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School social workers perceptions on multilevel practice : understanding, implementation, and barriers to engaement

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ABSTRACT

The National Association of Social Works standards for school social workers [SSWs] urges SSWS to engage in ecologically informed practice interventions that affect both individual students and the multiple levels of the school environment. Despite this recommendation, survey literature indicates that SSWs spend most of their time using individual interventions to affect students' well being. This qualitative study explores the perspectives of current SSWs to gain a deeper understanding of how they think about and implement multilevel practice. In particular, this study explores SSWs' perceptions of the barriers to increased engagement in multilevel practice. Six currently practicing social workers practicing in urban and suburban settings across United States were interviewed to gain a better understanding of the perceived goals for their work, daily practice activities, understanding of multilevel practice, implementation of multilevel practice and perceived barriers to varying practice activities. Findings indicate that school social workers engage in highly varied practice activities in their various school settings. While few participants expressed an understanding of multilevel practice, all SSWs expressed receptivity to this type of practice. Perceived barriers to multilevel practice included SSWs ancillary role in the school setting, inadequate training, and the high demand for individual counseling and crisis intervention. Hypotheses for further inquiry and implications for future school social work scholarship are offered.

SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS PERCEPTIONS ON MULTILEVEL PRACTICE:

UNDERSTANDING, IMPLEMENTATION, AND BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree Master of Social Work.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

In the context of the environment of school reform and accountability, literature and the National Association for Social Work [NASW] have called for a broadening of roles for school social workers [SSWs] (Allen-Meares, 1994; Berzin & O'Conner, 2010; Corbin, 2005; Costin, 1975; Frey & Dupper, 2005; Kelly, et al., 2010; Packard, 2001). Ecological theory has served as the foundation in the formation of frameworks that encourage SSWs to conceptualize their jobs as targeting the multiple systems impacting students' lives—interventions aimed at micro, mezzo, exo and macro interventions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Corbin, 2005; Frey & Dupper, 2005; Sabatino, 2009; Clancy, 1995; NASW, 2012). SSWs are called to effect change at various levels, rather than focusing intervention efforts exclusively with individual students and families (Frey & Dupper, 2005; NASW; 2012; Sabatino, 2009; Clancy, 1995). SSWs are urged to target change efforts across various levels of practice to encourage interventions in all of the relevant systems that affect children's lives to encourage enduring change for students (Clancy, 1995; Frey & Dupper, 2005; NASW, 2012).

Despite the recommendations by the NASW, current trends in SSW literature, and foundation based on ecological theory, both recent and past surveys of SSW have found that SSWs spend more time on micro-level interventions with individual students and/or interventions with small groups of problem-identified students than on interventions focused on school-wide preventative programming, participation in school-culture change efforts, or

leadership activities (Allen-Meares, 1994; Kelly et al, 2010). While various speculative

explanations have been posited as to why social workers do not often engage in school

leadership decision-making and broader school change activities (Allen-Meares, 1994; Berzin &

O'Connor, 2010; Frey & Dupper, 2005; Phillippo & Stone, 2011), little empirical research has

explicated SSW's perceptions of the potential barriers to engaging in multi-level work (Corbin,

2011).

This study attempts to begin to narrow the gap between the theoretical explanations of the

barriers to multilevel practice for SSWs and SSWs lived experience of their roles in schools. A

qualitative inquiry approach has been employed to explore the following questions: (a) how do

SSWs currently practice in schools?; (b) how do school social workers understand multilevel

practice?; (c) how do school social workers describe their engagement in multilevel practice?;

and (d) what barriers/impediments do school social workers face that discourages their

engagement in multilevel practice? This study has clear relevance for both the education of

future school social workers and most importantly, improving services for students and families

in schools. In gaining a deeper understanding of school social workers' perceptions of their roles

in school and the potential barriers to engagement in multilevel work, social work educators can

become better equipped to prepare their students to take on a broader role in schools. Finally, the

relevance of this research extends beyond the field of social work and may be useful in broader

considerations of education policy, school administration, and school organizational design.

For the purposes of the study, the term "school social worker" will refer to social workers

that provide services at a school-based setting. SSWs can refer to either social workers hired

directly by schools/school-districts or to social workers hired by a community agency to work

within schools. Furthermore, the term "school social worker" refers specifically to individuals who have trained specifically as social workers, earning a Masters degree in the field.

Formulating a succinct definition of what constitutes engagement in "multilevel practice" for school social workers is a more complex task. In order to engage in multilevel practice, school social workers' interventions should extend beyond individual student interventions aimed at individual, problem-identified, student change goals. Rather, multilevel practitioners also participate in efforts to create broader changes in the school climate, the community, or larger school or district reform efforts. A few examples of practice choices that constitute interventions aimed at broader levels include SSW participation in school climate meetings, facilitation of preventative programming, and attempts to further integrate community organizations in schools. For the purpose of this study, no distinction was made between SSWs who currently engage in multi-level practice or those who do not. All perspectives were thought to be useful in understanding potential barriers. An expanded explanation and discussion of multilevel school social work practice is contained in the literature review below.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

A Brief Historical Background of School Social Work

The school social work field has undergone many shifts in purpose since its conception in 1906 (Allen-Meares, 2010b; Shaffer, 2006). One pivotal change occurred when the function of social workers in school-based setting transitioned from facilitating mutual adaptation to a focus on helping students better "adjust" to current school settings (Stuart, 1986). Understanding the history of school social worker is instrumental in both a consideration of the influences on the school of social work field and contextualizing the current status of the field today.

School social work began in the "visiting teacher" movement that began early 20th century. Visiting teachers were social workers employed by community organizations whose primary function was to serve as a liaison between the home, school, and community. The movement began in the context of compulsory attendance laws, increased immigration, and the extension of social and health services to schools and communities. Visiting teachers were employed to help schools understand the relationship between various community and family factors—such as poverty, poor health, and economic instability—and school attendance problems (Allen-Meares, 2010b; Knupfer, 1999; Shaffer, 2006). Another essential task for visiting teachers "was to aid in the reorganization of school administration and of school practice by supplying evidence of unfavorable conditions that underlie children's school difficulties and by pointing out needed changes" (Oppenheimer [1925] as cited in Allen-Meares, 2010b). To do

this work effectively, SSWs had considerable access to principals and superintendents of schools (Alderman [2006] as cited in Shaffer, 2006). Notably, up until the 1930s, school social workers' tasks did not include long-term individual work with children (Allen-Meares, 2010b).

School social work experienced a major transition in the 1930s under the influence of the mental hygiene movement. The field shifted focus towards a "school caseworker" orientation where the profession became more clinically oriented—focusing on the learning needs of the individual, struggling child. There was a shift away from school social worker's involvement in working with administrators to improve school conditions that was prevalent through the 1920s. This push in the field towards an individual casework orientation maintained momentum through the 1960s (Allen-Meares, 2010b; Shaffer, 2006). Beginning in 1970s and continuing to the present, there have been many calls for redefining school social work to extend beyond the "school caseworker" model and shift back to an broader framework that considered the multiple systems that affect a pupil's success in school (Allen-Meares, 1994; Corbin, 2005; Corbin, 2011; Costin, 1975; Frey & Dupper, 2005; Hopson & Lawson, 2011; Kelley, et al., 2010; NASW, 2012; Packard, 2001).

Clearly the history of the school social work field demonstrates how the roles of SSWs have varied and changed over time. The school social work field is in a perpetual state of evolution as it is has adapted to different historical and educational trends. The push towards a school caseworker orientation in the 1930s led to a decrease in SSW involvement with school wide decision that persists to the present despite appeals for great SSW engagement in this area. The current school social field may greatly benefit from a revisiting of the practices of the early visiting teacher movement, as the profession may confronted with similar challenges first encountered at the turn of the past century. Shaffer (2006), notes:

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Immigrant populations are growing rapidly, social worker-student ratios continue to be

high, and schools remain bureaucratic, inflexible, and slow to change…social work

retains its role linking home, school, and community. However, the social action and

leadership emphasis of early school social work pioneers has been replaced primarily by

casework with maladjusted students and a peripheral role in the decision-making process

in schools. (p. 243)

Given that SSWs may currently hold a peripheral role of in the decision-making process in

schools, understanding the history of the school social work field may present an opening for

SSW to reclaim access to these functions within schools. The importance of SSWs balancing

individual work with individual students and families with work impacting broader systems is

strongly supported by the ecological framework that serves as the profession's foundation.

Ecological Framework

Ecological theory focuses on the broad picture of the multiple environments, or

ecologies, that affect a person's development (Allen-Meares, 2010b; Bronfenbrenner, 1979;

Clancy, 1995). In particular, as applied to practice in schools, this conceptual framework urges

that workers engage in practice that targets interventions across all levels of system change— the

micro, mezzo, exo, and macro systems that affect student's lives (Allen-Meares, 2010a;

Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Clancy, 1995). Used as a foundation, ecological theory guides social

workers to consider how the multiple complicated ecologies and the transactions between these

ecologies impact students. Furthermore, this perspective can guide school social workers to

intervene at multiple levels in the system or to decide which system(s) would be the most

appropriate for interventions (Allen-Meares, 2010a; Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Ecological theory can also form the basis for a preventative approach to intervention (Allen-Meares, 2010a). Calls for engagement in multilevel interventions are central to theorists' new models for defining roles and functions for school social workers (Frey & Dupper, 2005; Sabatino, 2009). This multilevel approach to school social work is grounded in ecological theory (Allen-Meares, 2010a; Frey & Dupper, 2005; Sabatino, 2009; Clancy, 1995,). While older models of school social work, such as the school-community-pupil relations model (Costin, 1975), drew more heavily from systems theory, even this earlier conceptualization of school social work included a call for clinicians to understand the community context of their students beyond the school.

The clinical quadrant. Frey and Dupper (2005) drew heavily upon ecological theory in their formulation of the clinical quadrant. In their model, they present four levels of school social work practice along two dimensions: desired change unit (individuals or environment) and the people engaged in the intervention (large group/system or individuals/families/small groups).

Each quadrant describes the intervention along both dimensions. Work in quadrant A "engages individuals, families and small groups to promote change in the environment"; quadrant B work "engages large groups, and promotes change in environment"; quadrant C work "engages individuals or small groups and seeks to change individual/psychological factors of those are involved", quadrant D work "engages large groups and seeks change at the individual level" (Frey & Dupper, 2005). Frey and Dupper (2005) emphasize social work's historical commitment to social change in their demands that SSWs be able to move from one quadrant to another with relative ease and to distribute the time spent in each quadrant on the basis of the needs of their practice setting (p. 37) (See Appendix A).

Limitations of ecological theory. While the ecological model has served as a foundation for the development of this more detailed conceptualization of school social work, it has not been enough to encourage social workers to fully and adequately engage in practice outside of individually oriented interventions (Berzin & O'Connor, 2010). One limitation of the ecological model is its complexity (Clancy, 1995). Clinicians may have difficulty understanding how to implement the ecological model in their daily practice activities, preferring to practice in the "casework" model focused on micro-level (Clancy, 1995). Clinicians who enter school social work may have extensive clinical training and conceptualize their role more narrowly, without recognition of "the importance of early intervention and prevention approaches" (Frey & Dupper, 2005).

