often narrowly defined by policy or funding, the ideal role is broad and adaptable, which aims to address any barrier within the realm of a student's success. Using a systems approach, social workers work with families, schools, and communities to find solutions. Their toolkit includes counseling, staff consultation, referrals, advocacy, and parent outreach. Scholarship believes that early access to social workers can help resolve problems before they escalate. It is also important that they communicate their role clearly to school leadership, ensuring their services align with professional values and benefit the entire school community (Huxtable, 2022).

### **Conflict Resolution Education in Schools**

Conflict Resolution Education (CRE) can be implemented in schools at multiple levels. They can range from targeted interventions like peer mediation programs to whole-school cultural shifts grounded in peaceful conflict management. Conflict Resolution is a learned skill that requires intentional teaching through structured educational programs. A comprehensive approach to CRE may include a variety of program components, like 1) social competency skill training which includes conflict resolution for adults and students, 2) peaceable classrooms, 3) curriculum instruction and integration, 4) school-wide positive discipline systems, 5)

diversity/anti-bias awareness, 6) parent/community involvement and training, and 7) peer mediation and peace leadership.

Some of the prominent models include RULER program, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), and the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) program. The RULER program, based on the Mayer-Salovey model of emotional intelligence, was developed at the Yale Centre for Emotional Intelligence. It focuses on building skills in recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing, and regulating emotions. It engages the entire school community including students, teachers, and parents. It has also shown to improve academic performance, classroom climate, and reduce behavioral issues like aggression and bullying (South & DeJarnette, 2022). The SEL framework emphasizes five interconnected skill areas - self-awareness, social awareness, self-regulation, responsible decision-making, and relationship management. These competencies are essential for fostering empathy, emotional regulation, and respectful interactions, which directly support conflict resolution. Studies show that SEL programs help students better manage stress, build healthy relationships, and improve both behavior and academic outcomes (Chowkase, 2023). The CASEL initiative further builds on SEL principles by promoting high-quality, evidence-based social-emotional learning from early years through secondary education. Research on CASEL programs documents improved communication, collaboration, and resilience among students. Thereby making these models highly effective for embedding emotional intelligence and conflict management skills within the school's ecosystem.

Jones in 'Conflict Resolution Education: The Field, the Findings, and the Future' (2004) highlights the four broad and interrelated goals of CRE, each being associated with specific outcomes:

1. Creating a Safe Learning Environment - CRE contributes to reducing school violence, intergroup tensions, suspensions, and dropout rates. Initiatives like the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Anti-violence and Anti-bullying curriculum in the U.S. stresses the importance of fostering discipline and safety through preventive education.
2. Fostering a Constructive Learning Environment - Effective CRE improves school and classroom climate by promoting respect, empathy, and positive discipline practices

among students within classrooms and their larger ecosystems. Research has proven that this reduces time spent on disciplinary issues by teachers and enhances student-centered learning environment.

3. Supporting Social and Emotional Development - CRE overlaps significantly with social and emotional learning (SEL), helping students build emotional awareness, problem-solving skills, empathy, and nonviolent communication. It focuses on 'education of the heart' by reducing aggression and promoting healthier conflict behaviors in both school and home settings.
4. Building a Constructive Conflict Community - At its most transformative, CRE fosters a culture of shared responsibility for social justice and nonviolent problem-solving. Programs aligned with restorative justice aim to strengthen school-community connections and reduce broader community tensions.

CRE intersects with several complementary educational frameworks like the Peace Education program, Violence prevention programs, SEL programs, restorative justice circles, antibias education, Non-Violent Communication, Democratic Citizenship Organization, International Understanding, and Human Rights, Global Education, Critical Pedagogy, Education for Liberation and Empowerment, Social Justice Education, Environmental Education, Life Skills Education, Disarmament and Development Education, and more. These various frameworks are nothing but a different way of contributing to the same bigger goal of ensuring inclusivity, respect, tolerance and harmony within ecosystems. Peace Education for instance, emphasizes global citizenship, cross-cultural understanding, and systemic peacebuilding. While both CRE and peace education promote similar skills, peace education has a stronger focus on structural injustice and international application. Violence Prevention programs may include CRE components but focus more narrowly on reducing serious behavioral risks such as physical violence, substance use, or self-harm (Jones, 2004). In contrast, CRE emphasizes nonviolent problem-solving as a life skill. Democratic citizenship education faces a major challenge when ideals like equality and justice are taught in classrooms but contradicted by real-life issues such as racism, sexism, and social inequality. For students to truly adopt democratic values, it's not enough to simply teach them, it believe that they must experience democracy in action. As Dewey (1938) emphasized, real learning comes through lived experience. In a socially divided

society, students, both privileged and marginalized, are aware of these contradictions, which can hinder the internalization of democratic principles unless schools actively practice inclusion and fairness (Banks, 2020).

