

The Honors Program
Honors Project
“Voices of School Social Workers”
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Introduction

Over the years, school social work history has been pieced together with fine quality and intriguing events. In the beginning of the 20th century a great need was seen for the education system to grow due to people's daily struggles of poverty and circumstances (Allen-Meares, Washington, & Welsh, 1986). In the United States the increasing number of immigrants contributed to the growth in the education setting and precipitated social work services provided in the education setting. Making connections with the school system and home/community environment became even more significant when it was acknowledged that every citizen has the right to an education. School social workers were first known as "visiting teachers," and they recognized that their duties should intertwine with what individuals were facing in everyday life. School social workers not only provided direct services, but also advocated for change in policies that negatively affected school children (Allen-Meares, Washington, & Welsh, 1986). School social workers then became the link and avenue between the school setting and children's every day home life situations and social environment (Allen-Meares, Washington, & Welsh, 1986).

A school social worker is often defined as the bridge or facilitator bringing together students with those charged with their educational and personal care, which can be teachers and parents (<http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos060.htm>). The roles of school social workers are flexible (Constable, McDonald, & Flynn, 1999). This "flexibility" is not uncommon for social workers that participate in developing the parameters of their

roles for newly created positions. After being in their position for a longer time a school social worker can learn how to react to the school and communities needs (Constable, McDonald, & Flynn, 1999).

I chose to research school social work because of my own interest in working in this field of practice. I decided to research the experiences of school social workers in one school district and their perspectives of their roles, functions, and responsibilities. I used a phenomenological approach to qualitative methodology in order to facilitate and “hear” the voices of school social workers. My data collection methods included a focus group and individual interviews. Of the seven social workers in the school district, five school social workers participated in my study. The primary question that drives my research is what are the responsibilities and duties of school social workers? By answering this question I can have a better understanding of school social work and this can help me in the future.

Literature Review

History

Significant moments

As the population in the United States increased and human needs expanded many diverse agencies were emerging to provide social services in the community, but in the beginning these services were not through the school systems (Encyclopedia of Social Work, 1995). In the early 20th century cities such as, Boston, Hartford, and New York led the way in first developing school social work (Encyclopedia of Social Work, 1995). Administrators saw how some youth struggled with everyday situations and how that it affected their ability to get an education. These responses led to services first being

created in urban schools (Encyclopedia of Social Work, 1995). In time other school districts followed the model established by these urban schools (Encyclopedia of Social Work, 1995). Services continued to grow in schools and this showed the way to a significant moment in 1921. At this time school social workers came together to form “the National Association of Visiting Teachers” (Encyclopedia of Social Work, 1995).

School social work services expanded through the mandatory school attendance laws too, which placed an importance on student’s attendance in school (Encyclopedia of Social Work, 1995). The school attendance law in effect challenged the use of students as child workers (Encyclopedia of Social Work, 1995). Mandatory school attendance policies, the increased visibility of child labor, and the accompanying problems of poor and working poor families accentuated the need for trained practitioners to provide connection and communication between home and school, families and teachers (<http://www.doe.state.in.us/sservices/swhist.htm>).

Another factor during this time period relating to practice within the profession is school social workers gathered information about students’ needs and how they cope with situations. This gave social workers the opportunity to help teachers see how certain factors outside of school can affect student’s learning ability (Encyclopedia of Social Work, 1995). For example, students being child workers could affect how much a student can learn in the classroom. Children and adolescents worked overtime in factories or fields to help earn money for their families. For families to make it, millions relied on their children working (Durr, n.d.).

Client focuses

In the 1930's the Great Depression caused school social workers to focus a lot on students who needed such things as food and shelter (Constable, McDonald, & Flynn, 1999). An increasing shift in the 1940's of the social work profession to a medical model influenced the approach to school social work practice. Between the 1940's and 1960's school social work services focused on a clinical direction. This added status of the school social workers and helped detach some of the stigma attributed to the social workers as "truant officers" (Encyclopedia of Social Work, 1995). Students received casework services to assist them with their problems and work out different issues (Encyclopedia of Social Work, 1995). With changes in society, school social work has changed along with it (<http://www.doe.state.in.us/sservices/swhist.htm>).

Roles of school social workers today

The purpose of social work as defined by the National Association of Social Workers is to promote adequate resources for individuals and to help empower people to meet their needs. This centers on especially empowering and focusing on individuals in situations of poverty or oppression (Miley, O'Melia, & DuBois, 2001). The basic values of the social work profession include nonjudgmental attitude, self-determination, and confidentiality. Social workers are expected to not judge clients from their own socioeconomic or cultural standpoint (Miley, O'Melia, & DuBois, 2001). Social workers are expected to respect a client's right to make choices. Social workers are also expected to adhere to confidentiality, set boundaries, and be dependable (Compton & Galaway, 1999). Confidentiality is the basis for social worker's behavior "and forms the basis for trustworthy professional relationships." The only exceptions to this are if service users

give permission to share information or if by law the social worker is mandated to report information (Miley, O'Melia, & DuBois, 2001). A prevailing theory of social work practice is "seeing" the person within the environment, understanding that a person's full range of experiences, feelings, behaviors, and life circumstances are a result of the interaction of social systems. Social workers who use a generalist approach recognize the connection of issues relating to personal and interpersonal concerns and issues in the broader society. Social work practice not only entails working with individuals and families on personal and interpersonal change, but practice also includes working on social change for social and economic justice (Miley, O'Melia, & DuBois, 2001).