The Gap Between Recommendations for Practice and Current Practice Activities

The NASW standards for school social work were "designed to enhance awareness of the skills, knowledge, values, methods, and sensitivity school social workers need to work effectively within school systems" (NASW, 2012, p. 6). However, despite a push for the broadening of SSWs' roles within schools as driven by the ecological framework, (Allen-Meares, 1994; Berzin & O'Conner, 2010; Corbin, 2005; Costin, 1975; Frey & Dupper, 2005; Kelly, et al., 2010; Packard, 2001) survey literature reveals that SSWs' practice trends are inconsistent with practice guidelines (Allen-Meares, 1994; Kelley et al., 2010). This section will provide an overview of the current NASW standards, the demographics of the school social work field, practice trends, and the split between ideal practice recommendations and reported practice experiences in the field.

NASW standards. Drawing upon ecological theory, the NASW has published clear guidelines outlining standards of practice for school social workers (NASW, 2012). The NASW

standards are framed in the context of three guiding principles: (a) education and school reform; (b) social justice; and (c) multitier intervention. Regarding education and school reform, the NASW addresses the relationship between school social work and current trends in policy around increased accountability:

> It is important that social workers be proactive to address these pressures and advocate for resources. School social workers actively help school systems meet expectations of federal, state, and local mandates; particularly those designed to promote equal educational opportunity, social justice, and the removal of barriers to learning (2012, p. 3).

In this statement, the NASW discusses the relationship between SSWs and legislative policy agendas. SSWs serve both as advocates for students and schools and help schools fulfill policy directives. Regarding the social justice principles, the NASW emphasizes addressing issues of equal educational opportunity as a hallmark of school social work practice. In addressing social justice principle, the NASW (2012) urges SSWS to "facilitate collaboration among students, parents, community members, administration, teachers, and other school staff" (p. 4) and promotes working from an ecological framework to identify resources for addressing inequities. Finally, the third principle of multitier intervention is based on the Response to Intervention (RtI) framework. RtI is a prevention to intervention strategy that uses a model with three varying levels of intensity. "The multitier model suggests a reallocation of school social work services to address school and small group intervention and consideration of more intensive interventions for individual students, based on their level of response to interventions at prior levels" (NASW, 2012, p. 2).

NASW states the role of school social workers is multifaceted; school social workers should provide direct services to children and lead prevention efforts through "building the capacity of family members, other school staff, and community agencies to improve student outcomes" (NASW, 2012, p.5). The NASW also strongly urges SSWS to participant in education policy development, to work as agents of systems change, and to "provide leadership in developing a positive school climate" (NASW, 2012, p. 13). NASW, the governing body for all of social work, clearly conceptualizes best practices for SSW as encompassing multiple levels of practice. Yet, as further detailed below, SSWs actual practice activities are not completely aligned with recommended guidelines.

School social work practice in action. This section will provide an overview of the literature that provides insight into the demographics of SSW, the different roles and tasks of school social work, and lastly, how data on practice activities of SSWs compares to the ideals established by NASW guidelines.

SSW demographics. The population demographics of school social workers have remained largely unchanged since 1994 (Allen-Meares, 1994; Kelley et al., 2010). The field of school social work is mainly composed of White (78.4%), female (88.6%) clinicians who hold a Master's degree (87.2%) in social work (Kelley et al., 2010). A majority of school social workers are employed directly by the public school districts (88.8%) and work in a wide variety of school communities, from rural to urban. More school social workers are employed in elementary schools (44.3%) than in middle schools (17.7%) and high schools (21.4%) (Kelley et al., 2010). School social workers often work in multiple schools within a district (Allen-Meares, 1994; Kelley et al., 2010).

SSW roles and practice activities. In a nation-wide survey of 860 school social workers, Allen-Meares (1994) found five job dimensions emerged for school social workers: (1) leadership and policy-making, (2) educational counseling with children, (3) home-school liaisons, (4) administrative and professional tasks, and (5) facilitating and advocating families' use of community resources. The survey was mailed to a random sample of just over 2,000 school social workers drawn from various sources, including NASW membership, state associations of school social workers, employers and state commissions (Allen-Meares, 1994). Tasks that were designated under the "leadership and policy-making" category contained tasks such "responsibility for professional leadership in relation to services to the community, parents, school administrators and the profession" (Allen-Meares, 1994, p. 563). Clinicians rated leadership and policy-making as the least important in the five job dimensions (Allen-Meares, 1994). Updated survey results published in 2010 found similar results to the 1994 survey (Kelly et al., 2010). School social workers were found to practice with a clinical casework orientation, spending significantly more time on "service delivery primarily with students who have already experienced achievement and school adjustment problems" (Kelley et al., 2010, p. 139) while only playing "a limited role in school leadership through participation in school committees, development of prevention activities, and improvement to the overall school culture" (Kelley et al., 2010, p. 139).

These results of these two studies suggest that, despite pushes such as the NASW's to define best practice as incorporating multi-level intervention, SSWs continue to most of their time on "clinical casework" interventions, or on individually-focused efforts, than on interventions that seek to change broader systems (Allen-Meares, 1994; Kelley et al., 2010).

Thus, the current reality of SSW practice in the field does not appear to fully mesh with the proscriptive guidelines set forth by professional organizations (NASW, 2012).

New Roles and Possibilities for School Social Workers

Both empirical (Hopson and Lawson, 2011; Phillopo & Stone, 2006; Sabatino, 2009; Packard, 2001; Corbin, 2011) and theoretical literature (Corbin, 2005) strongly suggest expanding possibilities for SSWs involvement in targeting interventions at the school-wide level. This section will look at models proposing expanding practice selections as well as research shedding light on actual practice.

Suggested areas for increased school social work involvement. Corbin (2005) discusses the increased opportunities for SSWs involvement under the Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) change strategy as defined by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. CSR funding was intended to change efforts "to expand the quality and quantity of schoolwide reform efforts that enable all children, particularly low-achieving children, to meet challenging academic standards" (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Corbin (2005) outlined both the importance and utility of SSWs participation in site-based discussion making teams, child-study teams, and parent teacher-teams.

Site-based decision-making teams "make decisions over a wide range of administrative, operational, curricular, and instructional areas" and "have responsibility for developing and monitoring a school plan that establishes the school's academic climate, staff development, and parent involvement goals" (Corbin, 2005, p. 241). In site-based decision-making teams, SSWs cans serve a key role in advocating for the consideration for the socio-emotional needs of students in discussions around academic goals. Additionally, SSWs can serve as facilitators in

discussions around difficult topics such as poor staff morale, experiences of racism in schools, and low-academic student achieve.

Secondly, SSWs can perform a critical role in child-study teams. Child study teams are multidisciplinary pre-referral teams that aim to promote student success before socio-emotional or behavioral factors begin significantly and negatively impacting academic achievement. In this team, SSWS can help identify trends in referrals that may signify systemic factors in the school environment that require attention. Secondly, SSWs can also "can influence the work of the child study team is by asking about the school issues that prevent students from being successful" (Corbin, 2005, p.242). Finally, in parent-teacher teams, SSWs can serve as facilitators of communication and collaboration between parents and teachers. SSWs can work to facilitate relationships between schools and families, facilitate parent-involvement in schools in new ways, and help identify what parents' need from the school to feel better supported. While the CSR funding program is no longer active, recommendations for SSW engagement under this model remain helpful in conceptualizing varying roles for SSWs (Corbin, 2005).

Empirical support for expanded roles for school social workers. While survey data has indicated that as an aggregate school social workers' do not often engage in practice aimed activities outside of "quadrant c" (Allen-Meares, 1994; Kelley et al., 2010), research also demonstrates that some school social workers do engage in interventions aimed at broader school change (Hopson & Lawson, 2011; Phillopo & Stone, 2006; Sabatino, 2009; Packard, 2001; Corbin, 2011). These examples helpful in providing examples of the broad range of effect practice interventions available to school social workers. School climate has been identified as one essential important change area in which school social workers may be particularly positioned to take a leadership position (Corbin, 2005; Hopson & Lawson, 2011). School

climate is a broad term that describes the organizational conditions that shape both the students' learning and the faculty's working conditions (Hopson & Lawson, 2011). As social workers are uniquely positioned to understand the unique ecology of schools, they may be of particular use to schools in analyzing school climate. One study asserted that social workers could implement survey measurements with students and teachers to collect data to drive school-climate changes within school (Hopson & Lawson, 2011).

Additionally, in considering social workers as in-school "consultants", social workers can conceptualize their work as engagement in consulting work across broad arenas of schools: organizational consulting, program consultation, education and training consultation, mental health consultation, behavioral consultation, and clinical consultation (Sabatino, 2009). In order to engage in consultant work across these broad dimensions, social workers would need to engage in practice across the four clinical quadrants. This model uses the term "consultants" to offer new in-school roles for school-based social worker, even for social workers that already work as part of the school staff. Using a single-subject case study approach, other research has also supported the role of social workers as organizational development consultants (Packard, 2001).

While useful in promoting new thinking about school social workers' roles, there are limitations in the existing empirical studies used to support school social worker's as important figures in implementing school culture change (Hopson & Lawson, 2011) and acting as in-house school consultants (Packard, 2001). While this literature advocates for school social workers as potential actors in carrying out these roles, neither study actually uses school social workers in implementing their study interventions. Furthermore, while the case-examples provide a good description of how organizational development and school-culture assessments can be

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implemented, generalizability is limited due to the inherent limitations in the single-case study design. More research is needed with school social workers that are actually engaging in work promoting school climate change and acting as in-house school consultants.

Social workers have also been found to be meaningful contributors in multidisciplinary collaborative teams designed to help meet the needs of vulnerable students (Phillopo & Stone, 2006). In a case study example, a multidisciplinary team was able to help school staff move from employing disconnected student-level interventions to the development of broader, system-wide interventions meant to address underlying problems and issues (Phillopo & Stone, 2006). Social workers' documented successful participation in such multidisciplinary groups can provide a model for school social workers' increased involvement in school-reform efforts. It is important to note that the generalizability of the study described is, again, limited by the singe-case-study design. Furthermore, this research is focused on how social workers can be successful contributors in multidisciplinary teams, rather than on any potential challenges that arose during the collaboration process. Further research is needed to address the potential challenges school social workers face when participating in these types of multidisciplinary teams.

A review of school social work's history reveals the field's oscillating commitment to multi-systemic practice (Allen-Meares, 2010b; Knupfer, 1999; Shaffer, 2006). Current survey research indicates that as a collective group, SSWs spend most of their time doing individual counseling or family interventions targeted at individual, problem-identified students. However, as outlined above, the field's continued focus on individual students is not supported by the NASW, trends in literature, or by the foundational ecological theory upon which the field is grounded. Furthermore, literature has provided suggestions and guidelines for particular ways that SSWs could impact the broader systems impacting their student's lives. The continued

incongruity between theorized practice recommendations and SSW's current practice activities highlights the necessity to better understand that barriers that may prevent SSWs from moving towards a more integrated, multi-systemic form of practice. An exploration of some of these potential barriers is discussed in the next section.

