A Study of School Social Workers' Perceptions of Disruptive School Behaviors and their Role in Response to the Problem

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MASTERS IN SOCIAL WORK THESIS

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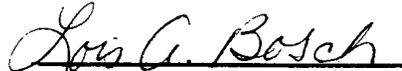
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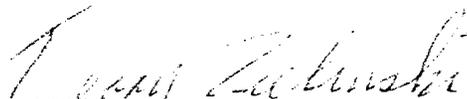
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Chapter One

Introduction

In school it is a child's job to learn and the teacher's job to facilitate this learning. In spite of this assertion it is commonly believed that our children do not learn to their potential. One barrier to learning is the disruptive behavior of the learner or their peers in the classroom. Disruptive behavior is of concern to educators, parents and others due to its strong link with depressed academic achievement (Finn, Pannozzo & Voekl, 1995; Malone, Bonitz & Rickett, 1998). In spite of the long history of this problem, it has recently garnered more attention due to the belief that disruptive behaviors are becoming more serious in nature (Kaufmann & Center, 1992).

In regard to dealing with disruptive behaviors in the schools, much of the literature focuses on how teachers and principals can and do intervene. However, one member of the school staff commonly ignored in this literature is the school social worker. An important question is, why are school social workers omitted from so much of the literature surrounding addressing disruptive behavior? One likely reason for this lack of inclusion lies in the confusion over the role of the school social worker. This confusion is generated from two separate sources. First, the school social worker role has fluctuated greatly over time (Radin, 1989; Staudt & Kerle, 1987). This alone makes it difficult for educators, administrators, researchers and even social workers to understand how school social workers are involved in addressing disruptive school behavior. Second, there is a great discrepancy between how the current literature defines the school social worker's role and what the research shows it actually is. For example, while much

of the literature calls for a more systemic approach from school social workers, research on the school social worker continues to show that they are in a more clinical or casework type role (Alderson, Krishef & Spencer, 1990). Due to these inconsistencies understanding what the role of the school social worker is in regards to disruptive behavior remains difficult.

Therefore, this research attempted to answer two questions. First, how do school social workers perceive the issue of disruptive behavior in the schools? Specifically, how do they define the issue, how serious do they feel it is, etc. Second, what is the role of the school social worker in addressing this issue in the schools?

To answer these questions the researcher surveyed school social workers from the Minnesota School Social Workers Association (MSSWA). The MSSWA is a statewide organization which attempts to address the needs and concerns of school social workers through interacting with other organizations, disseminating research data throughout the state and advocating for the school children of Minnesota. Upon receiving approval from the MSSWA, surveys were mailed out to 75 randomly chosen members to obtain their responses to the aforementioned questions. From those who responded, data were compiled and analyzed in an attempt to develop a clearer understanding of how the school social worker perceives both disruptive behavior and their role in addressing the problem.

Following this introduction are chapters that discuss various areas of this research. The literature review (Chapter 2) examines two separate areas of study. First is the issue of disruptive behavior. Specifically, the review tries understand the what disruptive behavior is, what the consequences for this problem are, theoretical explanations for the

problem, and some of the interventions schools commonly use in addressing this issue. Second is the issue of the school social worker and their role. In examining this role school social work is defined, its history is reviewed, models of school social work practice are reviewed and research on the role of the school social worker is revisited.

This literature review will be followed by a chapter describing the study's research questions and methodology, a chapter presenting and discussing the results from the survey, a chapter addressing the strengths and weaknesses of this research and finally a chapter discussing the implications of the research on the role of the school social worker.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

<u>Disruptive Behavior</u>

The issue of disruptive school behavior is currently an issue that is constantly in the public eye. With recent incidents of severe aggression in schools, particularly surrounding the use of guns, the public remains concerned about the safety of our children in our nation's schools. However, there currently is a debate in the literature surrounding the severity of disruptive behavior. For example, some have asserted that disruptive school behavior is becoming serious and violent in nature (Kaufmann & Center, 1992). Other studies have noted that the media is responsible for creating this violent image of schools, and that in reality school professionals do not feel that disruptive behavior has become more severe (Astor, Behre, Fravil & Wallace, 1997). In addition to being concerned about our school's safety, there is also a general concern in the public eye about less lethal incidents of disruptive behavior in the schools. In fact, for the last five years it has been reported that the general public reports a general "lack of discipline" as one of the most serious problems affecting our public schools (Elam & Rose, 1995; Elam, Rose & Gallup, 1994, 1996; Rose & Gallup, 1998, 1999; Rose, Gallup & Elam, 1997).

While it is important to note that many people are currently concerned about disruptive school behavior it also remains important to remember that disruptive school behavior has a long history (Nichols, Ludwin & Iadicola, 1999; Radin, 1988). Throughout this history it has been shown that disruptive behaviors in the classroom are strongly associated with lower academic achievement of students in the classroom (Finn,

Pannozzo & Voekl, 1995; Malone, Bonitz & Rickett, 1998). In addition, disruptive

student behavior is a serious source of stress for teachers, which in turn hinders their

ability to teach and the student's ability to learn (Hartzell & Petrie, 1992). To counteract

these negative effects schools have constantly tried to intervene and remedy this problem.

In spite of these efforts already made, disruptive behavior in our schools exists and

therefore continues to warrant the attention of those in our schools and communities.

What is disruptive behavior?

To effectively deal with a problem it makes sense that one should understand

what the problem is. However, in dealing with disruptive school behavior it is difficult to

follow this line of advice. This difficulty arises from the fact that disruptive behavior can

be defined in numerous ways (Johnson, 1989). Disruptive behavior could be something

as non-threatening as the child who won't stay in his or her seat to something as serious

as the child who becomes physically aggressive towards peers. In spite of the difficulty

in defining this concept, the current body of literature has identified three common ways

of defining it. First, Johnson (1989) points out that disruptive behavior is often defined in

clinical terms. Children who exhibit disruptive behaviors are much more likely to be

diagnosed with disorders such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or

Oppositional Defiant Disorder than their non-disruptive peers (August, Realmuto,

McDonald III, Nugent & Crosby, 1996). With this approach the disruptive behavior is

viewed as part of the disorder the child is suffering from and is, therefore, described as a

disorder rather than as a willful act. Second, as schools become increasingly strict in how

they deal with behaviors it has become more common to see disruptive behavior defined

in legal terms (Gast & Nelson, 1977). An example of this would be how certain school

behaviors are now viewed as a legal transgression, such as sexual harassment, assault, etc (Smith, Morrow & Gray, 1999). Third, a behavior, which in everyday life would not be a problem, could be viewed as disruptive in a school setting (Malone, Bonitz & Rickett, 1998). Examples of these type of behaviors would be the child who has difficulty attending to one subject, the child who has difficulty standing in line with peers, or maybe the child who has difficulty using a quiet voice indoors and for that reason is viewed as disruptive. The point is that there are numerous behaviors a child can exhibit, which in everyday life are not problematic but when placed in the more structured environment of school can cause difficulty for the child and his or her classmates.

Kaufmann and Center (1992) took a different approach in defining disruptive behavior. Rather than trying to find one overall definition of disruptive behavior, they attempted to find out what specific behaviors were being seen in the schools that were problematic or disruptive. To answer this question they surveyed 500 randomly selected secondary school principals in the state of Georgia. In this survey they asked principals to state the five disruptive behaviors seen in their schools which were the most common and then the five behaviors which were most serious. From the 292 questionnaires returned they reported that the five most commonly cited disruptive behaviors were tardiness, defiance of authority, fighting, and behavior problems on the bus and lastly what they termed disruptive behavior. When asked which behaviors were the most serious these principals reported fighting, disruptive school behavior, defiance of authority, behavior problems on the bus and the use of drugs and alcohol.

This study points out that there are a wide variety of behaviors that concern principals and school staff (Kaufmann & Center, 1992). Due to this variety of behaviors

this research only gives us a beginning understanding of what types of behaviors are seen in the schools as opposed to one universal definition of disruptive behavior. There are several strengths to this research such as the random selection of subjects, which in turn leads to a greater generalizability of their findings (Rubin & Babbie, 1997). In addition, of the surveys sent out a high number were returned (58%) which increases the likelihood of their results being generalizable to the subject population (Rubin & Babbie, 1997). However, there a limitation to this study lies in its reliance on only choosing subjects working in the secondary schools, which makes it impossible to generalize these findings beyond students in secondary schools.

Gerdes and Benson (1995) conducted a study to find out what were the most significant problems faced by an inner city school. To answer this question they used a nominal group process to identify the most significant problems of the students and the faculty. A pre-kindergarten through grade 9 inner city school was selected as the setting for this study. From this school they took a stratified random sample of the students and faculty and put them into groups of seven or fewer. Each group was then asked to decide what was the most serious problem currently facing the school. All student groups reported student misbehavior as one of the most serious problems facing the school. These students described student misbehavior as using foul language, being disrespectful to teachers and acting up in class. Other problems cited were fighting, pregnancy, drugs and so on. The most disturbing from the student groups was that all reported feeling unsafe in school. The faculty groups also identified behavior problems as a major problem facing the school; however, in addition to this they identified more conceptual problems than did the students. For example, the teachers cited low parental support,

lack of student motivation, community isolation and low student self esteem as serious problems facing the school. While there were differences in what the groups reported, all identified that student misbehavior towards adult authority was a significant problem facing the school. Sadly, both faculty and students reported feeling that they were powerless to remedy the situation.

Gerdes and Benson (1995) do not specifically define what disruptive behavior is, but they do point out that student misbehavior and not adhering to adult rules is a significant problem in this school and possibly other inner city schools. Some strengths of this research are the use of a randomly selected sample and their open-ended inquiry into the beliefs of the subjects on this topic. This technique of obtaining a sample makes it more likely that the results are representative of the the entire subject population (Rubin & Babbie, 1997) and by using an open-ended approach the researchers were able to obtain a more in depth analysis of what problems were present in this school. Some limitations of this research were that the subjects were all from one inner city school, which makes it difficult to transfer these results to other settings. In addition, all subjects in the study were African American, which makes it difficult to know if the findings are applicable to schools of different racial backgrounds.