Since the beginning of social work as a distinct discipline in the late 1800's, an ongoing debate concerning the focus of intervention-individuals or the social environment has continued to shape the profession. For any type of prevention to happen change in society must happen, on the other hand rehabilitation can be seen to work with individuals to handle urgent situations. In everyday life every specialty of social work uses rehabilitative and prevention measures. An example of this is working with an individual who has a drug abuse problem because it is helping with the urgent situation and can also help prevent situations in the future (Compton & Galaway, 1999).

Today school social workers are in the school system and are included in the "educational team" (<http://www.doe.state.in.us/sservices/socwork.htm>). Social workers use "teamwork" skills to build alliances and work well with other professionals (Miley, O'Melia, & DuBois, 2001). School social workers work with parents, teachers, and administrators to name a few (<http://www.doe.state.in.us/sservices/socwork.htm>).

Working with these individuals school social workers incorporate how a student

functions on all levels (physical, emotional, and social) and how they will function and adapt in an education setting (<http://www.doe.state.in.us/sservices/socwork.htm>). Also, school social workers work with the student population in schools and are particularly taught to do so (http://internationalnetwork-schoolsocialwork.htmlplanet.com/school_social_work.htm). “The goal of school social work is to help young people accomplish appropriate developmental tasks in ways that best respect the values underlying our common human nature, our common human needs, and the human potential of each person, often needlessly wasted” (Constable, McDonald, & Flynn, 1999). To help individuals meet their needs school social workers can develop resources and make services assessable. Resources are available in communities to help individuals and they can be put into two categories. One category is services available through formal organizations and accessed through parents or the school. The other category is informal resources in the community, which could include family or friends (Constable, McDonald, & Flynn, 1999).

With my interest in school social work and what roles school social workers have in an educational setting, I decided to research this phenomenon through qualitative research. My inquiry for qualitative research is a “phenomenological study” that examines through the voices of school social workers, their perspectives of their work, their roles, functions and responsibilities. The qualitative inquiry draws on the individual and collective voices of the social workers in one particular school district.

Methodology

Qualitative research focuses on things that happen in a natural setting or in the “real world.” Qualitative researchers can recognize that an issue can have a lot of layers and be complex (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). For this study, qualitative research is the best method to hear social workers voices and to gather data about the phenomenon of school social work. Qualitative research was conducted through a “phenomenological study” to look in depth at the roles and responsibilities of school social workers of a specific school district in Minnesota.

Phenomenon is a Greek word and phenomenology comes from it. It means “to show itself” or “to put into light” (Morse, 1994). Phenomenology tries to explain the necessary meaning of human activities (Morse, 1994). Phenomenology writing can be open to many different meanings. For example, as different individuals read this research paper each person can have different interpretations. Each individual has his or her own “interpretive lens” (Morse, 1994).

The nature of the work undertaken was conducted by qualitative research. Qualitative research focuses on things that happen in a natural setting or in the “real world.” Qualitative researchers can recognize that an issue can have a lot of layers and be complex. In addition, qualitative research can have a purpose that includes showing a system or settings environment or it can help the researcher gain knowledge about a certain event. Usually, in qualitative research the researcher cannot answer questions like why did this event happen? (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). Qualitative researchers emphasize

their relationship with the subject they are studying and the situations that are barriers to their research. This may be because qualitative researchers are in the social environment and their research findings are set there. Researchers that conduct qualitative research value the descriptions of the social environment. Conducting interviews and observing the people who the researcher interacts with can help the researcher have a better understanding of the people's perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

Conscious subjectivity: values and standpoints

As a researcher my values influence my study of school social workers. A majority of my values are rooted in my family and how I was raised. At a young age, education at a higher level after high school was emphasized. Education is valued in my family and the value of hard work is instilled in me. My family comes from a disadvantaged economic background and I received some support services in school. Also, my mother has shown me the nature of helping and giving to others. These are some of the reasons that I have chosen the field of social work as my field of interest.

In addition, my standpoint of school social work is that it is greatly needed in school systems. Every individual can use support and help at different times in their lives. Children can bring family issues to school and this can affect their academic performance. Things that happen outside of the school system can affect children within the school atmosphere. Having services available to students can help them individually as well as have a positive impact on the school and community environment too. School social workers can help individuals and families be aware of and access services within the school and resources available in the community. Having that circle of networks and information can help build healthy individuals, families, and communities.