Potential Barriers to Multilevel Practice

Various explanations have been offered as to why social workers do not often engage in school leadership decision-making and broader school change. The potential barriers to SSWs engagement in these practice activities include: (a) inadequate training; (b) large number of students in need of critical mental health services; (c) the field's affiliation with special education service delivery; and (d) perceptions of the services of SSWs as periphery rather than central to school wide functioning.

Training. One possible explanation is a lack of appropriate training for school social workers (Allen-Meares, 1994; Berzin & O'Connor, 2010; Corbin, 2011). An analysis of a focus group of school social work experts (school social workers, administrators and those connecting through academia) identified both inadequate preparation in MSW programs and lack of professional development as perceived barriers to participation in school-level change efforts (Corbin, 2011). Another qualitative study that analyzed syllabi from 58 MSW program's courses on school social work, found that few courses on school social work provided information on general trends in education reform, thus "school social workers may be inadequately prepared to engage in dialogue about these trends" (Berzin & O'Conner, p.244). Perhaps, school social workers are reluctant to engage in broader school-reform efforts because they lack the background knowledge to meaningfully contribute to conversation about these efforts. Additionally, Berzin and O'Conner (2010) found that the largest gap in school social

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work syllabi was training on how social workers can help shape systems through individual/group interventions.

Unmet mental health needs of students. Research has also found that practice choices vary between SSWs who work primarily with students with mental health problems, depending on whether or not the majority of their caseload received outside mental health [MH] counseling (O'Brien, et al., 2011). While SSWs in both groups reported using individual counseling more frequently than other interventions, SSWs whose students received outside MH services reported less engagement in individual counseling interventions (66.1%. reporting using all/most of the time) than SSWs whose students did not receive outside MH services (74.7% reporting using all/most of the time) (O'Brien, et al., 2011). "Similarly, enhancing community involvement and engagement was used far more frequently with students with outside counseling (45.3 percent) than with those without (20.0 percent) (O'Brien, et al., 2011). On the other hand, there was only a marginal difference between groups in the realm of improving school wide culture/climate (O'Brien, et al., 2011). Differences in practice choices between these two groups of SSWs may suggest a link between the levels of unmet MH needs in students and SSWs' tendency to engage in multilevel practice. Perhaps, SSWs who serve as the primary providers of MH services for their students, perceive individual counseling for these students to be more so critical that it limits engagement in other practice interventions.

Affiliation with special education. Some researchers have theorized that the relationship between social work and the traditional approach to special education in leading social workers to a narrow focus on individual-level interventions (Frey & Dupper, 2005). However, correlational analysis of survey research contradicted this assertion with the finding that time on

IEP-tasks actually decreased the likelihood of the frequent use of individual counseling and increased the likelihood of group counseling (Kelly & Stone, 2009).

School social work as a peripheral service. The peripheral status of SSWs has also been implicated to SSW's lack of engagement in systems-oriented work within schools (Phillippo and Stone, 2011; Sedlak, 1997). By perceiving school social work services as "extraneous to schools' core curricular and pedagogical mission…many school districts have avoided permanent fiscal responsibility for school mental health services and have thereby rendered these services ultimately expendable" (Phillippo and Stone, 2011, p. 77). At the same time, Phillpo and Stone (2011) also argue that SSW's "peripherality" and focus on individual casework may help SSWs to secure a more stable position within schools as these activities do not pose any significant stress on the school system. Thus, schools may appreciate that SSWs do not demand school wide change, function independently as mental health providers to individual students, and thus provide a needed service to schools (Phillippo and Stone, 2011). An extension of this argument is that SSWs may fear that their involvement in systems-oriented change work might be unwelcome by school administrators.

Researchers have discussed a variety of barriers that hinder SSWs fuller participation in multilevel practice (Allen-Meares, 1994; Berzin & O'Connor, 2010; Corbin, 2011; Frey and Dupper; 2005; Kelly & Stone, 2009; Phillippo and Stone, 2011). Insufficient training, the unmet mental health needs of the student body, the field's affiliation with special education, and SSWs' peripheral and status may all present barriers to multilevel practice. Yet, with the exception of Corbin's (2006) focus-group study, little attention has been given practicing SSWs' perceptions of the barriers that may impact them. The next section offers a summary of how this study aims

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to bring SSWs perspectives into the discussion of potential barriers stymying participation in multilevel practice.

Addressing Gaps in School for Social Work Study

A historical review of the field of school social work has revealed the field's wavering dedication to employing multi-systemic interventions in practice (Allen-Meares, 2010; Shaffer, 2006; Stuart, 1986)). Examining the early SSWs or "visiting teachers" impact on school-wide programming and decision-making may provide inspiration to present-day SSWs to recharge their efforts towards multi-systemic interventions. Additionally, drawing upon the groundwork of ecological theory and the guidelines of the NASW, SSWs are explicitly urged that practice limited exclusively to work with individual students and families is not sufficient to constitute effective practice in the era of increased school reform and increased accountability (Allen-Meares, 1994; Berzin & O'Conner, 2010; Corbin, 2005; Costin, 1975; Frey & Dupper, 2005; Kelly, et al., 2010; NASW, 2012; Packard, 2001). Finally, practice literature has provided SSWs with examples of possible roles and tasks that would increase their participation in broader systems-oriented work (Hopson & Lawson, 2011; Phillopo & Stone, 2006; Sabatino, 2009; Packard, 2001; Corbin, 2011). Yet, despite this clear appeal for a multilevel approach to practice, survey research reveals that as a collective unit, SSW's most frequently reported used intervention continues to be individual counseling with students and families of individual students (Allen-Meares, 1994; Kelley et al., 2010).While some literature has theorized about the impediments to multilevel practice, there is a clear gap in research about the perspectives of practicing SSWs in regards to what they perceive as the impediments to engagement in multilevel practice. Survey research captured critical data about the practice choices SSWs are making (Allen-Meares, 1994; Kelley et al., 2010), but this survey research provided little insight

into the descriptive reasoning behind the seemingly limited interventions employed by SSWs or

the perceived impediments to engagement in more systemic interventions. This qualitative study

was proposed to address this gap by accessing to richer narrative details of current SSWs

practice choices and their reflections on the perceived barriers to multilevel work

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Research Purpose and Questions

Literature has demonstrated that school social workers are called upon to perform a wide variety of roles and tasks in schools. Despite evidence demonstrating school social workers' ability to participate in broader school change activities, many school social workers' mainly practice individual-level interventions. While limited qualitative research has begun to offer a better understanding of how social workers engage in multilevel practice (Corbin, 2011), much of the understanding of school social workers' roles and preferred tasks is derived from quantitative, cross-sectional research involving survey questionnaires (Allen-Meares, 1994; Kelley et al., 2010). However, quantitative survey research fails to offer detailed accounts regarding SSW's unique perspectives on these roles and tasks. Furthermore, while literature has theorized about the potential barriers for SSWs in engaging in school-level change (Allen-Meares, 1994; Berzin & O'Connor, 2010; Corbin, 2011; Frey & Dupper, 2005; Kelly & Stone, 2009; Phillippo & Stone, 2011), more qualitative research would be extremely helpful in gaining a deeper understanding of how school social workers' perceive both their roles in school and potential impediments to engaging in multilevel practice. The literature's suggestions regarding the potential barriers for SSW's fuller engagement in a wider range of practice have not yet captured SSW's unique voice regarding their actual experiences in the field.

To give voice to SSWs, this study employed a qualitative inquiry approach to begin to fill this gap in research to address the following questions: (a) What roles and tasks constitute practice for SSWs? (b) How do school social workers understand multilevel practice? (c) How do school social workers describe their engagement in multilevel practice? (d) What barriers/impediments do school social workers face that discourages their engagement in multilevel practice?

Research Method and Design

Qualitative inquiry was chosen as the design, as it offers the opportunity to provide richer data specifically from the perspective of SSWs. Furthermore, as qualitative inquiry permits more flexible inquiry and allows participants to express complex ideas, this method holds the capacity to identify new theories about what the barriers may before SSW's engagement in broader school/district level school change efforts rather than limiting the discussion of barriers to pre-existing ideas. Gathering information from the individual experiences of school social workers will broaden the knowledge base about the potential challenges that arise for school social workers in this arena.

Qualitative data was collected through video interviewing conducted via Skype. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. The interview format was selected to elicit detailed, narrative information from participants about the nature of multilevel social work practice. The interviews were conducted with the use of a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix E) to ensure the interview addressed all relevant themes but also allowed flexibility to enable participants to provide more information that might elucidate themes not previously hypothesized by researchers. As the interviews progressed, questions were adjusted based information received, employing a flexible, qualitative methods approach.

Sample

  Participant characteristics. This study sought participants with graduate-level training in social work (with an M.S.W degree) that currently worked in school-based settings. Participants were required to have at least 6-months experience in school-based work in order to participate. This requirement was to limit the interviews to SSWs who had at least minimal experience in their position. As all interviews were conducted via Skype, participants were required to have access to a reliable Internet connection, webcam, and Skype software.

  Participant recruitment. This study used non-probability, convenience sampling in locating participants. Non-probability sampling was chosen due to the unavailability of a comprehensive list of SSWs. Initially, recruitment efforts focused on school social workers located in Massachusetts, however the geographic area was expanded to nationwide level due to difficulty in locating a large enough sample. Recruitment from the study was conducted in several ways: (a) email solicitations were sent personal networks of the researcher requesting the forwarding of study information to eligible participants; (b) study information was posted on Facebook and LinkedIn, specifically in group pages relevant to school social work; (c) email solicitations to SSWs whose emails were available on publically available staff directories of school nationwide; and (d) advertisement of the study in the American Counsel of School Social Work e-newsletter. This study also employed snowball-sampling techniques as participants were also asked to forward study information to other SSWs in their professional and personal networks. An analysis of the difficulties in recruitment of participants will be discussed in detail in the discussion chapter this study.

Participant and School Characteristics

Six interviews were ultimately recruited and included in the data set for this study. . Originally, the intended sample size for this study was 12-15 participants, however many difficulties were encountered in the recruitment of SSWs for this study. Emailing SSWs from publically available staff directories was not effective in garnering interest from eligible participants. Additionally, the requirement to use Skype software was limiting, as many potential participants did not have access to a stable Internet connection, Skype, or a webcam. Some potential participants also stated that they were unable to participate as the interviews were taking place near scheduled school vacation periods or in the midst of particularly busy times of the year. Ultimately, most participants were recruited through advertisement in the e-newsletter for the American Council of School Social Work (ACSSW). SSWs who have signed up to read this newsletter may not be representative of the general school social work population, as they have expressed interest in increased profession development as evidenced by their attention to the newsletter.

Seven participants were interviewed; however one interview could not be used for transcription as a result of technical difficulty in the audio recording of the interview. The final sample of participants included in the data set was comprised of five women and one man. Most participants self-identified as white (n=5) and one participant identified as multiracial. All had clinical social work training and held a master's in social work. One participant also held a doctoral degree in education. Geographically, participants worked in schools located in the Northeastern (n=3), Southeastern (n=2), and South Central (n=1) United States. Many participants (n=4) were highly experienced social workers both in terms of broad experience in the field of social work and experience as SSWs. The range of experience as a social worker

varied from three to thirty-eight years in the general social work field, with two participants practicing for less than six years and four participants practicing for over twenty years. Similarly, the years of experience working specifically in school-based practice ranged from three to thirty years with two participants working less than four years in schools and four participants working more than fifteen years in schools. Caseloads also varied from 40-400 students with participants reporting caseloads of 40-80 students (n=3), 100-150 students (n=1), and 300-340 students (n=2).