From these studies two assumptions can be made. First, it remains difficult to find one common definition of disruptive school behavior. Rather, it seems appropriate that in understanding what disruptive behavior is one should look to the individual school, staff or educational community to see what behaviors they are currently witnessing. Second, in spite of a lack of general agreement as to what disruptive school

behaviors is, all of those involved identify it as being problematic to the academic, social and emotional growth of students in our schools.

Theoretical explanations for disruptive behavior

In reviewing the literature on the subject, Johnson (1989) identifies five theories or models currently used to understand the origins of disruptive student behavior. The first theory is identified as psychodynamic theory. This theory postulates that the individual's behavior, is driven by the individual's unconscious thoughts and desires (Ashford, Lecroy & Lortie, 1997). Therefore, in the case of the acting out child, his behavior is guided by unconscious conflicts or desires in his mind.

The second theory used to explain disruptive behavior is commonly referred to as one aspect of behaviorism. Behaviorism, which was developed from the work of John Watson, states that behavior is determined by what the individual learns or experiences from his surroundings (Ashford, Lecroy & Lortie, 1997). From this theory B.F. Skinner developed his theory that behavior of the individual is formed through the responses of his environment, whether positive or negative (Justen & Howerton, 1993). So in the case of the child displaying disruptive behaviors it is believed that his behavior originated from feedback he has received from his environment. Therefore, to change this behavior one must change the responses that the child receives for his behavior to encourage a behavior change.

Family systems theory describes problematic behaviors as results of interactions between the individual and his or her family system (Ashford, Lecroy & Lortie, 1997). In dealing with the disruptive child the intervention often does not focus on the child's behavior, rather it will focus on intervening somehow in the family system.

The fourth framework Johnson (1989) cites is actually a model rather than a theory. This model is commonly referred to as the medical or biological model. In this model the underlying cause or reason for the child's predisposition to disruptive behavior lies in biology. Therefore, with this model interventions often include the use of medications aimed at altering behavior (Johnson, 1989).

The fifth framework or theory is called ecological systems theory. One who follows this theoretical base believes that the in social work practice the individual needs to be viewed along with their surrounding systems. Therefore, in the case of the disruptive child, his behavior can be influenced by one or many of his surrounding systems, while at the same time the child reciprocally influences or acts on those systems around him or her (Ashford, Lecroy & Lortie, 1997; Bronfennbrenner, 1977). With this framework in mind, one can intervene in numerous different social systems to address the behavior of the individual child. This creates the possibility that numerous interventions could be used.

In addition to Johnson (1989), others have identified all or most of these theoretical frameworks as underlying explanations of disruptive behavior (Hollin, 1993). Even though the literature repeatedly identifies these underlying causes it is important to also examine the research around this area. Malone, Bonitz and Rickett (1998) did one such inquiry into the underlying causes of disruptive behavior. In their study 3800 non-randomly selected subjects were surveyed and asked what they believed were the underlying causes of disruptive behavior. From the 3800 questionnaires sent out, 1866 teachers chose to participate. From those questionnaires returned it was apparent that these teachers felt there were numerous causes of disruptive behavior. Interestingly,

while responses varied, the top 10 causes included four out of five of Johnson's theoretical explanations. For example, causes these respondents identified were: student's lack of social skills (Behavioral), student's poor home life (Family Systems), lack of administrative school support (Ecological Systems), inconsistent teacher discipline (Behavioral) and physical problems of children (Biological or Medical).

The findings of Malone, Bonitz and Rickett (1998) lend support to the literature's assertion that there are numerous theoretical explanations for disruptive behavior. A strength of this research lies in the large number subjects who chose to participate which makes it more likely that the results are representative of the subject population. A limitation of this study arises from the use of only teachers as subjects in exploring this topic. This is problematic due to the assertion of Jones (1993) that teachers are not well trained in understanding human behavior, and in this case student misbehavior. Therefore, it would appropriate for further research to obtain viewpoints of those school staff who are more appropriately trained in uderstanding human behaviors, such as school social workers.

From this research there appears to be a common belief that there are numerous causes or influences in child's disruptive behavior. This is somewhat problematic in that it is hard to always know what manner of intervention will work with the individual child. It is this uncertainty which has lead to the numerous interventions developed through the history of dealing with disruptive school behavior.

Interventions with disruptive behavior

In dealing with disruptive behavior, there is a long and varied history of interventions used (Nichols, Ludwig & Iadicola, 1999; Radin, 1988). From this long

history Butchart (1998) identifies four different phases of interventions aimed at combating disruptive behavior. As these phases are presented it would appear that they proceed in chronological order. This is true that each originated in different periods of time. However, simply because a new phase began does not mean that a past phase disappeared. In fact, at this time interventions from all phases are still used in schools. Whether a school chooses to use interventions from one or all phases depends on the overall policy and beliefs surrounding school discipline. Therefore, phase one is the phase of corporal punishment. In this phase disruptive behavior was commonly dealt with through the use of physical violence toward the offending child. This came in the form of spanking, slapping and so forth. This phase, in particular, has a long history but is now viewed by many as ineffective and inhumane (Radin, 1988).

Phase two is called child-centered instruction. In this phase efforts were made to gear the curriculum of the school towards the interests of the individual child. The belief behind this approach was that if the child dictated what and/or how he was learning, his interest in learning would remain high. Subsequently, this high interest in learning would lead to fewer incidents of disruptive behavior. In its purest sense, the literature does not show this idea as being commonly used presently when intervening with disruptive behavior. However, a core belief behind this approach is the use of empowering the student. This idea of empowerment is currently seen in interventions such as peer mediation along with other student lead interventions in dealing with disruptive behavior (Cahoon, 1988; Ikram & Bratlien, 1994).

Phase three is called the prize, reward and demerit phase. The belief in this phase of interventions was that a child's behavior is shaped by the consequence following it. It

was during this phase that Behavior Modification began to be used and garnered strong support from the teachers using this approach (Charles, 1985).

Phase four is called the mental hygiene period. During this phase misbehavior started to be viewed upon from a mental health standpoint. Disruptive behavior was no longer looked at as a willful act of disobedience but rather a disorder from which the child was suffering (Johnson, 1989). Subsequently, this approach lead to the increase of clinical services used in the schools, which came primarily from social workers (Fisher, 1988).

Similar to Butchart (1998), the Center for Mental Health in Schools (1997) conducted a review of the literature to look at the types of interventions used when dealing with disruptive behavior. However, unlike Butchart (1998), the Center for Mental Health in Schools categorized interventions used in terms of "when" they were initiated. From this they reported three different general types of interventions used in the schools. First, there were those categorized as primary interventions. These were interventions that were initiated before the disruptive behavior began in attempts to prevent the misbehavior from occurring. These interventions are not commonly seen in programs where efforts are being made to develop school wide initiatives to prevent disruptive behavior in the general population (Lewis & Sugai, 1999; Nelson, Crabtree, Marchland-Martella & Martella, 1998).

Second, there were those interventions categorized as secondary interventions. These are those which are initiated during the disruptive behavior. Therefore, their purpose is to deescalate and redirect the disruptive child toward more positive behaviors.

Common examples of these are peer mediation or timeout from the child's reinforcing environment (Turner & Watson, 1999).

Third, there were those interventions categorized as tertiary interventions. These are interventions that are initiated after the disruptive behavior has occurred in the hopes that it will discourage the child from displaying behavior again. Common examples of these interventions are suspension, expulsion or after school detention (Bock, Tapscott & Savner, 1998).

If anything, the literature shows that since there a wide variety of theories explaining disruptive behavior, it is logical that there would be a large number of interventions used to combat these behaviors. While reviewing these various theories each showed or at least claimed that their intervention was successful. Therefore, it remains unclear which interventions are preferred among school staff using them.

A recurring theme from this literature review is that when one is inquiring about disruptive behavior, its causes, interventions and so forth, both teachers and administrators are the professionals most commonly sought out as experts. This is interesting due to the fact that neither teachers or administrators are trained extensively on understanding human behavior (Jones, 1993). Whereas, in even the most beginning social work text, the social work student is asked to understand the behavior of the individual in the context of the environment in which they live (Ashford, Lecroy & Lortie, 1997). In fact, throughout the literature social workers are only mentioned when discussing interventions related to mental health services and special education. This lack of involving the perspectives of social workers in the discussion of disruptive behavior leads us to one obvious question. If the social worker is not looked on as the

expert on understanding and dealing with disruptive behavior in the schools, what then is the social worker's role? The next section of this review will then focus on the school social worker by reviewing its history, models of practice and research on the role of the school social worker.

<div align="center">School Social Work</div>

What is school social work? Much like disruptive behavior, school social work is an illusive term. In fact, Staudt and Kerle (1987) claim that what a school social worker is and does varies greatly depending on the setting in which he or she works. Therefore, to get a general understanding of what school social work it is helpful to first know what social work is. Hepworth, Rooney & Larsen (1997) describe social work as a helping profession which is dedicated to improving the social functioning of its clients by assisting them in accomplishing tasks, reducing their stress level and connecting them with community resources. Therefore, one could assume that the mission of the school social worker would be the same but that the practice would be in a school. However, one thing that makes school social workers different is that they are operating in a setting that may have a different mission than their own. So in this case the purpose of the social worker may be secondary to that of the school. In addition to this confusion over what school social work is, Meares (1977) states that what a social worker does should change over time with the needs of the school and students. Therefore, both the method and type of services a school social worker provides can vary greatly over time. The transitory definition of school social work is most apparent when reviewing school social work's history.

94-142. This leaves little time for these school social workers to focus on activities that will spur on system wide change in their schools and communities.

It is obvious that school social work has a long and varied history. Throughout this history, school, society and social workers have identified different needs in the schools and therefore different models of school social work. This next section will review some of the research done investigating the various roles of the school social worker.