Research-researched relationship

By using qualitative research methodology I was able to build a relationship with the co-participants of the study by having open communication and building rapport with them. One way I had open communication with the co-participants is I sent a letter to each of the school social workers in the school district to share information about the opportunity of participating in the study. In the letter each social worker was encouraged to contact my advisor Mary Ann Reitmeir or myself if they had any questions.

I established rapport with the co-participants by arranging a neutral location to hold the focus group. This location was accessible to each social worker. By having a neutral setting where we all could be comfortable put each of us on equal ground and was crucial to building rapport. At the beginning of the focus group I provided refreshments and this enabled us to have a more informal and positive environment to discuss the topic. It opened the door to small talk and everyone could get situated for discussion to begin. Also, the clothes individuals were wearing generated a starting point for commonality and a gateway for an open environment. A lot of individuals were wearing black and this led to small talk among people. In addition, sharing information about myself being a college student at Bemidji State University and why I chose social work as a profession helped build a rapport with the participants in the study. They got to know me and where I was coming from and I got to know each of them. In this way I think qualitative research is unique because the co-participants and I formed a foundation and created a path to share information about school social work. Participants also helped shape the research when I asked them if they had anything to add at the end of the

individual interviews or at the end of the focus group when I asked if there was anything they felt was important to share about school social work. This shaped their role as a co-participant because they could share as much additional information as they liked.

Phenomenological study

An overall picture of the word phenomenology means an individual's perceived idea of what an event represents (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). There are many different factors included in a phenomenological study. The purpose of this type of study is to gain knowledge of an event through the participant's worldview. A phenomenological study pertains to a certain event as it is experienced in everyday life and how people understand the event or phenomenon. In addition, the number of participants that are willing to be involved in the study can range from 5-25 people (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001).

In addition, methods of data collection for a phenomenological study can include interviews of an unstructured nature too. An interview may look like a conversation where the participant shares more information and the researcher mostly listens (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). Also, a group interview or "focus group" can be a qualitative method to gather data on an event and the researcher can lead the "focus group" in a structured or unstructured way depending on the function of the research or interview (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). For a phenomenological study, a researcher would facilitate a "focus group" or group interview in an unstructured manner (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). When collecting data a researcher should listen to the participants and really "hear" what they are talking about. A researcher should set aside preconceived ideas and experiences that may manipulate what the researcher "hears" the participants talking about (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). Also, ways of analyzing data for this type of study are looking for areas

of data that have meaning and show different parts of the event or experience (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001).

Procedures

The entire population of social workers in the school district was invited to participate in the study. A letter was sent to each individual, co-signed by my advisor Mary Ann Reitmeir providing information about the research project. Each individual was cordially invited to participate in the research project. An informed consent form was included with the letter to each individual regarding confidentiality measurements; permission to tape-record focus groups and individual interviews, with a statement that participation was voluntary (please see Appendix I for informed consent form). Out of the seven social workers in the school district, five were able to participate in the research project. The five co-participants signed the informed consent form. A copy of the informed consent form was given to each participant.

Population description

This qualitative research was conducted in a school district of Minnesota. It examines the “phenomena” of school social work through the voices of the five participants. In this district there are seven social workers involved in social work practice. The years of tenure for the five participating school social workers ranged from 1-14 years. Of the five social workers that were able to participate in the study, all five have a Bachelors of Social Work degree (BSW).

In the district there is one social worker to serve all of the six elementary schools, one is at the middle school, and a third social worker is at the high school. The student population in the elementary schools totals approximately 2, 134. In the middle school

the total student population is approximately 1, 258 while the high school has about 1, 662 students. These three positions are funded through the district's budget while other social work positions in the district are supported mainly through grants. One position staffs a social worker to run a program for young mothers to help them receive needed services, develop self-support, and have good parenting skills. Another social worker's position is working with parents and children who need services and helping them find resources before the children enter school. A position that is district wide is a social worker works with homeless children and youth. The fourth position of another social worker is addressing substance abuse issues of children and youth in the district.

Data collection methods

For this study, qualitative research is the best method to hear social workers voices and to gather data about the phenomenon of school social work. The data collection methods included focus groups and individual interviews. Initially the study included a beginning focus group, individual interviews, and an ending focus group. The ending focus group did not take place because the social workers were not able to attend. Different circumstances contributed to the ending focus group not taking place. These circumstances included impending budget cuts and the projected loss of social work positions, and the end of the school year. Both factors created distractions for the social workers.

The location of the first focus group was set in a neutral location and three participants were able to attend. The informed consent forms were addressed and signed by the participants. When the focus group began ground rules were discussed for the focus group to run smoothly (please see Appendix II for ground rules guide). Also, it

was reconfirmed that permission was given to tape-record the focus group and each participant agreed to that. Confidentiality measurements were also discussed. The vehicle for discussion was lead by a focus group guide (please see Appendix III for the beginning focus group guide). In addition, when data were collected from the individual interviews, the location of the interview was set in the participants work environment. Five social workers were able to participate in the individual interviews. At the beginning of each interview it was reconfirmed that the participants agreed to the interview being tape-recorded. Discussion during the interviews was lead by an interview guide (please see Appendix IV for individual interview guides).