With regards to school placement, four school participants worked in one school site and two participants worked in multiple school sites. One participant served four different schools and another served three different school sites. For SSWs employed in multiple school sites, the SSW working in four sites worked exclusively with elementary school students while the participant working three sites worked in both elementary schools and high schools. The schools represented included one pre-school, four elementary schools, and one middle school. SSWs worked in both urban (n=4) and suburban environments (n=2).

Data Collection

Data was gathered using both a brief demographic survey and a 45-minute interview. The demographic survey was completed prior to the beginning of the Skype-interview and returned to the researcher via email or postal mail. The demographic survey asked participants for identifying information such as their gender, race, education, age, and experience in the field (Appendix D). This survey also asked participants about the schools in which they worked, including question about geographic setting, numbers of schools served, size of caseload, and grades of students served (Appendix D). All other study data was collected through in-person, individual interviews that generally lasted around 45-minutes. Using a semi-structured interview

guide (Appendix E), questions elicited information about SSW's training, roles and tasks, understanding and implementation of multilevel practice, barriers to multilevel practice, and recommendations for more effective practice.

The Skype interviews were both audio and video recorded. The audio files of the interviews were then transcribed, with notation of particular bodily gestures as observed on the interview, and used as the primary data for study. The use of Skype interviews had some limitations. Primarily, internet-based interviews presented technical difficulties in several interviews that interrupted the natural flow of conversation. Additionally, as with other face-to-face interviews, it is likely that the research may have inadvertently revealed some indication of judgment or assessment of the participant based on their responses either through a shift in tone or body language, and made participants feel uncomfortable or introduced interviewer bias into the data. On the other hand, the use of interviews was beneficial as it allowed participants the opportunity to ask clarifying questions about what they are being asked. Furthermore, it allowed the interviewer to probe deeper into areas that warrant further exploration.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the qualitative data was aimed at summarizing and describing relevant meanings and themes. As previously reported, all audio from the interviews was transcribed. As these transcriptions provided a large amount of raw data, qualitative analysis software (Dedoose) was used to analyze the data through the use of open coding techniques. Rather than sorting data using a list of code categories derived from theories, it was coded based on a close examination and multiple readings of the transcribed interviews. In order to better understand and organize the data, the technique of memoing was employed to identify code labels and their meanings, theoretical notes, and operational notes. The following describes this technique in greater detail:

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During open coding the data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, compared for similarities and differences, and questions are asked about the phenomena as reflected in the data. Through this process, one's own and others' assumptions about phenomena are questioned or explored, leading to new discoveries. (Rubin & Babin, 2010, p. 305)

Through the use of coding and memoing, both latent and manifest themes were identified that emerged in the data. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the demographic information collected.

 One of the inherent risks of qualitative analysis is the potential for researcher bias to influence how data is coded and understood. While it is impossible to fully eliminate the influence of the researcher's perspective in coding the data, care was taken to review transcription data multiple times and in different orders, to perpetually question the comprehension of the derived meaning and themes. In working with school social workers, limited apparent ethical issues were present. One important consideration was that the participants did not feel judged/criticized by the interviewer. As the research focused on why school social workers are not fully engaging in multilevel practice, school social workers might have felt embarrassed that they are not doing more in their school. It was important to phrase the interview questions in a way that avoided judgment when assessing social workers engagement (or lack thereof) in broader school reform efforts. Furthermore, the research conducting the interview has had past experience working in schools, with a specific aim of addressing school-wide culture issues. The researcher was aware of the potential biases that might have influenced both the interview and the data analysis stage of this research as a result of her personal

experiences in the field and monitored the influence of this potential bias throughout the course

of this study.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

Overview

The primary goals of this research were to access narratives of SSWs understanding of multilevel practice and to gain a better understanding of the barriers that may exist that prevent SSWs from engaging in varied practice interventions. School social workers were also interviewed for broader insight into their perspectives on the goals of school-based social work practice, their daily tasks, and the identification of factors that might improve their efficacy. The major findings of this study suggest that school social workers may have a limited understanding of the concept of multilevel practice and perceive many barriers to more effectively engaging in varying levels of interventions.

This finding chapter will present findings on the following major issues:

- the stated goals SSWs have for their work;

- training for field of school social work

- the daily tasks of school SSWs;

- clinician understanding of multilevel practice;

- multilevel practice interventions employed;

- participants stated perceptions of barriers to employing multilevel practice interventions;

- participants' stated perceptions of barriers to a more effective school social work

    practice.

Goals of SSWs

SSWs interviewed for this study had distinctive views on the broad goals of their work. While responses varied, all participants' responses identified students, rather than the systems that serve them, as the primary target of intervention in their stated goals of their work. More specifically, several participants (n=3) stated that the primary goal of school social work was to help students with emotional difficulties succeed academically. One participant's statement summarized this view:

> I think that the most important goal is getting the students who have emotional issues
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> ready to learn in school… everything else I think falls off of that or, you know, is
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> secondary to that…because if, if you work with somebody and they're not doing well in
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> school, in the end they're not going to be successful. (Participant 5, April 14, 2013)

"Getting students ready to learn" was primarily operationalized by participants in terms of interventions including the following: instilling hope, providing a wide range of need-based mental health services to student, and putting the emotional health of kids first as the primary goals of school social work. Only two social workers explicitly identified goals aimed at systems. One SSW included the school as a whole as primary target for intervention in her inclusion of "prevention" and "awareness" on a school-wide basis as a goal (Participant 3, April 16, 2013). Another participant included the goal of "bridging the gap between poverty and education" (Participant 2, April 23, 2013) in her response suggesting a target for intervention that extends beyond the individual student and the school community. With the exception of these two responses, SSWs goals were framed in terms of targeting students rather than systems.

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Participants emphasized their goals as helping *students* succeed academically rather than helping *schools or systems* better serve the needs of students. However, these stated goals do not unambiguously exclude interventions aimed at broader system change and it may be broader systems work may be embedded in goals of "getting students ready to learn."

Adequacy of Training for School Social Work

All participants reported that their academic training specific to school social work was not adequate for preparing them for their work in schools. Only two participants recalled having any coursework specific to school-based practice. Of these participants, one recalled a course limited to the implementation of bullying programming, rather than a comprehensive course on school social work. Another participant was required to take additional coursework for statewide certification as a school social worker. Neither of these participants felt that these courses were helpful in preparing them for school-based work. These findings suggest that training is both limited and inadequate in preparing them for the day-to-day realities of SSW practice.

Training through placement experiences was reported to be beneficial in preparing SSWs for their roles in schools. Only two participants reported having internships in school-based settings. Both participants reported that these internships were advantageous in better preparing them for the current roles in school. One participant related that his placement supervisor modeled the different roles and tasks school social workers are expected to take on in schools.

> As a school social worker you had to be, you know, all things to all people… teacher might need you to help to talk to a student who had a certain situation; they might need your input on a crisis situation. You might need me to go get that mattress that for somebody, you know? I mean you might be doing—and I do--crossing guard duty. You might be everything. It is about being able to wear so many different hats and I think she

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reinforced the point my dad used to make that you just really need to be flexible.

(Participant 5, April 14, 2013).

This participant speaks to how his supervisor helped prepare him for the lack of task uniformity in his future work as an SSW.

Finally, a reoccurring theme (n=3) regarding training was a "learn as you go" quality of work as a school social worker. One social worker, who had neither coursework nor an internship in a school-setting stated

I just had to figure out, you know, cause we really didn't have any training. They didn't give me a mentor. It was just me working with the principal and her saying you know, I want you to do … I want you to do a counseling program. And, I just had to figure out how to make it happen" (Participant 4, March 25, 2013).

In sum, participants reported very limited formal academic education specific to school social work. Furthermore, while two participants relayed the helpfulness of placements in schools, the messages from supervisors was often reflective of the challenges multiple and varying task for SSWs. Finally, SSWs (n=3) expressed they were often left to establish their own idea of effective practice without support from supervisors or administrators. As a whole, academic training and on-the-job resources appear inadequate to adequately prepare, guide, support and SSWs in their work.

Varying tasks of school social work

Each school social worker interviewed performed a different function in the school(s) in which they worked speaking to lack of standardization in the field. Some daily job tasks included conducting individualized education plan (IEP) meetings for students, classroom-based instruction, crisis intervention, conducting assessments of students, documentation for services,

monitoring student attendance, individual counseling, group counseling, development of prevention programming, collaboration with teachers and administration, and overseeing clubs/activities for students. Individual counseling (n=4) and crisis intervention (n=3) emerged as the most common tasks for clinicians interviewed. While preventative activities such as the development of prevention programming, collaboration with school staff and student groups were included in participants' descriptions of daily tasks, participants emphasized individual-level interventions over systemic interventions in their task descriptions. The amount of tasks and prioritization of tasks also differed for each participant. Some school workers interviewed had a prescribed scope of tasks to perform on a daily basis, while others seemed to have more flexibility in the particular job functions they performed on a specific day. Challenges arising from the demands of crisis work and an elaboration of the diversity of SSW's daily activities are discussed below.

Putting out fires. Some school social workers (n=3) conveyed that crisis work intermittently accounted for a large portion of their daily activities and challenged their ability to accomplish other tasks of importance or perform tasks to their fullest capacity. One participant reported that crisis work often interfered with her ability to work with individual students in groups:

> I think crisis intervention takes up the higher percentage of my daily tasks…but there's times when my group work, you know, individual work often gets canceled or pushed back… group work, you know, should not be one of those things that gets canceled and it does because of crisis intervention and daily things that happen on campus. (Participant 2, April 23, 2013).

Another participant reiterated the challenges to focusing on a distinct task or engaging in longer-term interventions. She reported that

> most of the time it is kind of [sic] we are putting out fires. We just don't have the time to really spend on a case that we should have probably spend on it, just because you do one thing and then you pulled in another direction to do something else" (Participant 6, April 14, 2013).

A third echoed this sentiment; it was difficult for her to deeply focus on a particular school issue or individual student without inevitable disruption from a new crisis that demanded her immediate attention.

"Not your typical social work job." Each school social worker interviewed for this study employed a unique range of interventions and practiced school social work in a was different than the other school social workers interviewed. Two participants noted that they perceived their practice to be significantly uncharacteristic of more typical school social work positions. One participant described her role as a classroom-based teacher:

> So I have a typical class, but I only have 10-11 students at a time, and my job is to get them to be more successful. And so I'm trying to teach them organizational skills, I'm trying to teach them to be more responsible for their job…their education… I do a lot of just tutoring, particularly math tutoring and a do a lot of advocacy for them with their teachers and with their parents. If someone has been absent for 7 or 8 days and I'm writing to their teachers, saying you know, ''Johnny' has missed a lot of your classes, you know, what can I do?' So that's my job now…and I love it… Overall, I feel like in this setting, I can model for them. I can parent them. I can work with them, because I do get the whole picture of how they're doing. (Participant 1, March 26, 2013).