## **Discussion and Analysis**

### **CRE in the Indian School Context**

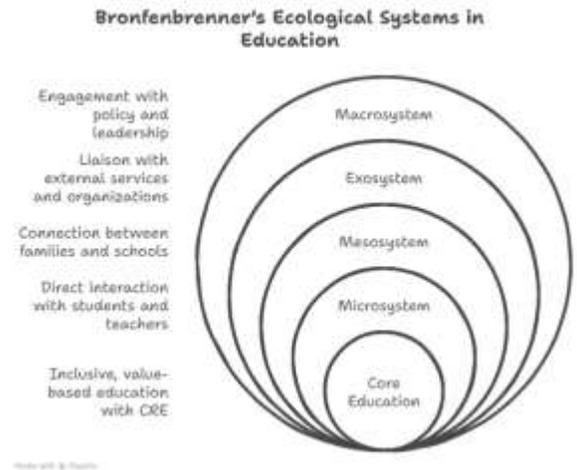
In today's fast-changing world, it has become urgent to bring Conflict Resolution Education (CRE) into Indian schools. Many students are facing high levels of stress, anxiety, and peer conflict. This became especially more prominent after the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected both emotional health and classroom behavior. Students now need skills like empathy, emotional intelligence, and peaceful communication more than ever. At the same time, global and national tensions like the India–Pakistan conflict and increasing divisions in society are influencing how children understand differences, disagreement, and diversity. These issues often show up in classrooms. This makes schools more than just places for learning facts, they also need to teach democratic values, cooperation, and respect for all. CRE provides students with practical tools to manage conflicts in a healthy and inclusive manner, and help schools become hubs of peace and shared learning.

Despite this need, many schools in India continue to handle student conflicts with punishments or discipline, rather than using preventive or supportive methods. Most schools do not have trained professionals such as social workers or even counselors who can address students' emotional needs. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 brings hope in this situation. The visionary document supports inclusion of life skills, emotional learning, and teaching constitutional values like justice, equality, and fraternity to students. These values match the core ideas of CRE and have been reflected in the National Curriculum Framework for Secondary Education (NCF-SE) (2023) that has been drafted under the guidelines of NEP. If implemented well, NCF-SE will give schools a strong policy base to build CRE into everyday teaching not as a separate activity, but as a part of every child's holistic development.

## Role of School Social Workers as Enablers of CRE

School social workers have a special role in making CRE work inside schools. They are trained in working with individuals and groups, and have basic counseling skills. This helps them run life skills sessions, organize peer mediation programs, and build restorative practices into school routines. They don't just resolve fights, they also help students learn important life skills like managing emotions, solving problems, and building empathy. Social workers can not only support teachers in creating positive classroom environments, they can also train students to become peer leaders, and create safe spaces where students feel heard. These are key steps in building school cultures that prevent conflict and support peace.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory can be used to understand how social workers can function within the school ecosystem in various levels of analysis. At the microsystem level, they work with students and teachers directly. In the meso system, they connect schools with families, helping both follow similar values. At the exosystem level, they link schools with community services and mental health support. And at the macrosystem level,



they influence school policies and leadership, helping to apply frameworks like NEP 2020 and the NCF-SE (2023). Because they work across all these layers, school social workers are at a position to create real and lasting change. They don't just help individuals, they help build systems that support peaceful and inclusive schools. This makes them central to the success of CRE in India.

## Application of CRE Models through School Social Work

Bodine and Crawford (1998) identified four foundational models of CRE, each offering a distinct path to promote conflict competence among students:

1. Peer Mediation Model – Students are trained to mediate conflicts among their peers, encouraging peer-to-peer resolution and responsibility.
2. Process Curriculum Model – CRE is taught as a stand-alone subject or integrated into weekly lessons, offering students formal instruction in conflict resolution skills.
3. Peaceable Classroom Model – Conflict resolution is embedded within the classroom through core curriculum infusion and classroom management strategies (Poliner, 2003).
4. Peaceable School Model – A comprehensive, whole-school approach that applies conflict resolution principles across all school operations and stakeholders, including parents. This model promotes systemic change through training, student leadership, and inclusive practices.

CRE Model	Definition	Application through School Social Work
Peer Mediation Model	Trains students to mediate peer disputes and encourages peer-led resolution strategies.	Facilitate student mediation training; guide peer support groups; monitor school conflict resolution clubs.
Process Curriculum Model	Offers CRE as a standalone subject or weekly session to teach structured conflict resolution skills.	Conduct classroom-based life skills sessions; integrate CRE into existing SEL or civics curricula.
Peaceable Classroom Model	Embeds CRE into classroom content and management; focuses on respectful dialogue and cooperation.	Support teachers in using restorative practices; co-develop conflict-sensitive class charters.
Peaceable School Model	Applies CRE across the entire school system involving staff, students, and parents.	Lead school-wide initiatives on nonviolence; conduct parent engagement sessions; integrate school policies.