The structure of the questions varied to some degree. For the individuals who could attend the focus group, questions focused on getting to hear what they expected when they got into the field and how they found things to really be. The structure of the questions was then centered on what their everyday responsibilities are and how time management is related. Another question took the direction towards policies and how they affect their job along with who decides what their roles are in the school system. The last question was structured to hear what they would hope for in an ideal world. How they would see their job description in an ideal world was the main focus.

In addition, these questions were asked of the participants who could not attend the beginning focus group. Three other questions were asked that related to questions discussed in the beginning focus group. The structure of these questions was to gain additional information, which included if the participant would like to share any personal stories relating to school social work, which could shed some light on this specialty of social work. These participants also were asked what their roles are as school social

workers and what services they can provide in that setting. This can give a sense of what duties go on during the day. The two other questions focused on if the social workers saw a greater need for some services that were not available and to hear if there were any concerns of issues going on during that time frame of the interviews. This was to hear if there were any issues that the social workers were facing or concerned about.

The ending focus group date was set and reconfirmed and on that day none of the participants were able to participate in the focus group. One reason why this focus group did not happen may be that the ending focus group was set at the end of the school year and social worker's availability might have been lower at that time. Another reason may be that during this time period changes were being made in the composition of social workers or number of social workers in the school. There was disorder and turmoil with budget cuts being made in the school district. These are some factors that could have contributed to the ending focus group not taking place.

Data Analysis

After collecting data on school social work through a focus group and individual interviews an analysis was carried out. The focus group and individual interviews were each transcribed. After the transcription was completed the focus group and individual interviews were studied together. The data were then categorized into themes. The themes that emerged were then examined for more clarity.

Questions created categories and in response themes within these categories emerged. The data analysis was conducted by searching for themes and patterns of participants' responses. The analysis is meaning oriented. This is part of a "phenomenological study" which refers to a study conducted to understand a person's

view of a certain situation (Leedy& Ormrod, 2001). The findings section examines these themes through the voices of the participants. Participants are referred to by using a code to insure anonymity and confidentiality.

Findings

Choice of social work as profession

The qualitative research conducted found many themes and patterns within the phenomenon of school social work. A theme from the data collected shows how participants chose social work as their profession. The common element was helping people and being around people. The purpose of social work as defined by the National Association of Social Workers is to promote adequate resources for individuals and help empower people to meet their needs. This centers on especially empowering and focusing on individuals in situations of poverty or oppression (Miley, O'Melia, & DuBois, 2001). One participant has always enjoyed helping individuals (PZ). When she was about 10 or 11 years old she would help their neighbor and son who were both disabled, get wood and water. This participant reflects and knows that this is one of the reasons she knew she wanted to help individuals (PZ).

Another factor relating to the choice of social work, as a profession is some participants' families helped them get into the field of social work. One participant shared that their dad and mom were the owners of a boarding house for the elderly (PX). She said, "So, I grew up there and so I kind of learned it from my mom and that's kind of how I got into it" (PX).

School social work: assumptions and how things are

The participants of the qualitative research project shared what they expected of school social work, assumptions, and how things are. When one participant began to work as a school social worker she had no background knowledge of school social work (P2). She had a very strong background in special education laws because she worked with adult individuals with challenges for fifteen years (P2). With laughter, this participant mentioned that at first she was naïve in the area of individuals who have formal authority in an organization and then other individuals who actually make the decisions. She mentioned that organizations kind of work that way (P2). I see this reflected in the literature review because an example of formal power would be the lawmakers who passed the required school attendance laws. In my opinion, a prime example of individuals who held informal power would be the “attendance officers” because they kept track of students.

Another participant commented that when they thought of school social work they thought it was mainly working with students who have special needs. And they realized that when they got in the school social work field there was a lot of direct contact and building relationships with students (P1). As stated in the literature review, social workers do not judge individuals. They do not put fault on a client or see them as “good or bad” (Miley, O’Melia, & DuBois, 2001).

One participant also shared that they thought their position was unique to the school district because they work district wide with a lot of students and their work is geared towards prevention (PY). Participant Y said that on the other hand, elementary

social workers etc. usually work a lot with special education and attend Individual Education Plan meetings and have that special education link where as that is not her focus. This is different than they assumed because during their social work internship at a high school they worked mainly one on one with individuals (PY). As shown in the literature review, in everyday life every specialty of social work uses rehabilitative and prevention measures. An example of this would be that working with an individual who has a drug abuse problem because it is helping with the urgent situation and can also help prevent situations in the future (Compton & Galaway, 1999). As participant Y said, something else that was surprising are the steps that are necessary to begin a program.