This SSW's current role as a classroom-based instructor diverged drastically from the positions she previously held. She reported that for the previous 20 years, she was employed in what she considered to be a more "typical" school social worker position. In this capacity, her daily tasks were composed of mainly of individual and group work with students. Another school social worker noted that that his practice as a school social worker was perhaps unusual due as his unofficial role as an administrator in his school. Due to the small nature of the school in which the SSW was employed, he occasionally took on the responsibilities of a "vice-principle" figure in handling issues of discipline with students.

While not all participants may have specifically identified their practice as atypical, all SSWs interviewed had very differently defined roles in their school(s). One participant worked with elementary students one day per week and with pre-school students four days a week. Her role with elementary school students was entirely focused on coordinating, facilitating, and documenting IEP meetings with students receiving special education services and their families. In her work with preschool students, she conducted evaluation with caregivers around academic readiness and helped to identify students who may be in need of special supports.

Another participant's most time consuming task in schools involved issues of student truancy at three different elementary schools. She spent substantial time daily on the phone and visiting homes of children's families who had large number of absences in school. In this setting, the social worker worked with the family to emphasize the necessity of school attendance and problem-solve with the family around issues of attendance.

With so many distinct daily activities and tasks reported, it is clear that SSWs do not all serve the same job functions within the schools they serve. When asked to describe their daily tasks, the most participants mentioned crisis intervention and individual counseling. Notably,

both of these task activities can be primarily as individual interventions involving individual students or "quadrant c" interventions using Frey and Dupper's model. Yet, no participant reported *sole* engagement in quadrant c interventions. Further discussion of varying practice activities that constitute multilevel practice are detailed below.

Understanding and Implementation of Multilevel Practice

This section presents findings in three different areas: (a) SSWs expressed understanding of multilevel practice; (b) SSWs expressed receptivity to multilevel practice; and (c) examples provided by SSWs of activities that constitute implementation of multilevel practice. While many participants (n=5) expressed lack of knowledge about the concept of multilevel practice, participants universally expressed receptivity and provided examples of practice activities that extended beyond quadrant c.

Understanding of multilevel practice. Five out of six participants expressed a widespread lack of knowledge about the concept of multilevel practice. The most common response to the question "What is your understanding of the idea of multilevel practice?" was "I don't know." The term "multilevel" was foreign to participants (n=5), but after providing a brief definition and explanation of the term, participants voiced more familiarity with concept of engaging in interventions on all levels of the ecosystem. All participants voiced understanding and knowledge of ecological theory. However, some SSWs appeared to struggle with the idea that the target of intervention could shift from the individual to the broader school culture or community issues. For example, when asked if what ways she perceived her practice to be multilevel, one participant responded: "It's like bare boned multi-level…like there are some kids, where I work with an agency (DCF) and I've worked with the parents" (Participant 3, April 16, 2013). This statement is focused on collaboration with specific agencies/people who serve

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critically impact an individual student's life and the student remains the target of intervention. A more comprehensive definition of multilevel practice would expand to include shifting the identified target of change to school culture, school policies, district policies, community issues or even national issues of education reform.

One participant was able to succinctly summarize the idea of multilevel practice, stating "I would see my job as multi-level practice---with individuals, with groups, with the community. You know, kind of micro, mezzo, macro type practicing" (Participant 2, April 23, 2013). This school social worker was able to clearly delineate how she implemented multilevel practice interventions in her work:

> Well I work with individual students on a daily basis and their families, micro practice
> and I work with communities. You know, connecting them to resources constantly being
> a broker in that way. I am getting community involvement in our school as well like
> having people come out and speak and having--You know advocating for our school in
> the sense that like we need as much support as we can get from community providers and
> then even on the macro level as far as advocacy and things like that, I mean … Taking
> our kids to the legislature to have them advocate for themselves. (Participant, April 23,
> 2013).

Drawing from ecological theory, the participant voiced the different practice activities that were aimed to intervene at micro, mezzo, macro and exo-system. In her position as an SSW she was both willing and able to intervene at all levels of the students' ecological systems. However, as further discussed below, this participant was not unique in her willingness to engage in this kind of multifaceted practice.

Receptivity to multilevel practice. All participants endorsed a desire to incorporate

multilevel interventions into social work practice in schools. Participants pointed to "reaching

out to community agencies" and "creating more preventative programming" as practice choices

that they would like to further integrate in their roles in schools. When asked about SSWs ability

to participate in broader school culture decisions, all SSWs also agreed that this would beneficial

to the school community. However, despite expressed receptivity, SSWs (n=3) also expressed

skepticism that they were positioned to impact boarder issues impacting students in schools:

> Well, I don't know that social workers ever get to have that role…I don't know where
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> they have jobs where they have one of those jobs. Maybe if they end up--which has
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> always been attractive to me-- in working for someone in the state house, drafting
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> legislation… Social workers aren't hired to look at big picture stuff. (Participant 1, March
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> 26, 2013)

This participant's comment regarding not being "hired to look at big picture stuff" may be

indicative of a more general belief among SSWs that their jobs are compartmentalized by the

specific positions which they occupied. Thus, while SSW expressed an understanding of the

concept of multilevel work and willingness to practice in this manner, they may not address

system-level concerns in their work out of a consciousness that this is not part of their job

description. SSWs additional perceived impediments to fuller participation in a wide level of

practice activities will be more fully explored later in this chapter.

Beyond "Quadrant C": Multilevel practice in action. While many (n=5) of the SSWs

interviewed in this study described their role in school as focused around individual practice with

students identified as needing extra support, most SSWs also employed interventions that

targeted broader populations of students, the school climate, school leadership, and the

community beyond the school. This section of the findings will present examples of specific school social work interventions that expand the target and involvement of the intervention beyond the individual student, small groups, or family.

Preventative programming. Participants spoke of their participation and organization of school-wide activities broadly aimed at prevention (n=6). Prevention programming includes interventions that are aimed at the general population of students, rather than focused on high-risk students in need of intervention. Multiple participants (n=3) discussed programming focused on bullying. One participant spoke of the different work she did on bullying campaigns throughout the year:

> Teachers have allowed me to come in and present to certain grade levels— I've presented to every grade level in the middle school— about anti-bullying stuff, online safety, things like that. And then I had a group of students do like a campaign at our school. And they did you know a poster contest and a writing contest. (Participant 2, April 23, 2013).

Another SSW stated that though she is not currently involved in preventative programming at her present position, this was a large part of role in schools in previous years. She spoke in particular about helping to prepare students to transition from elementary school to junior high school. Additionally, she organized high school students to make an educational video about peer pressure that she distributed to the student body to share with their caregivers. Finally, she also spoke about conducting classroom-based relaxation training with students.

Another participant spoke of his leadership in a grade-wide running club as a type of preventative intervention:

> I established a running club. This is year four of the running club. Health was one reason, but the actual primary reason was in springtime when you send 100 kids outside for

recess at the same time, there are going to be a lot of conflicts. Kids that I work with get left out. Kids getting into conflicts and when you take 75 of them—sometimes only 50 depending on the day— but you take 50 to 75 students to go run in a non-competitive activity, we don't get referrals to the office. (Participant 6, April 14, 2013).

Other types of preventative activities mentioned by school social workers included organizing classroom-based lesson around social skills (n=3) and raising the awareness of general mental health issues affecting multiple students with faculty (n=2).

Organizing students towards advocacy and social justice. Two participants spoke about their work with small groups of students around themes of advocacy and oppression. One SSW worked with a group of students to discuss issues of race and discrimination. This group of students then spoke about their personal experiences with discrimination on a panel in front of three different classrooms of students. Another SSW worked with students to learn about house bills that would directly impact them and brought students to the state legislative offices to advocate for those bills.

Working on systems. SSWs also worked on school-wide systems that impacted both individual students and the broader student population (n=3). SSWs worked to help organize a protocol of response involving key school providers to help provide extra-support around problem identified students. This protocol served as a template in helping all school staff to respond in a coherent way with kids involved in acute crisis. Another SSW met monthly with a large group of SSWs in her school district to problem-solve around issues affecting the whole school or district:

We might look at attendance policies for the whole district and look at what sort of things aren't working and what sort of things are working. For instance, one of the biggest

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issues we have is our data manager is not getting the letters out because we can't do our

jobs if the data managers don't get the letters out…that does affect the attendance if she is

not following through. We will talk about things like that or we might look at a specific

mental health issues. We will look at how are things in the mental health field are going.

(Participant 6, 4/14/2013)

Addressing broader community and social issues. Other SSWs also worked to impact

the broader social issues impacting students. One SSW stated that the while she did not

personally engage in this work, the social work department collectively participated in these

tasks. Examples include specific district-wide programming to support homeless students and

teen parents. This SSW also included an example of when she attended a community meeting on

issues that affected her students:

I have actually have gone to some community meetings in the past. There is one project

area that I have worked in on... It is when I had the middle school, but I actually had gone

over there to some of their meetings…we had some issues with children being

unsupervised after school and kind of run around getting in trouble. We know parents

were working and we kind of just talk about that a little bit with the people that were in

that community to see if there was anything that can be done. (Participant 6, April 14,

2013).

Another school social worker saw a need for more programming directed at raising students'

caregiver's sense of empowerment. Through observation, this school worker learned that many

of the student's caregivers, particularly mothers, were not fully literate and this was negatively

impacting parent's sense of power in schools. In response, the SSW is in the process of writing a

grant to implement parent programming aimed at increasing parent empowerment and participation in school programming.

Notwithstanding the fact that many SSW's (n=5) expressed lack of understanding regarding multilevel practice, all participants reported at least limited engagement in practice activities outside of quadrant c. Understanding the perceived barriers to increasing practice activities across all quadrants is critical to increasing SSWs participation in varying practice activities. SSWs perceptions of barriers to multilevel practice are outlined below.

Barriers to Multilevel Practice

Participants were asked about the perceived barriers to increasing their participation in school-wide prevention, leadership, and macro-level activities. SSWs provided many explanations of the perceived barriers to diversifying their practice choices. Issues of personal preference, the need for individual mental health counseling and crisis intervention, job definition, periphery status, placement at multiple school sites, and administrative focus on academic standards were all identified as barriers to fuller engagement of multilevel practice. Furthermore, few school social workers reported insufficient training and professional development opportunities in multilevel practice. All of these issues will be elaborated in greater detail below.

Passion for individual-level work and personal preference. While all participants reported an interest to incorporate multilevel interventions into their practice, SSWs also commonly reported their desire to do increased individual and small group work. This preference for individual and clinical work may be interpreted as a barrier to increasing participation in interventions aimed at larger systems affecting students. Preferences for different types of

multilevel intervention may also affect the choices SSWs make. One school social worker spoke of her preferences:

> I mean realistically you I only have so much time to do my work… advocacy and preventative— like school wide things-- those are two different things. School-wide things I want to do a lot of that. But—advocacy? It's just not my thing. I'm much more into direct work. I don't really like to network and I feel like there's a lot of networking you have to do for that stuff (advocacy) and that's just not my personality. (Participant 3, 4/16/2013)

As reflected in this quote, individual preferences and comfort with various practice activities inevitably have an impact in the frequency in which different interventions are used by SSWs.