Research on social work role

A theory can dictate how social workers should practice their craft, but there are many other factors that influence their actual day to day activities. For example, mandates such as PL 94-142 (Alderson, Krishef & Spencer, 1990), needs of specific schools and demands of school administrators can all affect what an actual school social worker does in a day. Therefore, how does the issue of disruptive behavior affect the day to day role of the school social worker? Currently there is little to no research examining the role of the school social worker in regard to disruptive behavior. However, a great deal of work has been done in investigating and explaining the basic or general role of the school social worker. For example, Meares (1977) conducted a study to determine what were common tasks of a school social worker. To determine these tasks, they chose to mail surveys to 832 randomly selected social workers across the country. From the 832 surveys sent out, 269 (32%) were returned and then analyzed. In this survey there was a list of school social work activities from which the subjects could choose the tasks that best represented what they did and what was important in school social work. This list was developed in an earlier study by Costin (1969), that also attempted to inquire about

the common tasks of school social work. Upon analyzing the data, Meares (1977) found

that most of the tasks described as important were those which placed the school social

worker in the role of the home-school-community liaison. However, while these were

labeled important most respondents agreed that for whatever reasons the focus of the

school social worker's task remained on serving the individual child.

This study lends support to the assertion of the previous literature, that while there

is a push for school social workers to act more systemically the crux of their work

remains with the individual. A strength of this study lies in the random selection of the

subjects, which makes it more likely that sample chosen is representative of the larger

subject population (Rubin & Babbie, 1997). However, due to the very low response rate

of those invited to be in the study, this sampling issue questions whether the findings are

representative of the larger sample. In addition, in analyzing their data only those

surveys completed by masters level social workers were taken into account. By selecting

to accept only responses from masters level social workers the researcher eliminated a

wealth of data they could have obtained from those bachelors level social workers who

gave their opinions on what were common tasks of the school social worker.

Staudt (1991) conducted a study that attempted to understand what the

perceptions were of special education teachers, principals and school social workers in

regard to the frequency of school social work tasks. To determine this Staudt chose to

administer a questionnaire to all principals, special education teachers and school social

workers in an Iowa school district. This sample consisted of 32 principals, 989 special

education teachers and 9 school social workers. Upon agreeing to participate, these

subjects then were asked to choose from 19 different social work services and comment

on how frequently they see them in their schools. From this inquiry Staudt claims that the most frequent tasks were those which fit into the casework model. Working with individual students, working in special education and assessing those special education children were some of the most common tasks cited. Again this focus was found in spite of social work literature's call for school social workers to develop more systemic approach or focus.

This study (Staudt, 1991) supports the assertion that school social work activities continue to fit into a Casework model. A strength of this study was that to answer their questions several different types of professionals were sought out as subjects. Due to this wide variety of subjects it is likely that a more in depth picture of typical social work tasks was obtained.

Alderson, Krishef and Spencer (1990) conducted a study that attempted to describe the role of the school social worker after the implementation of PL 94-142. To study this subject they surveyed 767 randomly selected school social workers from the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). From these 767 who received surveys, 327 (43%) completed them, returned them and agreed to participate in the study. Upon analyzing the data it was found that while these respondents felt the school-home liaison model was important, the vast majority of their work remained clinical or in the casework model. In addition, much of this clinical work originated from their need to fulfill tasks mandated by PL 94-142. In fact, these respondents reported that almost three-fourths of their time was spent on implementing PL 94-142. Therefore, it is apparent that for this sample, their training and/or belief systems push them towards taking on a more school-home liaison role while demands of their job dictate something else.

This study lends support to the assertion that school social workers continue to operate in the Casework model. In addition, this research postulates that a major reason for this focus is PL 94-142 and the demands it places on school social workers. However, in choosing the subjects for this study these researchers obtained a sample through a list of school social workers that were members of the NASW. This did give the research a sample that covered a larger cross section of the whole country; however in doing this it excluded any school social worker that chose not to be a member of the NASW. By excluding this group it is possible the results were not as representative of the whole population as desired.

In looking at school social work's history, theoretical base and available research, what can be said about the role of the school social worker? First, it is obvious that the role of the school social worker is something that varies over time. As with any type of social work, services given depend on what services are needed in the host setting. Therefore, it is safe to assume that as our schools change, the role of the school social worker will do likewise. Second, when the role of the school social worker evolves this may take a significant period of time. This slow change would then account for why, in spite of the literature's long term call for a systemic approach to school social work, the casework model persists. Third, while the literature and research tries to answer what the school social worker does and should do, it answers the question in general terms. This is likely due to the fact that by definition social work, and subsequently school social work is a very broad profession (Constable & Montgomery, 1985). This would make sense since social workers are trained in a variety of areas including working with individuals, developing policies, conducting research, advocating for oppressed groups and so forth

(Hepworth, Rooney & Larsen, 1997). Therefore, as school social workers and our schools approach new trends and changes it would be wise to reexamine the role of school social worker and determine how the social workers' skills can be best utilized.

Key Findings and Needed Research

In developing research questions from this review it is important to summarize some of the key findings. To begin with, disruptive behavior in schools has a long history. With this long history comes a wide variety of theories explaining its origin as well as interventions used in addressing the firm. First, it shows difficulty in defining what exactly these are these behaviors. Even so it is commonly agreed on that disruptive behavior is detrimental to both the students and the teachers (Malone, Bonitz & Rickett, 1998). Second, the literature states that the nature of disruptive behaviors may be changing to including more physically and verbally aggressive behavior. Therefore, it is important to verify whether or not these changes are occurring and if so rethink how this topic is addressed in our schools.

The literature on school social work shows that like social work in general the profession is broad and varies dependent on the setting. If there is any one description of school social work that would fit one could point out that clinical service appears to still be the cornerstone of social work practice. However, it is also asserted that the role of the school social worker often changes dependent on the needs of the students and or new schools. This then poses some interesting research questions for this study. As disruptive behavior in schools changes and possibly becomes more serious, what is the role of the school social worker in addressing this problem? Specifically, in regards to disruptive behavior how do school social workers describe their role and what would they

like it to be? Understanding this role is important for three reasons. First, as disruptive behaviors change it is important to redefine how schools in general will address the problem, and this of course includes social workers. Second, clarifying this role enhances communication between school social workers and educators (Staudt & Kerle, 1987). Third, by defining the school social work role clearly, it allows educators to see in concrete terms how school social workers will address this problem. In addition, this will allow educators to give school social workers input on how they are functioning in their specific role. In summary, it is important to remember that the focus of school social work is dependent upon the need of the population served (Meares, 1977). Therefore, research is needed to make sure that the profession is in fact changing along with our student's needs.

Chapter Three

Methodology

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore how school social workers perceive disruptive school behavior and to determine how they view or describe their role in regards to this issue. In exploring this topic two specific research questions will be addressed.

Research question one asks, **how do school social workers perceive the problem of disruptive behavior in the schools?** Some secondary questions arising from this line of research aim to ascertain whether school social workers feel disruptive behavior is a problem, what specific behaviors school social workers feel are disruptive and whether this problem is significant enough to warrant changing how schools are addressing the issue. In answering these questions we can explore the perceptions of social workers on this subject and see if these perceptions compare to those of the research reviewed.

Research question two asks, **what is the role of the school social worker in regard disruptive school behavior?** This leads us to then review what the general role of a school social worker is, how this relates to managing disruptive behavior, and whether they feel changes in their role are warranted. In answering these questions we will obtain a glimpse of how school social workers view their role in regard to disruptive behavior and determine whether this role is sufficient in addressing this issue.

Research Design

The purpose of this research is to answer the research questions so as to determine what are school social worker perceptions of disruptive behavior and to understand the role of these social workers in the schools. To answer these questions, a self-administered survey was mailed out to 75 randomly chosen members of the Minnesota School Social Work Association in attempts to gather their perceptions on the questions posed. From those subjects who chose to respond, their data were compiled and analyzed in order to answer the previously stated research questions.

Units of Analysis/Important Concepts

The unit of analysis for this study was the individual school social worker. Therefore in this study, the responses of these individual units of analysis were compiled in an effort to generalize their findings to the entire group.

For this research there are two concepts which warrant defining. First, it is important to ask what is a school social worker? For this research the label, school social worker, will refer to anyone who is a current member of the MSSWA and also identifies him or herself as a school social worker. Second, it is important to ask what is disruptive school behavior? In examining the literature it was shown that what one feels is disruptive behavior can vary greatly (Johnson, 1989). Therefore, for the purposes of this study disruptive behavior will be defined as any behavior or behaviors perpetrated by students which are detrimental to their or peers' academic and/or social growth in school.

Characteristics of Study Population

The subjects used in this study were school social workers who were also members of the Minnesota School Social Work Association (MSSWA). The Minnesota

School Social Work Association is a statewide association that is dedicated to improving the school social work profession and the well being of their clients. The organization hopes to do this through a number of different initiatives such as networking with other professionals/organizations, providing leadership to those in the profession, gathering data and disseminating information as well as advocating for children (Minnesota School Social Work Association, 1999). This organization has ten regions throughout the state, however sixty percent of its members work in the Greater Metro area. The school social workers in this organization hold licenses from both the Board of Social Work and the Board of Teaching. Therefore, it was these individual members who formed the population base from which individual research subjects were randomly chosen.

To obtain a sample from this population several steps were made. First, to gain access to this population permission was sought out and granted by Ranna Hansen Le Voir, Corresponding Secretary of the MSSWA as shown in Appendix A. Upon her approval, 75 subjects were randomly selected from a list of current MSSWA members. Those subjects were then invited to become participants in this research. From those subjects who responded, their responses were used to answer the questions posed by the research.

Development of Questionnaire

The measure used for this study was developed and written by the researcher performing this study (See Appendix B). In developing this questionnaire, it was critiqued and reviewed by the researcher's thesis advisor. The general purpose behind the measure was to address the 2 research questions. First, what are school social worker perceptions of disruptive school behaviors? Second, how do school social workers define

their role as school social workers in relation to this problem of disruptive school behaviors?