Furthermore, participant Z commented that in the beginning they saw social work as basically helping individuals. As Constable, McDonald, and Flynn (1999) point out, “The goal of school social work is to help young people accomplish appropriate developmental tasks in ways that best respect the values underlying our common human nature, our common human needs, and the human potential of each person, often needlessly wasted” (Constable, McDonald, & Flynn, 1999). A part that this participant didn’t comprehend was working inside the parameters around which your barriers exist (PZ).

Another participant commented that as a social work student she understood social work practice as primarily working with troubled children, for example, family problems (PX). She thought it was basically children with emotional needs but has learned through her work that it is working with the family too (PX). Compared to how she thought school social work would be, it is more positive (PX). Participant X assists families in locating resources, from both formal services from human service agencies

and through informal networks such as extended family and friends (Constable, McDonald, & Flynn, 1999).

Roles and responsibilities

A main theme of my inquiry was exploring the roles and responsibilities of school social workers. Each of the social worker's roles and responsibilities focused on their specialty and the student population they work with. A connection between and among the five social workers was their utilization of community resources, regardless of their "specialty" within school social work practice. This ties in with the literature review and how it was mentioned that resources could be found in the community. In addition, some of the school social workers receive referrals. School social workers work with parents, teachers, and administrators to name a few

(<http://www.doe.state.in.us/sservices/socwork.htm>). One social worker commented that a family might have other needs than relating to education. This social worker would meet with the family to see where they are at and the needs they have and then work with them to find the different resources to fit the family's needs (PX). As participant X said, assessment of the situation is done to see what the needs are and then referrals are made. As participant Z commented, the main issue is helping. Participant 1 reflected it is helping students get connected with community resources and to help with the crisis needs, such as food, along with "the ultimate goal of having them stay in school."

Interagency/Intragency

Another participant stated that they generally start the morning with meetings (P2). Meetings are critical because connections can be made with professionals in the community (P1). A child study team meeting refers to a meeting with a parent, teacher,

principal, or a child and can be called an Individual Education Plan. A purpose of this meeting would be to locate support services for the student within the school system. Today school social workers are in the school system and are included in the “educational team” (<http://www.doe.state.in.us/sservices/socwork.htm>). School social workers work with parents, teachers, and administrators to name a few (<http://www.doe.state.in.us/sservices/socwork.htm>). Working with these individuals school social workers incorporate how a student functions on all levels (physical, emotional, and social) and how they will function and adapt in an education setting (<http://www.doe.state.in.us/sservices/socwork.htm>). If there are other issues of concern in addition to academic challenges, resources in the community could be discussed with parents of a student. For example, a teacher contacted the social worker with concern for a student about a disorder and she said, “So, I will talk to that student, address that issue, make a parent contact, make referrals to an appropriate place” (P2). This relates to what was stated in the literature review, school social workers work with the student population in schools and are particularly taught to do so (http://internationalnetwork-schoolsocialwork.htmlplanet.com/school_social_work.htm).

In addition, another participant works with chemical dependency issues and the pre-assessment team when a referral comes from agencies such as the law enforcement. A role of the school social worker during this process is intervention. This usually happens by contacting the parents of the student and also talking with the student about the situation (PY). The approach for this community’s school district is a generalist approach (P2). Social workers who use a generalist approach recognize the connection of issues relating to personal and group problems. This leads them to work with diverse

populations such as, individuals and communities to work towards positive change (Miley, O'Melia, & DuBois, 2001).

Crisis intervention

Social worker's roles can involve crisis intervention. Participant Y commented, "I think we all get pulled into crisis". Participant Z said, it is really impressive how so many individuals come together in the district when there is a crisis. The school district has a crisis team (PZ). One participant's role during a crisis situation is to implement the crisis plan and connect all the resources (P2). When there is a crisis situation ideally the professional staff where it happens meets in the morning to get the facts about the crisis situation (PY). After that it is decided what staff member will be stationed where and where the students will be sent (PY). It also has to be decided if students will be met individually or in groups (PY). One participant reflected, "I remember when we first came, I don't think we knew what to do, with the first crisis that came along, did we? I mean and now we have all these people and they all come together as a team and support each other" (PZ). This relates to the literature review and looking at teamwork. Social workers use "teamwork" skills to build alliances and work well with other professionals (Miley, O'Melia, & DuBois, 2001). The school social workers have built their own support system by meeting for lunch sometimes (PZ). One participant shared, sometimes you can feel like "a lone ranger" and that's gotten better by meeting for lunches (PY). Participant Z agreed with the discussion of the "lone ranger" feeling. Another participant added that she is by herself but she thought it was improving (PX). Participant Z added, "It's always good to move towards a team approach". This enables the social workers to use each other for support and feedback, while maintaining confidentiality (PZ).