Need for mental health counseling, caseloads and crisis intervention. As mentioned in the section outlining the varying tasks of SSWs, crisis intervention work can account for a large percentage of workers' time. Crisis work was particularly mentioned in the context of displacing individual counseling and group work, but also affected ability to work on preventative programming and engage in broader macro-systems work. Some participants also had large caseloads of individual students determined both by special education requirements and administrative referrals, reflecting a high demand for individual work. One participant described her work at high schools: "The three days I'm in high schools I basically do half an hour after half an hour counseling… there's so much need between crisis and counseling, there's so many referrals" (Participant 3, April 16, 2013). Coordinating preventative programming, in the context of a full schedule of counseling appointments and crisis work, was reported to be overwhelming for some participants. Participants reported that there was "not enough time" to do everything— preventative programming, in particular, required coordination with other school staff and

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locating physical space. Planning these events required SSWs to work additional hours and was perceived as overly stressful. Difficulties in planning and coordination were compounded for SSWs that worked at multiple school sites over the course of the week (n=2).

Job description and administrative perspectives. The framing of SSW's job descriptions and administrative expectations of SSW roles in schools was one of the most frequently reported barriers to engagement in multilevel practice (n=5). One participant reported that school leadership's understanding and expectations of her role differed from between her multiple school sites. At the elementary schools she served, there was little flexibility to make practice choices outside of conducting biopsychosocial and educational-readiness assessments of students. Two participants perceived that principals and leadership had a very limited understanding of a SSW's role, training, and skills. These administrators provided little direction to SSWs and SSWs perceived that administrators possessed little knowledge of the day-to-day tasks SSWs performed. One participant reflected, "I think administration--different ones know how much I do. The high schools have no clue what I do…. And I think (the administration), well, I don't think they know everything that I do" (Participant 3, April 16, 2013).

Two participants also reported that administrators believed that SSW's primary purpose was to provide counseling services to students as mandated in their IEP. These participants perceived that SSWs were often included in the budgets of this school primarily for their role as supporting special education students. Some SSWs (n=2) reported that they though their administrators perceived preventative work as a welcome extra-service, rather than as a critical necessity. Another SSW particularly struggled with her primary role as a facilitator of IEP meetings. She saw her job description as one source of her feeling of inefficacy and attempted to work with other SSWs in her district to create a job description that might be more appropriate.

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However, this SSW faced significant administrative pushback during this process and was unable to create a new job description.

Job descriptions and administrative understanding roles also presented a barrier to engagement in discussions around school climate and district policies affecting the boarder student population. One participant stated that there was no room in many schools to do "big picture" thinking:

> We're not hired to do that. We're not paid a salary to do that. And, in like, what context would you do it?...There isn't a place for social workers to do that particularly. Social workers are hired to sort of problem-solve social-emotional issues for kids who have presented as problems in the school…Some schools can't afford people to think big picture. (Participant1, March 26, 2013)

Ancillary role in schools. Participants (n=3) also reported feeling like periphery staff rather than part of the core work of the school:

> I don't know if my school is typical of schools or not, but in my school, teaching faculty are the real core of the faculty. Anyone who isn't teaching—guidance counselors, social workers, nurses--people like that—are peripheral faculty. It's not like that they don't respect you, but you always feel like you're out of the loop a little bit, like you don't really get it. (Participant1, March 26, 2013)

This ancillary position was attributed one participant to the lack of association with any academic department. Furthermore, this marginal status was also associated with a decrease feeling of voice and power within school settings. This marginal status may lead SSWs to be perceived as unessential and therefore contribute to a lack of respect for their perspectives.

Multiple school sites. Both participants working in multiple school sites linked their

ancillary status to barriers in employing multilevel interventions. Barriers associated with

multiple school sites included no standardized space for coordinating services, difficulty

coordinating with other staff, and lack of a feeling of being integrated in the school community.

Both SSWs expressed that their ability to implement multilevel interventions would greatly

increase with the reduction of schools in which they worked.

Administrative focus on academic standards. SSWs (n=3) also mentioned that the

emphasis on academic standards as mandated by state guidelines appeared to force

administrators and teachers to prioritize the academic outcomes over socio-emotional outcomes

for students. Conversely, SSWs spoke of the lack of standards for mental health and SSWs

within a school system. Participants also connected the emphasis on academic standards to

administration's lack of understanding of the importance of mental well-being in raising

academic standards. SSWs may be uniquely positioned to help administration see the importance

of socio-emotional wellness in raising academic outcomes. Yet, SSWs may lack the ability to

introduce these topics into leadership discussions. One participant spoke of both of the obstacles

and importance of joining leadership discussions on integrating mental health in her school:

> I mean real issues get decided at the administrative level and social workers are never
>
> part of that, because that's not what their mandate is. The schools mandate is not
>
> necessarily to make kids to make kids more emotionally intact, their mandate is to get
>
> them to those MCAS scores. I think it's a matter of trying to raise that issue, maybe
>
> through the guidance departments as a real significant part of education. If kids aren't
>
> emotionally functioning well—if we're not creating a culture that fosters education in a
>
> positive way—then no matter what our academics are, we're missing a big part of the

school. I don't know how to get that a part of the academic reality. (Participant 1, March 26, 2013).

Lack of training. As mentioned previously, no participants reported receiving adequate training for their roles in schools. No participants had a comprehensive course specific to school social work or to multilevel practice in schools. One participant recalled specifically that the one course she had on community organizing was an extremely negative experience and that she did not receive further training on other more macro-level interventions. Furthermore, only one participant reported supervision in their job that was conducted by a clinical social worker with experience in schools.

While SSWs identified many perceived barriers to greater participation in multilevel work, they also named many specific recommendations that would improve the perceived effectiveness of their practice. The next section offers a review of these ideas.

Recommendations for More Effective Practice

As the closing question in the interview, participants were asked broadly about the factors that would their practice more effective. This question was general and not specific to the concept of multilevel practice, however some participants (n=3) pointed to changes in school culture as a recommendation for more effective practice. Other suggests for improvement focused on increased supervision (n=2), more standardized requirements for mental health in schools (n=1), placement in only one school site (n=2), and increased staffing of existing programming (n=1). Some of these of these recommendations for more effective practice are elaborated upon below.

Changes in school culture. One participant mentioned that his work as a SSW would be more effective if the teaching culture underwent a paradigm shift to meet the needs of students

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with different learning styles. He saw that way that some staff members expected students to sit quietly and listen for much of the day and that this did not work well for some young students who need more activity for optimal engagement. He spoke of referrals from some teachers for inattentive students where the child was identified as needing a counseling intervention. The SSW held a differing perspective that perhaps the teachers were not fully adept at adapting their teaching style to accommodate for more active students. This participant spoke that having school leadership support teachers to further accommodate to varying student needs, rather than sending kids for individual counseling, would make practice more effective. Another participant spoke to her desire to work more on "big picture" issues around school culture as related to raising academic expectations for students from low-income backgrounds. Finally, a third participant expressed a desire to return to school-based practice that involved individual counseling, group work, and prevention activities as opposed to her current position of facilitating IEP meetings and conducting evaluations.

Increased supervision. Two participants identified the need for improved quality supervision. One SSW stated that her present supervisor was "burnt out" (Participant 2, April 23, 2013) and that she would be more effective with better supervision. Another participant currently reported receiving almost no direct and regular supervision. Notably, a third participant also mentioned earlier in the interview that he had never received supervision from a supervisor with a degree in social work.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

This study is meant to complement the body of existing research regarding SSWs' roles and practice activities in schools. In particular, this study sought to give voice to SSWs' experience in schools as related to their understanding of multilevel practice, experience with implementation of related interventions and their perceptions of the barriers to engagement in multilevel practice. In examining the perspectives of currently practicing SSWs, this study intended to gain a better understanding of the discrepancy between recommended practice ideals and the current reality of SSWs' experiences in school-based settings.

These findings are useful for the education of future SSWs, secondary education policy, practicing SSWs and, most importantly, improving services for students and families in schools. This chapter will review the key themes in the findings of the study and compare the results to previous research through connections to the literature. The study's limitations are also discussed, followed by the implications for this study and suggested areas for future research and exploration.

Discussion of Major Findings

As emerged from participant narratives, the following critical themes will be discussed: (a) the emphasis placed on interventions that target individuals (b) participants' reported understanding of multilevel practice; (c) participant's involvement in systems-oriented interventions; and (d) the perceived barriers to fuller engagement in multilevel practice.

Individual interventions aimed at individual students. When asked to describe their daily tasks, participants most frequently mentioned individual counseling (n=4) and crisis intervention (n=3) as typical activities. As an application of ecological theory, these activities can broadly be classified as microsystem level interventions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) or, alternatively, as quadrant C interventions under Frey and Dupper's (2005) model. The prominence of these practice activities is consistent with past survey research that suggested that SSWs tend to spend the most time on interventions with individual, problem-identified students (Allen-Meares, 1994; Kelley et al., 2010).

Notably, one SSW participant reported her primary task was to serve as a classroom-based-teacher. In this capacity, she instructed small groups of students in organizational skills and served as a mentor. The students enrolled in her class been identified by administrators and classroom teachers as requiring additional support. While this intervention could not be classified as either individual counseling or crisis-oriented interventions, it is aimed at a particular small group of students in need of supplementary support. This type of intervention could also be classified as a quadrant C intervention as it engages a small group and aims to change the individual/psychological factors of those are involved (Frey & Dupper, 2005).

However, use of micro level or quadrant C oriented interventions by participants was not at the complete exclusion of participants' participation in other types of practice activities constituting multilevel practice. Before turning to participants' examples of system-oriented practice, a review of participants' understanding of multilevel practice is provided.

SSWs understanding of multilevel practice. "I don't know" was most common response (n=5) to the question "What is your understanding of multilevel practice?" While this response may be indicative of participants' lack of familiarity with the precise *term* "multilevel

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practice", it was not indicative of a complete lack of knowledge of the *concept.* Participants expressed a familiarity with the ideas behind multilevel practice upon hearing a provided explanation using ecological theory as an organizing construct. However, some participants' understanding of ecological theory focused entirely on involving multiple systems (families, outside providers, and state providers) to facilitate change in an individual child or family rather than a system. Interestingly, the single participant who was able to clearly identify multilevel practice and ecological theory was also engaged in a wide range of practice interventions aimed at individuals and systems. Clancy's (1995) suggested that clinicians' difficulty in understanding the implementation of ecological theory in practice might orient their practice towards more micro-level interventions. While participants' responses gave some credence to this suggestion, the findings of the study did not provide enough data to explicitly connect clinicians' level of understanding of ecological theory to the frequency of use of systems or prevention-oriented interventions.

