2019

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Special thank you to Mickey Heath for his skills and talents in the logistics of the article's publication.

School Social Workers: Important Assets in Rural Areas

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Abstract: As the American educational system continues to evolve and take on more social service responsibilities for students, their families, and the community, the need for school social workers has intensified. However, the demand considerably exceeds developed positions for school social workers. The increase in awareness of childhood trauma, toxic stress, poverty, and potential to spill over into the classroom places schools in a position where they need to be responsive to students' multi-faceted needs. This conceptual article will discuss the overwhelming need for school social workers, barriers to obtaining school social workers, and the benefits school social workers can bring.

*Keywords***:** School social workers, trauma, toxic stress, globalization, cultural humility, hidden curriculum, rural social work practice

Like other disciplines, education continues to change, evolve, and encompass more complex tasks. These changes increase the need for school social workers to assist schools to accomplish their educational tasks more effectively and efficiently (Alvarez, Bye, Bryant, & Mumm, 2013). Although some parts of education remain constant, some of the most significant changes in education over the past decade have occurred in the educational environment (Alsubaie, 2015). Currently, education is responsible for holistic student needs that teachers and administrators did not have to accommodate a generation ago. Today's schools are attempting to provide numerous on-campus social services, from the bulk of students' daily nutrition to in-house counseling services for traumatized students. The increase in awareness of childhood trauma, toxic stress, and poverty and its potential to spill over into the classroom pressures schools to be responsive to students' multi-faceted needs (Allen-Meares & Montgomery, 2014). Additionally, the make-up and diversity of the American classroom continues to change, with more students coming into school systems as English learners with different cultural beliefs (Rahman, 2013; Sanchez, 2017).

Despite these changes, educators are still responsible for imparting in students the scaffolded educational material they will need to successfully move through grade levels and forward to future occupations, institutions of higher learning, skill training, and/or community roles. Therefore, educators and school systems desperately need additional supports to meet expanding educational standards. School social workers are key players in the success of school systems, as they partner with educators, administrators, students, loved ones, and the community to address the complex needs that come with some students (Alvarez et al., 2013; Anyon, Nicotera, & Veeh, 2016; Sherman, 2016). Although schools rarely have trouble justifying a need for school social workers, budgetary limitations and misperceptions about the role of school social workers keep schools from employing this highly valuable resource (Ayasse & Stone, 2015). Additionally, as is common with themes of institutional inequality, those schools with the greatest need for school social workers due to large numbers of poverty-stricken, traumatized, and/or English learning students, are the schools that are least likely to have the resources to hire school social workers (Anyon et al., 2016; Day, Ji, DuBois, Silverthorn, & Flay, 2016).

Rural Settings and School Social Workers

Schools in rural settings are even less likely to have school social workers services due to the lack of community-wide resources, despite higher poverty rates than some urban areas (Heinrich, 2017). Students in rural school systems have a unique set of barriers that cause them to be vulnerable to high dropout rates, low educational attainment, and less likely to pursue higher education or technical training (Hoffman, Anderson-Butcher, Fuller, & Bates, 2017; Smink & Reimer, 2015). Research indicates that dropout rates for rural students are higher than students in suburban areas, but lower than students in urban settings. However, when looking at rural students living in poverty, the dropout rates are higher, with 23% of rural students dropping out compared to 18% of urban students (Provasnik et al., 2007). Common barriers to obtaining education for rural students are a complex mixture of individual, family, social, and community dynamics (Hoffman et al., 2017). Rural students regularly struggle with reliable transportation and extended distances from school, resulting in poor attendance. Additionally, rural students are burdened with early morning and late evening work hours on farms and/or part-time jobs to help support their families, making school less of a priority than other traditional students (Smink & Reimer, 2015). Families in rural settings often put a higher value on work ethic than educational attainment, creating transgenerational high school dropout patterns paired with employment at low paying, hard labor jobs with seasonal or economical trend instability (Maple, Pearce, Gartshore, MacFarlane, & Wayland, 2019). Due to rural settings, students have limited social opportunities and fewer peers for socialization, placing rural students at a higher risk of falling into relationships with negative peers involved in unlawful activities, such as substance abuse, tobacco use, and criminal behavior (Hoffman et al, 2017). Early involvement with substances increases risk for substance use disorders, lifetime use of tobacco, interpersonal traumatization, and additional poor health outcomes (Felitti, 1998; Nurius, Green, Logan-Greene, Longhi, & Song, 2016). Moreover, rural school districts take in less property taxes than suburban and urban areas, creating smaller school budgets. This equates to fewer teachers, inferior teachers, larger classrooms, older curriculums, older technology, fewer resources, and a significant deficit of social services offered at the school level (Hoffman, 2017). School social workers are equipped to address multifaceted problems that often accompany dynamics of rural education (Maple et al., 2019), however, these same financial issues are often responsible for the lack of social work positions in rural settings.