Confidentiality is the basis for social worker's behavior "and forms the basis for trustworthy professional relationships." The only exceptions to this are if service users give permission to share information or if by law the social worker is mandated to report information (Miley, O'Melia, & DuBois, 2001).

Additional services

Nonetheless, one participant mentioned an additional service could be extra support for the support staff, like the social workers. It was mentioned that sometimes the support staff has worked with the individual or family that the crisis situation involves. Even so, the support staff is looked at to handle the situation and those involved with the individual or family in the crisis situation may need the support instead of giving support (PY). Another participant also reflected that their program's major concern was focusing on teen dads' needs. This participant saw that teen dads might feel uncomfortable asking some questions to a female social worker so it was significant to have a male colleague that could answer some questions (P1).

Concerns on participant's minds

A major issue concern facing the social workers during the time of this research was the impending budget cuts and the impact on education and the work load of social workers and support staff roles because there will be class sizes that are bigger (PY). Another issue is politics and how urban populations have a large tax base and people in this participant's community may not have a lot (PZ). In an urban area individuals may look at building new schools in a different light (PZ). This participant commented, "We don't have the support and I think that they are really calling the shots" (PZ). Another participant added that sometimes individual's don't think their school district has those

types of problems that can be seen in urban school districts but they do exist (PX). A lot of times certain issues are very prevalent in the school district and to get additional services that mind set needs to change (PX).

Another participant shared that they recognized an issue that when a system isn't abiding the law it is the social workers role to point this out and work with the system for changes (P2). An example of this might be as the participant mentioned that administrators might not want to follow a law because it could be costly or there could be a change (P2). Another issue is the limitations of working within the school system. The focus is on academics and that makes it a challenge to take a student out of class to work with them for example, on posttraumatic stress issues (P2). Social work is in effect in a "host" setting, where the focus is on education. At the same time social workers focus on psychosocial needs, working with students, families, teachers, as well as others to help students (<http://www.doe.state.in.us/sservices/socwork.htm>). Working with these individuals school social workers incorporate how a student functions on all levels (physical, emotional, and social) and how they will function and adapt in an education setting (<http://www.doe.state.in.us/sservices/socwork.htm>).

One participant mentioned that their principal changed their roles often and resented the fact that they have certain team contacts and are in the community often (P2). Resources are available in communities to help individuals and they can be put into two categories. One category is services are available through formal organizations and accessed through parents or the school. The other category is informal resources in the community, which could include family or friends (Constable, McDonald, & Flynn, 1999). Two times during the month this participant is on a child protection team. For

example, a student came into this participant's office and showed them a post card from a convicted sex offender. The student was wondering how they got their address etc? That afternoon the participant attended the child protection team meeting and was able to talk with the county attorney. By that afternoon the county attorney located the individual who sent the post card and the person was dealt with. This participant shared that without the community connections to find out that information it could have taken her days (P2). Another concern was transportation too. In this school district the activity bus was discontinued. This was a problem for some students and for those who could access tutoring after school because transportation home was a challenge (P2).

Boundaries

Another area of discussion that emerged was creating boundaries. As one participant commented, the things in your job description must be done (PY). Another participant added that they could go to meetings every day, every hour but you really need to set your boundaries (PZ). Participant X shared that a good thing about social workers is that they are their own group and if they need to they can go to meetings for one another. Also, one participant's priority is with the kids and their welfare. She said the kids come first and everyone else is after them (PZ). School social workers work with the student population in schools and are particularly taught to do so (http://internationalnetwork-schoolsocialwork.htmlplanet.com/school_social_work.htm). Another participant added that when an individual needs them they want to be available but they are careful to set boundaries too (P1).

Time management

Time management plays a role in the school social workers roles and responsibilities. One participant reflected that it is essential and choices about what individuals have priority have to be made (P2). She said, the first priority would be if students were dangerous to themselves and other people (P2). Another participant commented, time management is critical and you have to plan things (P1). She said, for example, if you don't plan to do paperwork it's easy to lose it in the shuffle (P1). Even so, this participant shared that the students are always first though (P1). Social workers should not say they will do activities that are beyond the time they have. "A client can reasonably expect you to do what you say you will do" (Compton & Galaway, 1999). Participant Y also said she realized "that your job is never done" and meeting with a student one time can change their life (PY). However she reflected that it is very tiring and while checking in with an individual they begin to tell you their life story then hours go by and you are trying to get them to class again (PY). She said with laughter that time has been difficult for her because she has more planned in a day than is "humanly possible" (PY). She said her schedule may not look very full but there are some days when she doesn't get a lunch break or breaks and she may come in at 7:30am and not go home till 4:30-5pm (PY).

Another participant added that a positive part of being a social worker is that it is always different (PX). "I guess that's something that I enjoy, is that everyday is totally different and that, you know, you just deal with it as it comes and that it's not the same old thing you know" (PX). Another social worker has a district position and travels around the district (PZ). She said that the additional part is the grant piece and there has

to be balance (PZ). Participant 1 added in her individual interview that an important factor is grants. She does grant writing and that is essential because her program is funded with a grant (P1).