Previous research had not assessed SSWs understanding of multilevel practice or the implementation of ecological theory. The findings from this study raise important questions about the nature of SSWs' understanding of these terms and how this understanding may be a factor in determining the practice interventions SSWs employ. Further research is needed to more deeply explore this possible link. Yet, as will be discussed in the next section, all participants did name at least limited use of practice interventions outside of quadrant C. This fact points that fully understanding of multilevel practice and ecological theory is not a prerequisite for engagement in multilevel practice.

Engagement in multilevel practice. This study found that SSWs used many different types of interventions aimed at effecting change beyond the individual. Thus while this study

asked, "what are the barriers to multilevel practice?" perhaps a more accurate phrasing might be, "what are the barriers to SSWs *increased* participation in multilevel practice?" This simple rephrasing of the question acknowledges that SSWs are already engaging in system-oriented interventions, just not as frequently and perhaps not with as much acknowledgement, as individual-level interventions.

The study also found that participants engaged in interventions aimed at other types of system change. Examples include participation in discussion on the broader impacts of attendance policies and creating systems for addressing crises. These types of interventions promote change on a school-wide or even district wide basis, as is consistent with the recommendations of the NASW and past literature (Allen-Meares, 1994; Corbin, 2005; Corbin, 2011; Costin, 1975; Frey & Dupper, 2005; Hopson & Lawson, 2011; Kelley, et al., 2010; NASW, 2012; Packard, 2001).

Finally, this study found that SSWs also engaged in interventions that impacted multiple ecologies and could be considered cross-quadrant interventions (Appendix A). This finding is particularly noteworthy as this has finding has not been fully discussed in previous research, which has focused on pushing SSWs to pursue systemic activity as distinct from individually-oriented interventions. However, this study found that SSWS engaged in single interventions that targeted systemic and individual change simultaneously. Social justice programming and parent education programming are two examples of interventions that create change on both the individual and systemic level.

Social justice education. One participant spoke of her leadership in a social justice group for students. In this context, the SSW can be seen as engaging a small group of students with the aim of effecting change on three levels: change in the individual group members,

changes in the school culture, and perhaps changes in the larger exo-system. The student

participants of the social justice group may be personally affected by conversations regarding

experiences of racism and oppression. However, this group also conducted classroom

presentations around issues of social justice for multiple classrooms of their peers, thus aiming

change at a broader segment of the school. In this sense, the group could be considered both a

quadrant C and quadrant D type of intervention.

Parent education. Another participant spoke of her observation of the need for increased

parent empowerment programs and increased assistance to parents regarding literacy. As a

response, she was in the process of writing a grant to create programming around these topics.

One direct target of change may be the individual caregivers who attend this program. However,

it also represents a systemic change in school culture regarding the importance of caregiver

involvement and administrative support for such a program. Again, this intervention could be

considered both a quadrant C and D type of intervention.

The cross-quadrant nature of these interventions speaks to the fluid nature of some SSWs

practice interventions. Some SSWs seem to naturally engage in multilevel practice, targeting

multiple levels of the ecosystem with one intervention. SSWs may benefit from professional

development in helping them to create interventions that serve to promote both individual level

and systems level change. As reported in the findings, SSWs already perform a wide variety of

daily tasks. It may be helpful in training SSWs to help them conceptualize multilevel practice as

a time effective practice that helps them to maximize the impact of the practice decisions.

Barriers to Multilevel Practice As stated in the finding sections, participants perceived

many barriers to fuller engagement in multilevel practice. This section offers a comparison of

this study's critical findings regarding barriers to multilevel practice and the previous literature

on the same topic. In particular, the themes of the demand for individual services, SSWs' perceived ancillary status, and inadequate training will all be discussed.

Demand for individual mental health services and crisis intervention. One perceived barrier to multilevel practice (n=3) was the high demand for individual counseling and necessity for crisis work. This finding may be supportive of previous research that found that SSWs who worked primarily with students without outside mental health services were more likely to engage in individual counseling interventions than SSWs whose students received mental health services (O'Brien, et al., 2011). However, as participants in the present study were not asked about whether their students received mental health counseling, further research is needed to assess whether or not SSWs would support the notion that students' engagement in outside mental health services would increase their ability to engage in varying practice activities. The need for SSWs to provide individual counseling to students receiving special education services may also impact SSWs ability to engage in multilevel practice.

Participants also (n=2) reported that their administrators viewed SSWs' primary function as to provide individual counseling to special education students. SSWs may be restricted in their practice activities due to the necessity of fulfilling this service requirement per administrative direction. This finding is consistent with Frey and Dupper's (2005) assertion that the relationship between social work, individual counseling, and special education may lead social workers to a narrow focus on individual-level intervention.

SSW's ancillary role in schools. Participants' (n=3) perceptions of their ancillary or peripheral status in schools was consistent with other researchers assertions that secondary status may be implicated in SSWs' relative lack of engagement in systems-oriented work within schools (Phillipo and Stone, 2011; Sedlak, 1997). This barrier seemed particularly difficult to

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overcome for participants who worked in multiple school sites (n=2). However, as this research was focused solely on the perceptions of SSWs, it did not address whether these perceptions reflected the viewpoints of school administrators. This study speaks to the need for further research that compares viewpoints of SSWs and administrators and fully assesses how administrators view functions, roles and the skill set of SSWs.

Related to SSWs' perceptions of periphery status, participants also voiced that they did not feel that "big picture" oriented work was really part of their job. In speaking to that perceived barrier, one participant stated, "Well, I don't know that social workers ever get to have that role…I don't know where they have one of those jobs" (Participant 1, March 26, 2013). One possible interpretation of this statement is that it is reflective of both SSWs difficulty conceptualizing their roles as agents of system change and the lack of administrative encouragement for SSWs to participate in systems-change discussions. This sentiment may be indicative of both inadequate training for the field of SSW and administrators lack of knowledge of the potential job tasks for SSWs.

Inadequate adequate training and supervision. Participants universally endorsed that they had experienced inadequate academic preparation for their roles as SSWs. This fits with previous findings from a focus group of SSWs experts that associated insufficient preparation with a lack of SSW participation in school-change efforts (Corbin, 2011). Interestingly, no SSWs reported enrolling in a general course specific to school social work. As no research could be find with data attesting to the percent of practicing SSWs who have academic coursework to SSW, this is an area where there is a need for future research.

Secondly, participants (n=2) particularly identified the need for increased quality supervision. Again, this echoes the findings of previous research (Corbin, 2011) endorsing the

need for increased professional development opportunities. Finally, while two participants described their field placements in school-based settings as beneficial preparation, it would be interesting to more deeply explore how these experiences represented adequate training for systems-oriented worth. The interview questions did not probe deeply into the nature of these placement experiences.

Strengths and Limitations of this Study

Strengths. Previous research has offered both quantitative data and theoretical analysis as to the job functions of SSWs and the perceived barriers to multilevel practice. Yet, only very limited research had given consideration and attention to the narratives of SSWs' field experiences (Corbin, 2011). The major strength of this study was that it focused on the perspectives of practicing SSW and, thus, the analysis was based on the narratives of SSWs actual experience. Giving voice to SSWs perspectives in discussions of multilevel practice is critical as it allows SSWs to actively participate in the shaping of research and discussions that may ultimately impact their work and practice decisions. Additionally, the exploratory nature of this study presented an opportunity to give greater attention to interventions that are not bound to a single clinical quadrant. Finally, this study's finding was largely consistent with prior research on SSW and provides support to prior empirical and theoretical research.

Limitations. This study was limited by issues related to the sample population. First, six participants is a relatively small sample. Findings from such a small sample can not adequately represent the experiences and perspectives of all currently practicing SSWs. If the study had included more participants, it is likely that different perspectives may have been presented and the saliency of themes discussed here may have shifted. In terms of issues of diversity, the recruited sample was mainly white (n=5) and included one participant who identified as

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multiracial. Due to resources and time restrictions, it was not possible to recruit a more diverse sample. It may be that SSWs who self-identify as people of color have different perspectives and experiences regarding their engagement in multilevel practice, as well as the perceived barriers to fuller participation in this kind of practice. The geographic range of the sample may also be limiting. Experiences of SSWs may vary widely by geographic area and significant difference may exist between regions.

Finally, as mentioned in the methodology, a seventh participant was interviewed for this study. However, due to technical difficulties, a transcript of the interview could not be processed for analysis and her interview was excluded from the data for this study. Notably, this participant engaged in a wide variety of systemically oriented interventions and had expressed significantly more training in promoting macro-level change. The inclusion of her experience and perspective in this study may have led to differences in the findings and discussion of this study.

Implications for School Social Work

This study has clear implications for the education of school social workers, practicing school social workers, and school administrators. As this study sought to better understand the barriers to SSWs fuller engagement in multilevel practice, it naturally raises the question: what can be done to increase SSWs engagement in multilevel study? Based on the findings of this study, this section offers three tentative suggestions for lessening the barriers to multilevel practice.

First, SSWs may benefit from the increased availability and quality of coursework specific to school social work. As the field of school social work continues to gain prominence, graduate-training programs may consider adding coursework that address the multilevel basis that constitutes effective practice. Also, courses that already discuss macro practice or

community practice topics may include specific readings and discussion on SSWs involvement in school change as one type of macro practice. Finally, policy course may also consider including issues of education policy as topics in their discussion of legislation that affect the work of social workers.

Secondly, SSWs may benefit from increased professional development programs, with a particular focus on ecological theory, multilevel practice, and supporting SSWs engagement in systemic-oriented interventions. In addition to increased opportunities for professional development specifically oriented to multilevel practice, SSWs may also benefit from further involvement in networks of school-based social workers. The NASW may consider supporting specific programming and conferenced specifically geared towards multilevel school social work practice.

Finally, school administrators may benefit from improved education about the training, skills, and possible tasks of school social workers. The findings of this research suggest that there may be gap between administrators understanding of the capabilities of school social workers and the possibilities for greater SSW participation in school change discussions and interventions. Specifically, school administrators may benefit on professional development on the ecological framework of school social work and consider fully how SSWs can be employed to maximize the positive impact their intervention have for individual students, the school environment, and engagement in the broader community.

These three suggestions represent just a few of the possible applications to be derived from this study; however, further research is warranted to develop targeted strategies for improving SSW practice.

Possible areas of Exploration for Future Research

As mentioned throughout this discussion, this study raised several unanswered questions that may benefit from future research attention and exploration. The following questions may benefit from additional consideration:

1. How do SSWs understand ecological theory? How is SSWs understanding of ecological theory related to the implementation of multilevel practice activities?

2. What are the relationships between increased student participation in outside mental health services and SSW engagement in multilevel practice? If SSWs spent more time on systemic interventions, how would the mental health needs of students be fully addressed?

3. How many practicing SSWs have taken courses specific to work in schools? Is there a difference in practice interventions used by SSWs who have taken coursework specific to school social work and those who have had coursework?

4. How do administrators understand the job functions of SSWs? How do administrators understand the possibilities for SSWs inclusion in school-wide leadership discussions?

5. How can schools provide appropriate supervision to SSWs to guide them in implementation of multilevel practice interventions? What are the incentives for schools providing this level of supervision?