To measure the perceptions of school social workers in regard to disruptive behavior and their roles, both quantitative and qualitative measures were used. In the quantitative portion of this measure two levels of measurement were used, nominal and ordinal. Nominal measures were used with three out of the seventeen total questions in the survey. These nominal measures focused on obtaining basic demographic information from the study subjects. Ordinal measures were used in six out of the seventeen total questions. A Likert type scale was used in these questions to measure how strongly the subjects agree or disagree with several statements about the nature of disruptive behavior.

The next section of measures was qualitative in nature. Eight out of seventeen questions were open-ended and aimed to obtain several types of information. The information sought by these questions ranged from the subject's definitions of disruptive behavior to the descriptions of their roles as school social workers. These qualitative questions aimed to obtain more in depth information about this subject, which the previous quantitative measures could not ascertain.

Administering of Questionnaire

As discussed in the section describing the study population, this measure was given to randomly selected members of the Minnesota School Social Work Association. Upon obtaining this random sample, each subject was mailed out a questionnaire along with a letter of consent (Appendix C). In this letter of consent the subjects were asked to participate while also given a basic description of the research and their part in it. At this

time the subjects could decide whether or not they chose to participate in the study. If they chose to participate, they were asked to mail back their completed questionnaire in the provided self-addressed, stamped envelope. Conversely, if they chose not to participate they simply would not respond to the questionnaire.

<div align="center">Validity and Reliability of Measure</div>

Survey research, such as used in this study, tends to be low in validity (Rubin & Babbie, 1997). This problem with survey validity often arises due to how respondents' answers are typically collected into artificial categories. For example, in this research subjects are asked to give their perceptions on the overall seriousness of disruptive schools behavior. However, in giving these perceptions they are asked to put them into categories of strongly agree, disagree, etc. However, in reality the subjects' responses rarely fit easily into one of these measurable categories.

However, to combat the problems of validity that come with survey research, this measure also included several open ended or qualitative measures. Using these qualitative measures can then help offset some of the weaknesses of survey research (Rubin & Babbie, 1997). For example, in this questionnaire the qualitative questions give the subjects the opportunity to explain and support their responses to the quantitative questions. By combining these techniques the measure is able to obtain a fuller and more valid sense of how the respondents perceive these topics.

Unlike with validity, survey research tends to be quite high in reliability (Rubin & Babbie, 1997). Similar to this study, this type of research shows high reliability largely due to every participant being given a standard questionnaire format.

Data Analysis

This questionnaire utilized three different types of measures, which allowed for the data to be analyzed in different ways. To explain how to analyze data collected by this measure, it is most practical to review each type of measure individually and examine the type of analysis used. The study begins with nominal measures that seek to obtain demographic information about the subjects. To analyze this information, a frequency distribution was used to describe how the subjects responded to these measures. In analyzing the ordinal data, a frequency distribution was again used to show how the subjects responded to the numerous inquiries. Lastly, to analyze the open-ended questions, content analysis techniques were used to organize and analyze the data given by the study subjects on this topic. The analysis was performed by the researcher and a fellow MSW student to insure interrater reliability. Upon analyzing and compiling all of this data they were combined together to answer the questions posed by the research.

Protection of Human Subjects

In this study there is little need for the protection of human subjects due to the low risk nature of the study. Subjects choosing to take part in the study were asked to share their professional opinions on a non-intrusive, non-threatening issue. In addition, the anonymity of the subjects ensures that they will not be affected in the workplace as a result of sharing their opinions. The potential subjects were asked to participate in the research, but were given the option of not responding if they had any reservations about participating. Lastly, this research project was presented to the Augsburg Institutional Review Board and was given approval on February 6th 2000 (Appendix D).

Chapter Four

Findings

Of the 75 surveys sent out, 38 were returned by the study subjects, a 51 percent

return rate. However, two of those questionnaires returned were unusable due to the

respondents no longer being active school social workers. For the purposes of data

analysis, 36 questionnaires were usable, which represents a return rate of 48 percent.

Demographics

Questions 1-4 in the questionnaire used for this study were aimed at collecting

basic demographic information about those who chose to be study participants. The

requested demographic information centers on describing the setting and type of school

in which the study participant works. In addition, it seeks to describe the study

participant's level of experience as a school social worker.

Level of School

The respondents indicated the level of school/s in which they currently work. In

responding they were given the options of elementary school, junior high/middle school,

high school or other. Of the thirty-six questionnaires received, thirty-four answered this

question while two responses were missing. Fourteen respondents (41.2%) stated that

they currently worked in elementary schools. Three respondents (8.8%) stated that they

currently worked in a junior high or middle school. Six respondents (17.6%) stated that

they currently worked in a senior high school. The remaining eleven respondents

(32.4%) chose the "other" category in stating what level of school they worked in. Of

those eleven who chose "other" six stated they worked in K-12 schools, and the

remaining five stated they were in settings such as alternative schools, early childhood programs or level 5 programs.

Type of School Setting

The respondents indicated whether they worked in a public or a private school. Of the thirty-six questionnaires returned, thirty-four answered this question while two responses were missing. Thirty-three respondents (97.1%) stated that they currently worked in a public school. The remaining one respondent (2.9%) stated that he/she currently worked in a private school.

In addition, the respondents indicated the type of geographical setting in which they currently worked. In describing the setting of their school they were given the options of urban, suburban or a rural school area. Of the 36 questionnaires returned, 35 answered this question while one response was missing. Thirteen respondents (37.1%) stated that they currently worked in an urban area school. Five respondents (14.3%) stated that they currently worked in a suburban area school. Seventeen respondents (48.6%) stated that they currently worked in a rural area school.

Years of Experience

The respondents indicated the number of years they have been working as school social workers. In responding they were given the option of identifying themselves as having worked for 0-5 years, 6-10 years or 11 + years. Answers for this question were given on all 36 questionnaires returned. Ten respondents (27.8%) stated that they had been working as a school social worker for 0-5 years. Seven respondents (19.4%) stated that they had been working as a school social worker for between 6-10 years. The

remaining 19 respondents (52.8%) stated that they have been working as a school social worker for 11 or more years.

Perceptions and Definitions of Disruptive Behavior

Questions 5-9 sought to describe how the study participants perceive and define the issue of disruptive school behavior. Specifically, these questions inquired how serious of a problem school social workers felt disruptive behavior was, how they defined disruptive behavior and what they felt were the factors influencing the development of disruptive behavior in the schools.

Nature of Disruptive Behavior in Local Schools

The respondents were posed with the statement, "Over the past five years, the nature of disruptive behaviors seen in your school/s has become more serious in nature," and responded with their support or disagreement with that statement. In responding to this they were given the options of strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree or strongly disagree. Of the 36 questionnaires received, 35 answered this question while one answer was missing. Six respondents (17.1%) stated that they **strongly agreed** with this statement. Nineteen respondents (54.3%) stated that they **agreed** with this statement. Therefore, 25 respondents (71.4%) at some level supported the assertion that the nature of disruptive behavior has become more serious in their schools over the last five years (See Appendix E).

Six respondents (17.1%) stated that they **disagreed** with the statement in question five. One respondent (2.9%) stated that he/she **strongly disagreed** with this statement. Therefore, seven respondents (20%) at some level disagreed with the assertion that the

nature of disruptive behavior in their schools has become more serious over the last five years. (See Appendix E)

Two respondents (8.6%) stated that they were **undecided** as to whether or not the statement in question 5 was accurate or not. (See Appendix E)

Nature of Disruptive Behavior in Schools Nationwide

The respondents were posed with the statement, "Over the past five years, the nature of disruptive behaviors seen in schools nationwide have become more serious in nature," and responded with their support or disagreement with that statement. In responding to this they were given the options of strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree or strongly disagree. Of the thirty-six questionnaires received, thirty-five answered this question while one answer was missing. Fifteen respondents (42.9%) stated that they **strongly agreed** with this statement. Seventeen respondents (48.6%) stated that they **agreed** with this statement. Therefore, thirty-two respondents (91.4%) at some level supported the assertion that the nature of disruptive behaviors has become more serious in our nation's schools over the last five years. (See Appendix F)

One respondent (2.9%) stated that he/she **disagreed** with the statement in question 6. Of the 35 respondents, none of them stated that they **strongly disagreed** with this statement. Therefore, only this one respondent disagreed with the assertion that the nature of disruptive behaviors has become more serious in our nation's schools over the past five years. (See Appendix F)

Two respondents (5.7%) stated that they were **undecided** as to whether or not the statement in question 6 was accurate or not. (See Appendix F)

<u>Most Common Disruptive Behaviors</u>

The respondents listed the five most common disruptive behaviors seen in their school. From the thirty-six questionnaires received, one hundred and thirty eight types of behaviors were given as responses. From these responses five themes or categories of common disruptive behaviors arose.

<u>Verbal aggression.</u> Of the responses given, 30 (21%) of them fit into the category of verbal aggression. Often cited examples of verbally aggressive behaviors seen were behaviors such as name calling, using profanity, verbally threatening others and verbally fighting or arguing with others.

<u>Defiance or lack of cooperation.</u> Of the responses given, 27 (19%) of them fit into the category of defiance or lack of cooperation. Common examples of defiant behaviors seen were behaviors such as refusing to do work, defying staff directions and behaving in an insubordinate manner.

<u>Harassment.</u> Of the responses given, 21 (15%) of them fit into the category of harassment. Harassing behaviors were characterized as behaviors such as racial harassment, sexual harassment, spreading rumors, bullying and teasing.

<u>Hyperactive/impulsive behaviors.</u> Of the responses given, 18 (13%) of them fit into the category of hyperactive or impulsive behaviors. Common examples of hyperactive or impulsive behaviors seen were behaviors such as being off task, the student being out of their seat, tantrums and talking out loud in class.