Policies

Policies play a role in school social workers' functions and responsibilities. This theme shows that one participant's program is flexible because they don't have stern rules coming from the state or federal government (P1). An important aspect is that this participant does grant writing though (P1). As stated before, some of the social workers positions are funded through grants. Another participant commented that situations that are not in the power of children could affect their self-esteem a lot (PZ). This participant shared that a law went into effect July 1st that if a homeless family moves to a different area the child can still attend the same school (PZ). The participants' comments point out again the extent to which school social workers' roles and tasks are varied while working with students and parents as well as other professionals

(<http://www.doe.state.in.us/sservices/socwork.htm>). Working with these individuals school social workers incorporate how a student functions on all levels (physical, emotional, and social) and how they will function and adapt in an education setting (<http://www.doe.state.in.us/sservices/socwork.htm>). School social workers work with the student population in schools and are particularly taught to do so (http://internationalnetwork-schoolsocialwork.htmlplanet.com/school_social_work.htm).

Participant Y mentioned that another policy is that the school district has a drug and alcohol policy (PY). The school district has a no tolerance level (P2). Information on this policy received from Participant Z stated that the school district "clearly prohibits

the unlawful possession, use, or distribution of alcohol or of illicit drugs by students on school premises or as part of any sanctioned school district activities. Students will have imposed upon them for violations of this section sanctions up to and including expulsion from school. In addition, students who violate the standards of conduct will be referred for prosecution consistent with local, state, and federal laws.”

Best of best worlds

When asking in the best of best worlds what would your job description be, there were different responses that included liking ones job because of flexibility and having more than one social worker in their position. “In the best of best worlds there would be two people in my position” (PY). One participant said they loved their job and it is flexible because they are their own program (P1). Participant Y added that they like their job because they can be creative because there is flexibility. Another participant with laughter said, “Well, I guess the one I gave you” (P2). Participant 2 also mentioned that having more than one person in her position would be ideal. She stated, “I always appreciate having interns, they really help lighten my load” (P2). This participant also said a better relationship with administrators would be nice because it feels “like killing the messenger all the time” (P2). Home visits everyday were ideal too (PX). Participant X also shared that she works 32 hours a week and she likes that she has some flexibility.

Additional comments

When participants were asked if there was anything they thought was important to share about school social work, one participant was willing to share a story she thought enlightened some things that she thought were important (PZ). Participant Z said,

“I can just tell you one story of a situation um that might just enlighten some things that I think are important and um unfortunately with our budget situation, were going to be moving probably further away from that but um I ya, I was working with a middle school group and I brought a group together. Was a very small group of students and one of the students was continually duking it out and getting in fights and skipping school, they’d pull out here, there, and everywhere and um that was a time where I’d brought that group together and it was a time where that student connected with me and I connected with them but that student also connected with some other kids who they probably thought they could never connect or be friends ya know, so we, we kind of made this group and um from then on that person had just the support a place to go, somebody they knew that cared.”

This participant went on to say that they met that certain student when the student was in 8th grade and when that student became a senior they told her that they thought the anger management didn’t do them any good. While telling the story the participant laughed and shared that the student wasn’t in a fight after 8th grade. This participant also shared that having connections is very important and sometimes you may not have the time or energy to make all the connections. She said, school social workers should not be the ones to make every connection, but working towards getting people involved to try to establish a connection with kids is important (PZ).

Implications of findings

There are many practical implications of my findings. There are many themes and patterns relating to school social workers and their roles and responsibilities. One practical implication of my findings is that I have realized that everyday can be different

and school social workers have very complex and important roles in the school setting. As participant X shared, everyday can be different and you deal with things as they come. A second practical implication of my findings is that the main theme is helping students and students and their needs come first. "The goal of school social work is to help young people accomplish appropriate developmental tasks in ways that best respect the values underlying our common human nature, our common human needs, and the human potential of each person, often needlessly wasted" (Constable, McDonald, & Flynn, 1999). A third implication of my findings is there are challenges but making contact with a student can make a difference. As Participant Y shared, she realized "that your job is never done" and meeting with a student one time could change their life. A fourth implication of my findings is a school social worker works to have a balance with the school system, families, and the community as a whole. Collaboration within and outside the school setting is very essential. School social workers work with parents, teachers, and administrators to name a few (<http://www.doe.state.in.us/sservices/socwork.htm>). Having those connections can help an individual or family receive the services they need.

Through this research project and the voices of school social workers I have had the opportunity to gain so much knowledge and step into their shoes to hear some of the roles and responsibilities a school social worker can have. I am more aware of their roles and responsibilities in the school system. As I enter the social work field, I am better prepared to become a school social worker. I hope that other individuals can have a small taste of the phenomenon and everyday roles and functions school social workers can experience.