The four main models of Conflict Resolution Education (CRE) developed by Bodine and Crawford (1998) for Schools, Youth-Serving Organizations, and Community and Juvenile Justice Settings, can be brought to life through the work of school social workers in practical and meaningful ways. In the Peer Mediation Model, school social workers can identify and train student leaders to help solve conflicts among their classmates. These student-led circles encourage empathy, responsibility, and peaceful problem-solving. Then within the Process Curriculum Model, social workers can conduct workshops or life skills sessions focused on emotional awareness, communication, and managing conflict. These sessions can be offered as part of regular school periods, especially in subjects like civics, value education, or life skills. Through the Peaceable Classroom Model, social workers can support teachers by helping them use conflict resolution strategies during daily classroom routines. They can also guide students and teachers to set class norms and agreements, making the classroom feel safer, fairer, and more inclusive. And finally, the Peaceable School Model gives school social workers a chance to work at the whole-school level. They can lead programs for student well-being, train teachers and parents in positive approaches, and make sure that CRE values are reflected in school rules, policies, and community activities. These examples show that school social workers can turn theory into practice by applying CRE models at different levels, from individual students to the entire school community.

### **Challenges to Implementation of CRE through Social Work**

The implementation of Conflict Resolution Education faces major challenges. One major issue is the lack of formal recognition and clear roles for school social workers. In many Indian schools, they are hired with unclear responsibilities and limited authority. Social Workers complain, if employed are often treated as substitute teachers or playground incharge. This is far from their professional specialization and undermines their work within the schools. This makes it difficult for them to plan preventive programs, and they are majorly addressing crisis situations only.

Another challenge is the lack of training in conflict resolution and life skills for both teachers and social workers. Teacher training still focuses mostly on academic content. Socio-emotional learning and positive discipline strategies are often missing. Additionally, many school leaders

and teachers hold traditional views. They believe punishment is the best way to manage behavior. As a result, conflict resolution efforts are often seen as unnecessary or too soft.

Even though the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 supports value-based and inclusive education, its guidelines are not applied consistently. Different states and boards implement the policy differently. Operational plans, training support, and funding are also lacking. This weak system makes it hard for schools to take CRE forward. Without strong policies, training, and clearly defined roles, CRE may remain just a ‘good idea’ and not a real part of school life.

### **The Path Forward**

To truly embed CRE in Indian schools, we need a collaborative and multi-level approach. First, CRE must be added to teacher training and social work education. Educators and school social workers should be trained in how to manage conflicts, support students emotionally, and create respectful classrooms. Institutions like NCERT and NCTE should lead this work by building it into their regular training modules. Second, even school social work in India has not been given adequate attention from the profession. Most institutions of social work don’t offer school social work as a separate elective as they do for ‘medical social work’ and ‘correctional social work’,

Third, it is important to run pilot programs that show how CRE works in real settings. Programs like Youth Parliaments, Model United Nations (MUNs) and the community based Bal Panchayat initiatives have documented promising results. These allow students to practice leadership and solve problems peacefully. They also offer models that other schools can adapt. UNESCO and a few NGOs have been working on it already. Fourth, schools should hire social workers and counsellors. Also explicitly refine their job roles so that social workers can deliver the best of their ability. They should not be treated as a substitute teacher, but their expertise and contribution to the field and the school’s ecosystem should be given adequate respect it deserves. Schools should encourage teamwork between teachers, counselors, social workers, and parents. Together, they can create a safe and caring school environment.

Finally, the CRE curriculum should be culturally relevant. To achieve this facilitators can use inspirations from India’s rich cultural heritage. Examples from Indian folktales, stories from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Panchtantra; Gandhian ideas, and Panchayat style dialogue and

mediation and Indian social reformers can be used to make the process more holistic and relevant. These tools make learning relevant and rooted in students' lives. With institutional support, such efforts can prepare students not just for academics, but for life in a diverse and changing world.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has highlighted the powerful potential of integrating school social work and Conflict Resolution Education (CRE) to bring emotionally safe, inclusive, and peaceful school environments in India. Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework and the CRE model given by Bodine and Crawford, the study provided with a practical roadmap of how school social workers can embed conflict resolution strategies at multiple levels, from peer mediation and life skills training to whole-school wellness initiatives within schools and communities. The study also explores the challenges in incorporating this vision. Challenges like confronting several systemic barriers, including role ambiguity, lack of training, and limited policy enforcement have been explored.

Therefore, a multi-layered approach is essential, one that combines policy advocacy, interdisciplinary collaboration. The paper also discusses using culturally rooted practices such as Panchayat-style mediation and Gandhian non-violence to achieve context relevant practice. With the support of national frameworks like NEP 2020 and NCF-SE 2023, school social workers can lead the way in transforming how schools respond to conflict not just by solving problems, but by cultivating democratic, empathetic, and resilient ecosystems. In doing so, CRE becomes not a one-time intervention, but a way of life within the school system.

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