<u>Disrespect toward others.</u> Of the responses given, 17 (12%) of them fit into the category of disrespectful behavior towards others. Often cited examples of disrespectful

behaviors seen were having a bad attitude and talking disrespectfully towards peers and/or adults.

These categories account for the five most common types of behaviors seen by this study's population. However, in addition to these five categories a few other types of behaviors were noted, but to a lesser extent. Examples of some other behaviors noted as common were physical aggressiveness, truancy, health risk behaviors (smoking, drugs, alcohol, sex) and bringing contraband items such as pagers and cell phones to school.

Most Serious Disruptive Behaviors

The respondents listed the five most serious behaviors seen in their school. From the 36 questionnaires received, 105 types of behaviors were given as responses. From these responses five themes or categories of serious disruptive behaviors arose.

Harassment. Of the responses given, 31 (29%) of them fit into the category of harassing behaviors. Common examples of harassing behaviors seen were verbal threats, sexual or racial harassment, bullying, teasing and spreading rumors.

Physical aggression. Of the responses given, 30 (28%) of them fit into the category of physical aggression. Physically aggressive behaviors were characterized as throwing items, fighting, hitting and destroying property.

Verbal aggression. Of the responses given, 16 (15%) of them fit into the category of verbal aggression. Frequent verbally aggressive behaviors seen were fighting verbally with peers, using profanity, yelling at others and, in general, verbally abusing others.

Defiance or lack of cooperation. Of the responses given, 14 (13%) of them fit into the category of defiance or lack of cooperation. Typical examples of defiant

behavior seen were refusing work, being uncooperative with staff and running out of class.

Disrespect to others. Of the responses given, 5 (4%) of them fit into the category of showing disrespect towards others. A common example of a disrespectful behavior seen was making rude comments to staff and/or peers.

These five categories account for the five most serious disruptive behaviors seen by this study's population. In addition to these behaviors, a few other types of behaviors were noted, but to a lesser extent. Examples of some of the other serious behaviors cited were bringing weapons to school, participating in health risk behaviors (drugs, alcohol, smoking), public displays of affection and showing difficulties with paying attention in the classroom.

Factors Influencing the Development of Disruptive Behavior

The respondents were asked to identify as many possible factors they felt influenced the development of disruptive behavior in their population. From the 36 questionnaires received, 93 types of responses were given as factors influencing the development of disruptive behavior. These factors were then organized into the five theoretical explanations for disruptive behavior proposed by Johnson (1989).

Ecological systems theory. Of the responses given, 40 (43%) fit into the category of ecological or general systems theory. Often cited examples of system based influences of disruptive behavior given were violence displayed in media, a strained relationship between parents and school, socioeconomic stress, schools responding poorly to children with disruptive behavior and peer pressure.

Family systems theory. Of the responses given, 31 (33%) fit into the category of family systems theory. Common examples of family based influences of disruptive behavior given were abuse of the child at home, parental uninvolvement, lack of consequences at home, lack of parental support, and divorce.

Psychodynamic theory. Of the responses given, 11 (10%) fit into the category of psychodynamic theory. Influences of disruptive behavior which could be characterized as fitting in psychodynamic theory were emotional problems of the child, student mental health issues, student's suffering emotional abuse, students not feeling cared about and low motivation of students.

Medical or biological model. Of the responses given, 7 (7%) fit into the category of the medical or biological model. Typical examples of biologically based influences of disruptive behavior were poor diet, lack of sleep and alcohol or chemical use.

Behaviorism theory. Of the responses given, 4 (4%) fit into the category of behaviorism theory. Common examples of behaviorally based influences of disruptive behavior were the student's lack of problem solving skills, lack of structure and inconsistent behavior management.

Role of School Social Worker in Relation to Disruptive Behavior

Questions 10-14 sought to describe how the participants viewed their role as school social workers in relation to disruptive behavior. Specifically, these questions inquired as to how important the social work role was in dealing with disruptive behavior, how involved respondents were in their schools, how they intervened with children exhibiting these behaviors and how they would like to see their roles evolve.

Importance of School Social Work Role in Intervention

The respondents were posed with the statement, "In a school's effort to deal with disruptive behavior it is important that the school social worker is involved with the process," and responded with support or disagreement with that statement. In responding to this, they were given the options of strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree or strongly disagree. Of the thirty-six questionnaires received, thirty-five answered this question while one answer was missing. Twenty-one respondents (60%) stated that they **strongly agreed** with this statement. Thirteen respondents (37.1%) stated that they **agreed** with this statement. Therefore, 34 respondents (97.1%) at some level supported the assertion that school social workers should be involved in dealing with disruptive behavior in the schools. (See Appendix G)

One respondent (2.9%) stated that he/she **disagreed** with the statement in question 10. Of the thirty-five respondents, none of them stated that they **strongly disagreed** with this statement. Therefore, only this one respondent disagreed with the assertion that school social workers should be involved in dealing with disruptive behavior in the schools. This respondent stated she did not need to be involved in dealing with disruptive behavior due to her school already having behavior specialists. Lastly, no respondents indicated that they were **undecided** about this statement. (See Appendix G)

In addition to being asked whether they agreed or disagreed with this statement the respondents were asked to explain their answer. Thirty-one types of responses were given from which three themes arose as to why school social workers should be involved in dealing with disruptive behavior.

Training and experience. Of the thirty-one responses, 11 (35%) cited social workers' training and experience as a reason for why school social workers should be involved in dealing with disruptive behaviors. One respondent stated, "School social workers have training and expertise in helping those students with disruptive behaviors." From other responses it can be interpreted that this level of training and/or experience assists the school social worker in effectively dealing with this issue. In addition, it was also stated that the social worker's person in environment approach allowed them to see the "big picture" of what influences disruptive behavior. For example, one respondent stated, "Many teachers consider only a punitive approach, whereas a social worker can give a broader viewpoint." By understanding the wide variety of factors influencing disruptive behavior the school social worker can be more effective in their interventions. This training and expertise leads the school social worker to be integral when intervening with the child displaying disruptive behavior.

Home-school-community liaison. Of the thirty-one responses, 10 (32%) cited school social workers relationship with families, the school and larger community as a reason for why they should be involved in dealing with disruptive behavior. In fact one respondent described the school social worker as, "A vital link between disruptive students and their home situations." In addition to being a link between the family and school, respondents often cited the social workers' connection with community resources as being imperative in intervening with the child. For example, one respondent stated, "The school social worker can and should help the child/family connect with programs or agencies that can provide help and support for the child." This link to home, school and

community was therefore deemed by several as important in dealing with disruptive school behavior.

Member of school team. Of the 31 responses, 7 (23%) cited that since school social workers are part of the school team, they should be involved in dealing with disruptive behaviors. Many responded that school social workers often take part in, facilitate and consult teams working with children who exhibit disruptive behaviors. As one respondent stated, "There needs to be a team approach, which includes the school social worker." Therefore, these respondents felt that as social workers they are valuable members of the school team.

These three categories accounted for the most common reasons cited as to why the school social worker should be involved in dealing with disruptive school behavior. However, other reasons as to why the school social worker should be involved were also cited. Examples of some of the other reasons cited were; school social workers are already involved with writing and implementing treatment plans and that many children exhibiting disruptive behaviors are in special education which means they are likely already receiving social work services.

Level of Involvement of School Social Workers

The respondents were posed with the statement, "In your school/s attempts to deal with disruptive student behavior, how involved are you as a school social worker?" In responding to this they were given the options of not involved, sporadically involved, undecided, involved or very involved. Of the thirty-six questionnaires received, thirty-four answered this question and two answers were missing. None of the respondents answered that they were **not involved** in dealing with disruptive behavior. Seven

respondents (20.6%) answered that they were **sporadically involved** in dealing with disruptive behavior. Fifteen respondents (44.1%) answered that they were **involved** in dealing with disruptive behavior. Twelve respondents (35.3%) answered that they were **very involved** in dealing with disruptive behavior. While none of the respondents answered that they were undecided about their level of involvement in regard to dealing with disruptive behavior. (See Appendix H)

Interventions Used by School Social Workers

The respondents listed the specific activities they undertake in addressing disruptive behavior in their school. From the thirty-six questionnaires received, one hundred and fifteen types of interventions were given as responses. These responses were then organized into the three models of school social work practice proposed by Radin (1989).

Clinical casework. Of the responses given, 61 (53%) of them fit into the category of clinical casework type interventions. Often cited examples of casework type interventions cited were one to one student counseling, student group work, developing and implementing behavior contracts and crisis intervention.

Home-school liaison. Of the responses given, 32 (28%) of them fit into the category of home-school liaison type interventions. Common examples of home-school liaison type interventions cited were parent consultation, community/agency referral, facilitating communication between the home and school and home visits.

System change for problem prevention. Of the responses given, 22 (19%) of them fit into the category of system change type interventions. Interventions cited which

are characteristic of system change type interventions were staff consultation, facilitating team meetings, implementing policies and prevention activities.

Most Effective Interventions

The respondents listed the interventions they felt were most effective in dealing with disruptive behavior. From the thirty-six questionnaires received, 58 types of interventions were given as responses. These responses were then organized into the three models of social work practice proposed by Radin (1989).

Clinical casework. Of the responses given, 30 (51%) of them fit into the category of clinical casework type interventions. Common examples of casework type interventions cited were 1:1 student counseling, student group-work, behavior contracts or plans, assessment, mediation and frequent student contact/mentoring.

Home-school liaison. Of the responses given, 15 (26%) of them fit into the category of home-school liaison type interventions. Often cited examples of home-school liaison type interventions cited were parent contact, referral to outside agencies and collaboration with those agencies.

System change for problem prevention. Of the responses given, 13 (23%) of them fit into the category of system change type interventions. Common examples of system change type interventions cited were staff consultation, facilitating team meetings and implementing positive school programs.