Limitations

There are some limitations to my study of school social work. One limitation is my own experience as a researcher. My knowledge of qualitative research is limited due to the fact that this is my first year conducting this type of research. Another limitation is that all seven social workers were not able to participate in the study. This means that not all school social workers voices were heard in the district of Minnesota where the research was conducted. The participants that were not able to participate could not share their views and experiences. In addition, time was a factor that had limitations to the study. The first focus group did not run for approximately an hour and a half because some participants needed to leave early. Another time constraint is that the ending focus group was unable to happen due to each of the social workers obligations.

Future research

Research is an on going process and is very important. The phenomenon of school social work is very dynamic and changing with time and society. Future research is needed to have more in-depth information of school social workers and their roles and responsibilities. Future research can show the changes in school social work and how it functions with the overall system of education and society as a whole. This additional research can help individuals, organizations, and society as a whole, see and hear school social work from another perspective.

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Bemidji State University**Social Work Program**

 March 25, 2002
Project: **Honors Thesis**Title: **School Social Work: Roles, Functions, and Responsibilities**Student: **Amanda Hollatz, 218-755-3389; Email Amanda_415@yahoo.com**
 Advisor: **Mary Ann Reitmeir, MSW, and LISW, 218-755-2835;**
mareit@bemidjistate.edu

Participation Authorization Form

AUTHORIZATION: I understand the focus of this research project is examination of the roles, responsibilities, and functions of school social workers ----- . I also understand that the participants will remain anonymous and that the content of the interviews and focus groups while tape-recorded, will remain confidential. The final report will not attribute comments to any individual participant unless there is specific approval. I may contact the researcher at any time (Amanda Hollatz 1-218-755-3389 or her advisor Mary Ann Reitmeir 1-218-755-2835). I agree to participate in this study and to have my individual interview and the focus groups tape-recorded. I understand that I may withdraw from participation at any time.

Participant's Name: (please print): _____ Phone: _____

Address: _____ Email: _____

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____ Date: _____

Amanda Hollatz, Phone: 1-218-755-3389, E-mail: Amanda_415@yahoo.com

Advisor's signature: _____ Date: _____

Mary Ann Reitmeir: Phone: 1-218-755-2835, E-mail: mareit@bemidjistate.edu

**Bemidji State University
Social Work Program**

April 4, 2002

Project: Honors Thesis

Title: School Social Work: Roles, Functions, and Responsibilities

Student: Amanda Hollatz, 218-755-3389; Email Amanda_415@yahoo.com

Advisor: Mary Ann Reitmeir, MSW, and LISW, 218-755-2835; mareit@bemidjistate.edu

Notes:

1. Time commitment for participants will be about 2 1/2-3 hours for the 2 focus groups and individual interviews.
2. My advisor Mary Ann Reitmeir needs to sign the participation authorization forms. Friday, April 5, 2002 she will sign them and then we will send them in the mail to you.
3. I have my appointment book with me today and after the focus group if you are willing it would be great to set up a time for the individual interviews.

Thanks!

Ground Rules

I would like to thank you again for being willing to participate in the research project. The following are a few ground rules to help the focus group run smoothly:

- Respect for all participants
- Please let one person talk at a time
- Please allow each participant the opportunity for equal participation time
- Respect the confidentiality agreement

Thanks!!

Beginning Focus Group

1. Introduction:
 - A. Authorization forms signed before focus group begins
 - B. Myself: Volunteering and why I chose Social Work as a major
 - C. Research Project: ground rules, contribution to profession
 - D. Confidentiality and Tape-recording
 - E. Participants' and their work: How they got into Social Work and School Social work: How long in position?
2.
 - A. Sharing of personal stories relating to School Social Work: Perspectives of their work
 - B. Nature of School Social Work-----Roles, functions, and responsibilities: Who determines the roles etc.? What services are provided?
 - C. Additional services that should be available
 - D. Issues that are a concern in School Social Work
 - E. Where would you like to see School Social Work in 5 years?
 - F. In the best of best worlds how would your description of your job be?
2. Closure: Thank you!

Appendix IV

Interview guide for participant's that could not attend the beginning focus group:

1. Sharing of personal stories relating to school social work: perspectives of your work?
2. What are your roles, functions, and responsibilities as a school social worker, what services are provided?
3. Additional services that should be provided, issues that are a concern in school social work?
4. Background of school social work: what you expected, assumptions, and how things are?
5. What are everyday functions and responsibilities?
6. How does time management play a role in your functions and responsibilities?
7. Who determines your roles and how do policies play a role?
8. In the best of best worlds how would your job description be?

Interview guide for participant's that attended the beginning focus group:

1. Background of school social work: what you expected, assumptions, and how things are?
2. What are everyday functions and responsibilities?
3. How does time management play a role in your functions and responsibilities?
4. Who determines your roles and how do policies play a role?
5. In the best of best worlds how would your job description be?