Conclusion

This study provided an opportunity for practicing SSWs to provide narratives of their day-to-day experiences the field. In using SSWs narratives about their practice activities, this study helped to build a deeper understanding about SSWs understanding of multilevel practice and the barriers that may exist to SSWs increased participation in systems-oriented interventions. SSWs jobs are incredibly complex and demanding; listening to SSWs' daily experience provided

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an opening to thinking about changes that may be needed to facilitate greater involvement in multilevel practice.

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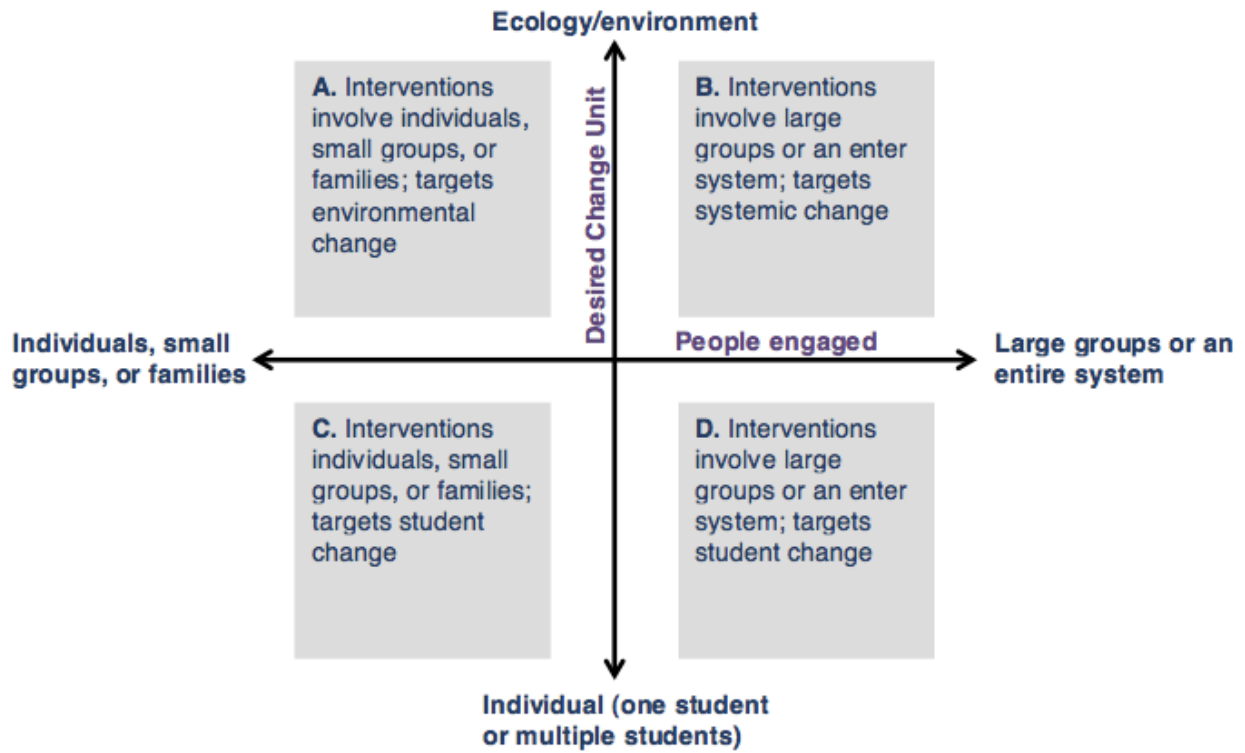**APPENDIX A: Figure 1. The clinical quadrant.**

Figure 1. The clinical quadrant. Reprinted from "A Broader Conceptual Approach to Clinical Practice for the 21st Century", by A.J. Frey and D.R. Dupper, 2005, *Children and Schools, 27*, p. 36.

APPENDIX B: Informed Consent Letter and Form

Dear Participant,

My name is Sarah Wettenstein and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a research study to learn more about the roles and values that school social workers practice in their jobs. I am particularly interested in understanding how school social workers contribute to school-wide reform efforts and work to create broader change in education. Furthermore, I am curious about the potential barriers in school social workers participation in this type of work. The data gathered for this study may be used for publication and presentation.

I am seeking social workers who are employed in a school setting for this study. This includes school social workers serving one or multiple sites in a public school district, employed directly by the public school district or by an outside agency.

I am seeking participants who have at least completed graduate training in Social Work (a Masters in Social Work or higher) and have practiced as a school social worker for at least 6 months. If you decide to participate, I will interview you via an online Skype videoconference for a period of approximately 45 minutes. The interview will be video and audio recorded and later transcribed. If someone other than myself transcribes or analyzes the interview, they will sign a confidentiality agreement first. Participants may be asked to participate in a follow-up Skype interview lasting up to 20 minutes. The purpose of this follow-up Skype interview will be to further clarify or expand upon interview themes for the purpose of more fully understanding the participants' ideas and perspective. Participation in the follow-up interview will be optional and participants may decline to participate. Finally, participants will be asked to fill out a "Participant Information Survey" for the purposes of collection of demographic information. This form is estimated to take 5-10 minutes to complete. Participants will be asked to fill out and submit the Participant Information Survey by email or through the mail **following the submission of this Informed Consent form.**

This research is about your professional practices and roles. The interview may bring out some difficult feelings and frustrations about your job, your work environment, and questions about own sense of efficacy in your job. This may lead to increased anxiety or discomfort for some participants, but the risk is low. However, I expect that many participants will enjoy the opportunity to talk about their work in a low-pressure environment and with a social work graduate student. You may gain satisfaction from simply telling your story. **There will be no monetary compensation for participation in the study.**

Your participation in the study will be kept confidential. I will conduct the video interviews in private. Audio files, video files, and transcripts will be stored electronically and password-protected. If other transcribers process the audio file, they will first sign a confidentiality agreement. Any personal information will be removed from the transcript. When the data is analyzed and presented, results will be shown so that no single person's response will be highlighted by itself. If certain quotes are used to convey a point, any details will be disguised to prevent a reader from deducing your identity. My research advisor will also have access to the

data but only after identifiable information has been removed.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time during your participation. If you do withdraw, all materials and documents pertaining to your participation will be destroyed or deleted. If you decline to participate in the 20 minute follow-up interview your original interview data will remain as part of the study unless you request for it to be destroyed. It will not be possible to withdraw after May 1, 2013. After this final withdrawal date, the report will be written. **If you wish to withdraw, please contact me as soon as possible via email at sswstudy@gmail.com.** If you have any concerns about your rights or any aspect of the study, please contact me or the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at 413-585-7974. Please keep a copy of this informed consent.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Participant signature: _____   Date:_____
    Printed name: _____

Please contact me with any questions or concerns about your rights or any aspect of this study.

Researcher's name and contact information: xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

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APPENDIX C: Recruitment Email

Hello!

My name is Sarah Wettenstein and I am a student at Smith College School for Social Work in Northampton. I am conducting a research study about how school social workers practice and the different types of interventions they use. In particular, I'm interested in looking at the barriers of participation in different kinds of school social work practice.

This study would involve completing a brief demographic survey and a 45-minute video-interview via Skype. Your responses and interview will be kept anonymous and completely confidential. Participants may also be asked to do a 20-minute follow-up interview.

This study is open to those who:

 - have at least graduate-level social work degree (MSW or equivalent); and
- work as social worker in a school-based setting for at least 30 hours a week for at least 6 months; and
-have access to a stable internet connection, a web cam, microphone, and Skype software.

If you meet the requirements listed above and would like to participate, or if you have any questions, please reply to this email xxxx@xxxx.com or call me at xxx-xxx-xxxx (cell).

If you cannot participate, please consider referring colleagues or personal contacts who may be interested – I would be happy to reach out to anyone who you recommend.

I look forward to hearing from you. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Sarah Wettenstein
MSW Candidate, 2013
Smith College School for Social Work

APPENDIX D: Participant Information Survey

1) What is your gender? _____

2) What is your age group?
    [ ] 18-24   [ ] 25-34   [ ] 35-44   [ ] 45-54   [ ] 55-64   [ ] 65 and over

3) How do you identify your race or ethnicity? *(check all that apply)*
    [ ] African-American   [ ] Asian-American/Pacific Islander
    [ ] Latino/a or Hispanic   [ ] Multiracial or mixed-race
    [ ] Native American   [ ] White/Caucasian

4) What professional degrees and credentials do you possess? *(check all that apply)*
    [ ] MSW or equivalent   [ ] Specialization or certificate in school social work
    [ ] LCSW   [ ] Teaching
    [ ] LICSW   [ ] Other: _____

5) How many years have you practiced in your current position? _____ years

6) How many years have you practiced as a social worker in schools? _____ years (or months)

7) How many years have you practiced as a social worker? _____ years (or months)

8) What level of students do you work with? *(check all that apply)*
    [ ] Preschool   [ ] K-5 (elementary)
    [ ] 6-8 (middle/junior high)   [ ] 9-12 (high school)

9) How would you describe the geographic setting of the school(s) where you work?
    [ ] Urban
    [ ] Suburban
    [ ] Rural

10) How many different schools do you work with? _____

11) About how many children make up your average yearly caseload? ____

APPENDIX E: Interview Guide

A. Rapport Building Questions

1. What attracted you to the school social work field?

2. What training did you receive to practice in a school-based setting?

B. Role Tasks/Expectations

3. How would you describe the overall goals of the work you do?

4. What sort of tasks do you do on a daily basis?

> 4a. What are you supposed to do on a daily basis? What is the task that takes up the most time? Are there things that you're required to do that you don't have time to do? Are there are things you wish you could be doing that you don't have time to do? What are some barriers that get in the way of you doing some of the things you wish you could do?

> 4b. Who is your most direct supervisor? What do you think their goals are for your work? How is that the same/different from your own understanding?

> 4c. What about other administrators in the school? What do you think the principal's goals are for you work? How is that the same/different from your own understanding?

C. Multilevel Practice

5. What sorts of work do you do that affects many students at once (for example, an entire grade level of the entire school, school district, ed reform in general)?

> 5a. Do you wish you were doing more of this type of work or do you feel like you're doing just enough?

> 5b. What training prepared you for this type of role?

> 5c. What are some barriers to increasing your participation in this kind of work?

6. In social work literature and in the NASW guidelines, there is a recommendation that urges school social workers to have a "multilevel practice". Multilevel practice is what I'm really interested in hearing more about—it is the focus of my research. What is your understanding of multi-level practice?

> 6a. Do you consider your practice to be multilevel?

> 6b. Does that feel like something that it's important to you?

6.c. What are the barriers that may hinder you from engaging in a multilevel practice?

D. Closing Questions

7. What do you feel would make your work as a school social worker more effective?

8. Thinking about what we're talking about today, and my overall research question looking at multilevel practice…is there anything else that you'd like to add or think I should know?

APPENDIX F: Human Subjects Review Committee Approval Letter
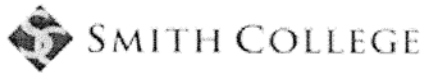
SMITH COLLEGE

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March 6, 2013

Sarah Wettenstein

Dear Sarah,

Thank you for making all the requested changes to your Human Subjects Review application. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project.

Sincerely,

Marsha Kline Pruett, M.S., Ph.D., M.S.L.
Acting Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Kristin Evans, Research Advisor