How School Social Workers View their Role

First, respondents stated what they would like to change about their role or job expectations as a school social worker. From the thirty-six questionnaires received, 29

types of responses were given. Two respondents reported that there was nothing they would like to change about their role in relation to dealing with disruptive behavior. However, from the remaining responses, three themes arose as to how school social workers would like to see their role different.

More support through division of responsibilities. Of the responses given, 11 (38%) of them stated that they felt they were overworked and unsupported in their role of social worker. This feeling was exhibited by the response of many school social workers who said they felt they had too large a caseload and that due to this overwork they had little time to accomplish their daily tasks. To combat these problems many respondents stated that they would like to see social workers assigned to a fewer number of schools and that they would like to obtain more support through the hiring of additional school social workers.

Like to do more of. Of the responses given, 10 (34%) of them stated some kind of activity which they would like to do more often. Activities given by the respondents came from all of the aforementioned models of school social work. Examples of these activities cited were program policy development, opportunities to train staff, collaborative work with community agencies, long term intensive counseling and home visits.

Like to do less of. Of the responses given, 6 (21%) of them stated some kind of activity which they would like to do less in their everyday practice. Examples of these activities came in three separate categories. First, it was stated that as a school social worker it would be preferable to do less crisis work and/or managing of daily behaviors. Second, it was stated that as a school social worker it would be preferable to do less

administrative work in the school. Third, it was stated that as a school social worker it would be preferable to do less paperwork and/or report writing.

Second, respondents stated what they could do differently in their role if the aforementioned changes were made. From the thirty-six questionnaires received, 29 types of responses were given. Of the responses given, 16 (55%) stated they would continue to do clinical work but in a more comprehensive or thorough manner. Another six (20%) responded that if the aforementioned changes were made they would have more time to do system wide preventive work. Lastly, 4 (14%) stated they would continue to do home-school-community type interventions. However, they would do so in a more enhanced manner such as by having more parent contact and stronger connections to community agencies

Third, respondents stated what they would like keep the same about their role. Of the 23 responses given, 13 (54%) responded that they would like to continue performing clinical/casework services. Three (13%) responded that they would like to continue to perform services within the home-school liaison model. Two (9%) responded that they would like to continue to perform services within the systems-based model. In addition, four (17%) stated that they liked that their role encompassed a variety of tasks.

Chapter Five

Study Limitations

There are limits to how far the data from this study can be generalized to the larger population of school social workers. First, the sample used consisted only of school social workers that are members of the MSSWA. Due to sampling only from this group, it is difficult to know whether the conclusions of this sample are representative of school social workers outside the association. Therefore, the findings of this study can only represent the beliefs and attitudes of those school social workers in the MSSWA.

Second, in attempting to understand disruptive behavior and the role of the school social worker only school social workers were selected as subjects. Due to their practicing social work as a profession, they may have been biased in describing the specifics of this role and its importance. Non-social work staff (teachers, paraprofessionals, etc) may have given a different viewpoint on what school social workers do and how important that is.

Third, after examining the collected data it appears that some of the respondents did not understand or misinterpreted what certain survey questions were trying to ask. For example, when asked what influences disruptive behavior some answered by citing a type of disruptive behavior. This form of random error then decreased the number of responses viable for use in data collection.

Fourth, it is possible that those who responded had strong feelings about this subject, which encouraged them to respond. Others may have had no interest in the subject and thereby chosen not to respond. If this form of systematic error occurred, the

study results may be biased towards the beliefs of those who feel strongly about the subject rather than the entire population.

Fifth, as with all survey research this survey can only collect the specific data that it requested. Therefore, it is possible that this measure missed some other factor or aspect of disruptive behavior, which the respondents identify as crucial.

Sixth, it is possible that the study subjects may have answered in ways they were socially acceptable. If this were the case the measure would not be capturing the subjects true perceptions on this issue.

These limitations cited do not invalidate the findings of this study. However, they do guide us in determining the level of credence we give to the findings and implications discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter Six

Discussion

Rubin and Babbie (1997) stated that for survey research a return rate of fifty

percent is considered adequate for significant data analysis. This study had a return rate

of around fifty- percent. However, two of those surveys returned were not filled out due

to the respondent no longer practicing in the profession. Regardless, the responses

obtained in this study are close to fifty percent, which allows one to draw some basic

conclusions from the findings. In addition, the demographic data collected indicates that

the respondents used came from a wide variety of backgrounds such as years of service,

level of school worked at and geographical settings. For example, respondents in this

study came from throughout all of Minnesota. This, in addition to the random selection

of subjects, ensures the findings will be generalizable to the larger population of MSSWA

school social workers.

How do School Social Workers Perceive Disruptive Behavior?

The findings of this study suggest that these school social workers agree with the

current literature (Kaufmann & Center, 1997), which states that the problem of disruptive

behavior is becoming more serious in nature. However, this finding draws us to examine

what is meant by **serious** disruptive behavior. For example, when the general public and

media organizations discuss disruptive school behavior they often are often referring to

the incidents of severe lethal aggression seen in the last few years (Astor, Behre, Fravil &

Wallace, 1997). When the respondents of this study were asked about what serious

behaviors they are currently seeing, they responded quite differently. First, the majority

of behaviors rated as serious were also rated as commonly seen. Second, only one of the serious behaviors noted involved physical aggression. Third, none of the respondents indicated the type of lethal aggression that is often portrayed by the news media. Even so, these findings suggest that school social workers do perceive this problem as becoming more serious, regardless of whether this seriousness refers to level of offenses or number of those committing the offense.

As shown by the literature review, it is difficult to define the term disruptive behavior. The findings of this study agree with the assertion of Johnson (1989) that there is no one type of disruptive behavior. Rather the respondents of this study indicated that there are numerous behaviors, which can be disruptive in their own separate ways. This variety of problematic behavior creates great difficulties for school social workers, but also gives them the opportunity to be creative and proactive with their interventions.

To effectively intervene with a child exhibiting problematic behavior, it is imperative that the underlying cause or factor influencing the behavior is addressed. The perceptions of school social workers in this study agreed with the literature (Johnson, 1989) which proposes that there are numerous theoretical explanations for disruptive behavior. These respondents cited causes of disruptive behavior that fit into the general and/or family systems theory 76% of the time. Some typical causes cited were the parental abuse of children, problems with the schools response to disruptive behavior, media violence and parental noninvolvement. It is this finding which seriously questions the efficacy of using interventions that focus only on the individual child who exhibits disruptive behavior. Consequently, this finding supports the idea that interventions need

to be focused on intervening with the individual child, the family and the larger surrounding systems.

<u>What is the School Social Worker's Role in Relation to Disruptive Behavior?</u>

Do school social workers have a role to play in their schools' efforts to deal with disruptive behavior? According to these findings, school social workers currently are involved in dealing with disruptive behavior and they agree that this should be part of their role. The respondents of this study gave various reasons as to why they should be involved in dealing with disruptive behavior. However, many of the reasons cited centered on the belief that, due to school social workers' training and experience, they are invaluable members of school team combating this issue.

After establishing that school social workers are involved in dealing with disruptive behavior, it is important to understand how they are involved. The findings of this study agreed with much of the research on the general role of the school social worker. First, the type of tasks a school social worker performed in dealing with disruptive behavior came from a broad range of activities (Constable & Montgomery, 1985). Second, these tasks generally fit into the three models of school social work practice proposed by Radin (1989). Third, the most common activities undertaken by school social workers were those that fell into the clinical casework practice model (Alderson, Krishef & Spencer, 1990; Staudt, 1991). Interventions which fell into the other two practice models were cited, but to a lesser extent. Therefore, in all aspects these findings supported the assertions already proposed by previous research describing the role of the school social worker (Alderson, Krishef & Spencer, 1990; Radin, 1989; Staudt, 1991).

In previous research it has been difficult to ascertain why schools seem to focus on providing clinical services within the schools. One possible explanation for this focus was that school social workers are mandated to perform these activities due to laws such as P.L. 94-142 (Radin, 1989). Another likely reason for the continued clinical focus arises from the fact that many school social work positions are funded through special education money which mandates they provide clinical service to this population (T. Zielinski, personal communication, April 26, 2000). These examples do not account for every possible explanation for school social worker's focus on clinical services. For example, the respondents in this study cited clinical services as being more effective in addressing disruptive behavior than the interventions of other practice models. If this belief in the efficacy of clinical services is indicative of the larger population's beliefs, it is logical to assume that school social workers would want to continue utilizing this practice model. This idea is by no means the only explanation for school social work's continued focus on providing clinical services, but it does give some insight into how school social workers may feel about the issue.

In keeping with the theme of how school social workers feel, these findings suggest that school social workers in general feel overworked and unsupported in their role. In addition, they feel without this support they cannot deal with disruptive student behavior to the level they feel they could reach with more support. This finding supports the assertion of Alderson, Krishef and Spencer (1990) that many school social work programs are understaffed and often strapped for resources. Therefore, if more support was given these school social workers could engage in a broader range of activities. In

addition, they would be able to perform their current activities at a more comprehensive level.

Implications of Findings for School Social Work Practice

Meares (1977) stated that what a school social worker does should change over time with the needs of the school and students. Therefore, since the findings of this study propose that the nature of disruptive behavior is changing, school social workers must be prepared to change how they approach the issue. As the profession has done in the past, school social workers need to review how they intervene with these students along with identifying the new challenges these changes bring. Consequently, school social workers need to be prepared and willing to alter how they practice to address the changing needs of their student population.

Both the findings of this study and the literature review stated that there is no one definition for disruptive behavior. Rather, both showed that there are a number of different behaviors that can be considered disruptive, and the type displayed may vary from school to school. Therefore, school social workers must lead their schools to develop more behavior specific interventions in order to address the behaviors seen in their school. The time of relying on general all-purpose interventions and reactive (suspension, detention, etc) has passed. School social workers need to keep themselves aware of the specific types of behaviors seen in their school and then intervene in manner appropriate to addressing the underlying causes of those behaviors.

The findings of this study state that school social workers tend to identify causes for disruptive behavior within the ecological systems and family systems theoretical model. However, these findings also suggest that school social workers continue to focus

their practice mainly within the clinical model of school social work. In doing this it can be inferred that they are not addressing what they believe are the underlying causes of disruptive school behavior. Therefore, school social workers need to reprioritize their efforts and focus on interventions that directly address the underlying influences of disruptive behavior. Specifically, school social workers need to address the systems based influences by incorporating more systemic and preventive interventions into their daily activities. School social workers must finally adhere to the call of school social work research and literature to reform their role into one that involves the systems wide prevention of problematic student behaviors.

<div align="center">Implications of Findings for School Social Work Policy</div>

Regardless of which model of school social work is most needed all models and resulting interventions are beneficial to a school's student population. However, due to the breadth of these roles it is nearly impossible for one school social worker to fill them in any sort of satisfactory way. Therefore, it is imperative that our schools begin to hire more school social work staff. With this increase in social work staff and support, it would be more feasible to expect the large variety of comprehensive services which school social work can offer.

The literature states that in combating disruptive behavior it is important to involve community agencies and others outside the walls of the school (Arnold, Ortiz, Curry, Stowe, Goldstein, Fisher, Zeljo & Yershova, 1999). In response to this there have been local efforts for schools, such as Achievement Plus Elementary, to collaborate and provide services with community agencies and individuals. Therefore, efforts are being made to link school and community, but more of this type of collaboration is still needed.

terms of disruptive behavior. Fifth, since these school social workers feel disruptive behaviors is becoming more serious, further research is needed to answer why this is happening. If school social workers are to effectively intervene with these behaviors, they must understand the forces pushing them to evolve.

Conclusion

Disruptive behavior is and will likely remain to be a problem for some time. In addition, as our schools grow and change disruptive behavior will likely follow suit. Therefore, school social workers, along with other school staff, need to be daring enough to look at new ways of dealing with the problem. If schools continue to provide only reactive and individually based intervention efforts there will continue to be no significant positive changes in regard to this issue. Whereas, if schools and school social workers begin to deal with this issue proactively and on a community level there will finally be some progress in decreasing disruptive behaviors' negative effects.

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January 8, 2000

Thomas Lucy
896 Cleveland Ave. S. #7
St. Paul, MN 55116

Dear Thomas,

Enclosed are mailing labels for the current members of the Minnesota School
Social Worker's Association for your use in doing your thesis research. Your
concern about student's disruptive behavior is definitely an important issue for
many schools. You have the permission of the MSSWA Board to use
our mailing list in return for giving us a copy of your finished thesis.

We do not keep specific demographics on our members, but we do have
members throughout the state. Our organization is divided into ten regions.
Almost all members are employed by public school systems, but also serve
students and families from private schools within their districts. All school
social workers have a license from the Board of Social Work and the Board
of Teaching. Approximately 60% work in the greater metro area.
If you need additional information let me know.

Sincerely,

Ranna Hansen Le Voir

Ranna Hansen Le Voir
Corresponding Secretary

Instructions: Please follow the directions for each close-ended question, and fill out responses for the open-ended questions. For the open-ended questions, please provide as much detail as possible. Thanks for your cooperation!

For the purposes of this research, disruptive behavior has been defined as any behavior or behaviors perpetrated by a student which is detrimental to their or peers academic and/or social growth in school.

1. I work at an: (circle the one/s that apply)

    elementary school   junior high/middle school   high school

    other : (please explain) _____

2. The school/s I work at are: (circle the one/s that apply)

    public schools   private schools

3. The setting/s of the school/s that I work at are: (circle the one/s that apply)

    urban   suburban   rural

4. Please indicate the number of years you have practiced as a school social worker. (circle the one that applies)

    0 – 5 years   5 – 10 years   10 + years

5. Over the past five years, the nature of disruptive behaviors seen in your school/s has become more serious in nature. (example - more aggression, harassment, etc) (circle the one which applies)

    1. strongly agree   2. agree   3. undecided   4. disagree   5. strongly disagree

6. Over the past five years, the nature of disruptive behaviors seen in schools nationwide have become more serious in nature. (Example – more aggression, harassment, etc) (circle the one which applies)

    1. strongly agree   2. agree   3. undecided   4. disagree   5. strongly disagree

7. In the space provided, please list the five most common disruptive behaviors seen in your school?

8. In the space provided, please list the five most serious disruptive behaviors seen in your school?

9. Please list what you feel are some of the factors which influence the development of disruptive behavior in your student population.

10. In a school's effort to deal with disruptive behavior it is important that the school social worker is involved with the process. (circle the one which applies)

    1. strongly agree   2. agree   3. undecided   4. disagree   5. strongly disagree

    Please explain your answer.

11. In your school/s attempts to deal with disruptive student behavior, how involved are you as a school social worker? (circle the one that applies)

    not involved   sporadically involved   undecided   involved   very involved

12. Please list the specific activities you undertake in addressing disruptive school behavior. (Please be as detailed and specific as possible)

13. Of the activities/interventions listed in the previous question, which do you feel are the most effective in dealing with the problem?

14. To better allow **you**, as a school social worker, to address the problem of disruptive behaviors;

    What would you like to change about your role or job expectations?

If these changes took place, what could you do differently?

What would you keep the same about your current role?

Thank you very much for participating in this research. Please feel free to add any additional comments or ideas you have about this subject or the research itself on this sheet.
Additional comments or ideas:

Thank you again for your time and effort!

If you have any questions about this questionnaire or research please feel free to call me at (651) 642-2022.

IRB Approval # 2000-01-2

Dear MSSWA Member,

You are invited to be in a research study that will examine school social worker perceptions of disruptive school behaviors along with examining what their role is in addressing this issue. You were selected as a possible participant due to your random selection from the Minnesota School Social Worker Association mailing list. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in this study. I, Thomas Lucy, am conducting this study as part of my Master's of Social Work thesis at Augsburg College.

The purpose of this study is to look into the topic of disruptive school behavior and school social work. In doing this, this research will aim to answer two questions. First, how do Minnesota school social workers perceive the issue of disruptive school behavior? Second, what is the role of these social workers in addressing this issue in the schools?

If you agree to be in this study you will be asked to take the following steps. First, you will need to complete the enclosed questionnaire in its entirety. Second, you will need to return the questionnaire in the enclosed, self-addressed and stamped envelope. Filling out this questionnaire should take you at the most around twenty minutes. Only the surveys received by March 1st will be included in this study.

All of the data you provide will be kept private and confidential. To ensure your anonymity, do not place your name or any other identifying information on the questionnaire. In any presentation of the data collected it will not be possible to identify any of the subjects. The only people with access to the completed surveys will be my thesis advisor, Dr. Lois Bosch and myself. All of the data collected will be destroyed by July of 2000.

Please do not feel obligated to complete this questionnaire unless you choose to do so. Your choice whether to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relationship with the MSSWA or Augsburg College. By completing and returning this questionnaire, you have given consent to participate in this study.

If you have any questions feel free to call me at (651) 642-2022 or Dr. Lois Bosch at (612) 330-1633.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Thomas Eugene Lucy
MSW Student Augsburg College
(651) 642-2022
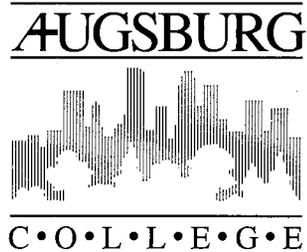
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MEMO

6 February 2000

To: Mr. Thomas Eugene Lucy

From: Dr. Sharon K. Patten, IRB Chair   *SKP*
   Phone: 612-330-1723

RE: Your IRB Application

I am writing on behalf of Augsburg College's Institutional Review Board on the Use of Human Subjects to inform you of our approval of your research study, "School Social Workers' Perceptions of Disruptive School Behaviors." Your IRB approval number is 2000-01-2. Please use this number on all official correspondence and written materials relative to your study.

Your research should prove valuable and provide important insight into an issue in social work practice, planning, and policy. We wish you every success!

SKP:ka

cc: Dr. Lois Bosch, Thesis Advisor

# ature of Disruptive Behavior in Subjects' Schools
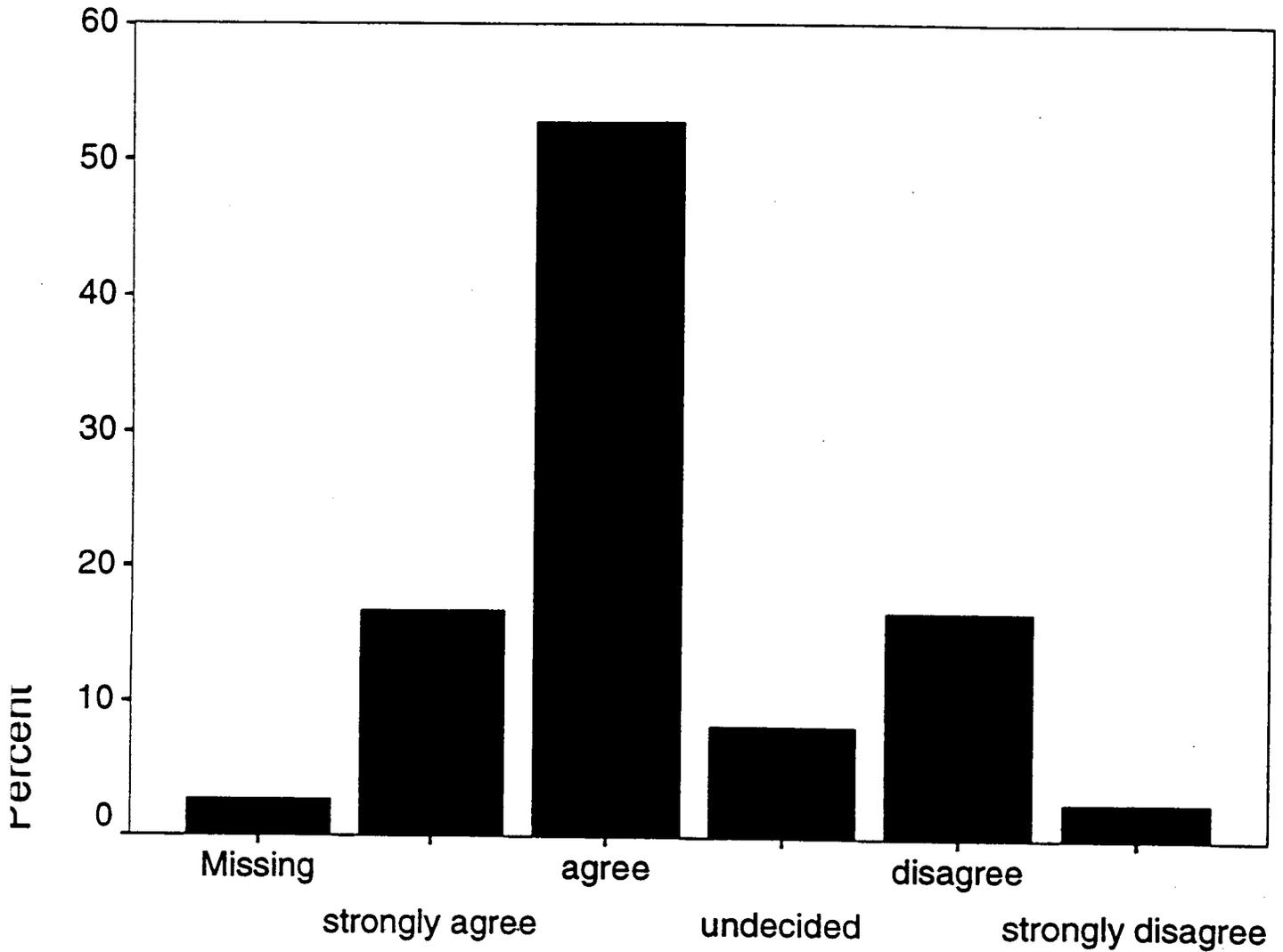
Behaviors have become more serious. Agree/Disagree

ture of Disruptive Behavior in Nation's Schools

Behaviors have become more serious. Agree/Disagree

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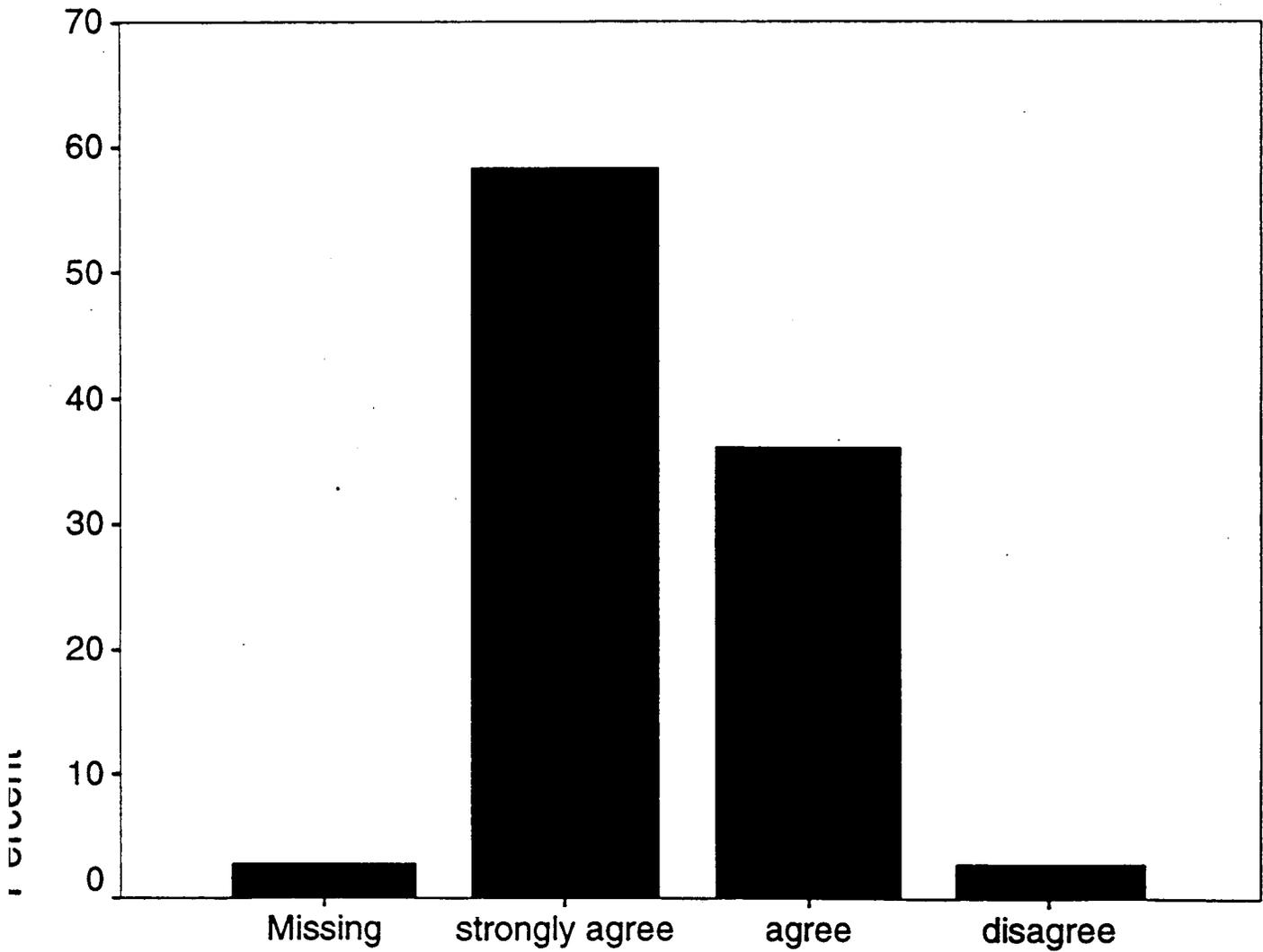
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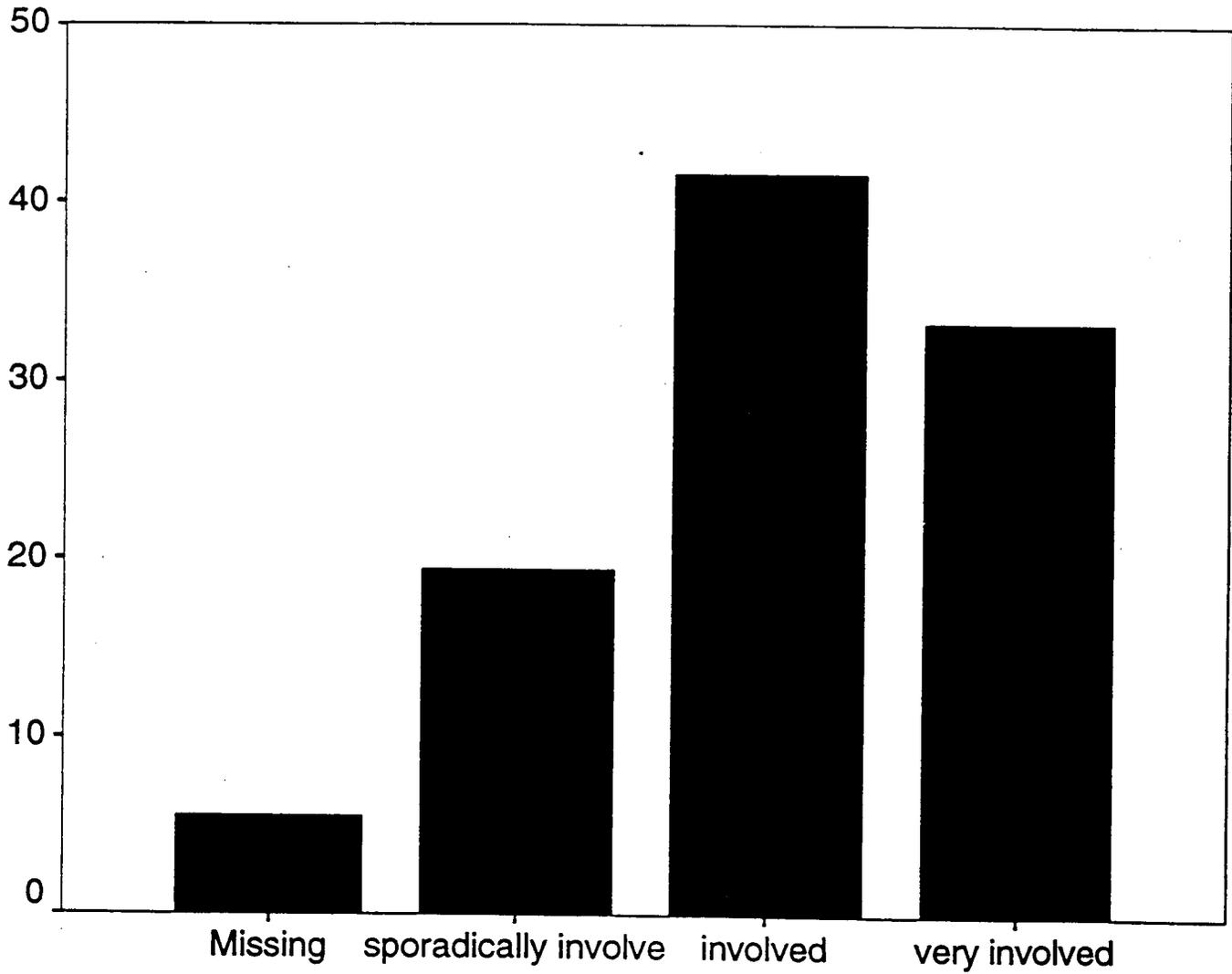
How involved are school social workers?