The Role of School Social Workers

A common area of misunderstanding surrounding school social workers are the important roles they play in an educational institution. School social workers partner with teachers, school staff and administrators, loved ones, guardians, and community resources to deliver services to improve students' academic performance, emotional well-being, behaviors in and out of the classroom, and chances of a more successful future (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2010). School social workers routinely engage in micro-, mezzo-, and macro-level social work practices that support students' trajectory in educational settings, the schools' educational mission, and enhance the ability of school staff and faculty to focus on their primary roles (Frauenholtz, Mendenhall, & Moon, 2017; Segal, Gerdes, & Steiner, 2019). Essentially, school social workers help all parts of the educational system, assisting student success, and supporting school employees to do their jobs more proficiently.

Customary micro-level services that school social workers provide include monitoring students struggling with truancy issues and/or high risk for permanent withdrawal from school, creating innovative interventions for students with mental health and/or problematic behaviors, and assessing students for substance use issues, suicidal and/or homicidal ideation, economic barriers, and/or unaddressed medical issues. School social workers also assist with acquiring needed resources to address deficits in clothing, school supplies, mental health services, emotional supports, and physical needs. On a mezzo-level, school social workers commonly facilitate therapeutic groups, in-office and in-home family assistance, confidential supports for the LBGTQ+ community, and create awareness and advocacy for oppressed and commonly bullied populations. Additionally, school social workers provide crisis management services, workshops for loved ones on a variety of topics, and conduct home visits for a variety of reasons. From a macro perspective, school social workers serve as a student advocates to larger audiences, establishing and administrating in-school social services, such as food pantries, clothing and school supply closets, shower and laundry services, and food backpack programs for students struggling with food securities. School social workers often provide in-service trainings for school staff, teachers, and administrators; serve as extra-curricular faculty sponsors; write grants to fund school-based social services; participate in individual educational planning meetings; contribute to a multidisciplinary team; and advocate for state and federal legislation and policy change (Bent-Goodley, 2016; Frauenholtz et al., 2017; Isaac, 2015; Kelly et al., 2016; NASW, 2010; Segal et al., 2019). School social workers serve as caseworkers, therapists, administrators, and clinical directors of the social services they provide. Additionally, school social workers' caseloads can be quite high, as it is common for schools to only have one school social worker or to assign the school social worker to more than one school (Dietsche, 2018; Sherman, 2016). School social workers in rural settings may have an area to cover that consists of several counties and may not be accessible daily due to traveling to multiple locations on a rotating schedule (Smink & Reimer, 2015), leaving considerable gaps in services to students and schools. Because there may be only one school social worker in the building, obtaining supervision and consultation with other social workers can be challenging (Social Work Degree Guide, 2019). The job of school social workers is challenging; however, the need is immense for several reasons. This conceptual article will discuss the unique challenge of toxic stress, increased globalization of the classroom, and resulting behavioral and cultural complications that demand the need for school social workers and to increase the number of school social workers available to schools and students in need.

Toxic Stress and Aftermath in Educational Settings

Research concerning childhood toxic stress and educational problems has consistently shown a strong positive correlation. Specifically, as the prevalence of aversive events and the load of stress accumulate, so does the risk for negative physical, emotional, cognitive, social, educational, and/or spiritual outcomes (Asok, Benard, Roth, Rosen, & Dozier, 2013; D'Andrea, Ford, Stolbach, Spinazzola, & van der Kolk, 2012; Day et al., 2016; Frauenholtz et al., 2017; Heinrich, 2017; Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2014; Power, et al., 2013; Reinbergs & Fefer, 2018). Toxic stress results from intense adverse experiences that are sustained over a long period of time, causing prolonged physical and psychological distress (Segal et al., 2019). This creates a cascade of physical, psychological, and neurological changes

that can result in damaging processes with long-term effects (Burke-Harris, 2018). Poverty is the most common toxic stress, with demonstrated consequences to cognitive abilities, future health outcomes, and behavior (Burke-Harris, 2018; Day et al., 2016; Felitti et al., 1998; Francis, DePriest, Wilson, & Gross, 2018; Kalil, 2015; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). Toxic stress has been shown to decrease a child's ability to learn new information due to resulting symptoms of hyperactivity, inattentiveness, distractibility, general apathy, and/or physical changes in the brain, specifically the corpus callosum, prefrontal cortices, temporal lobe, hippocampus, and amygdala (De Bellis & Keshavan, 2006; Teicher, Samson, Polcari, & McGreenery, 2006; Tomoda et al., 2009).

Additionally, pioneering research of Felitti et al. (1998) from the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study revealed that the majority of people have experienced adversity during their childhood. Of the original 17,000 plus participants that took the ACE survey, 2 out of 3 respondents positively responded to at least one of 10 possible childhood adversities (emotional, physical, and/or sexual abuse; physical and/or emotional neglect; parental separation/divorce; witnessed abuse of one's mother-figure; household family member with mental health issues and/or substance abuse issues; and household member who was incarcerated). The original study group was largely Caucasian, college educated, middle class, and employed (Redford, Pritzker, Norwood, & Boekelheide, 2015). Additional research has shown that children living in poverty have higher concentrations of ACE scores, indicating a heavier allostatic load of toxic stress and adversity (Francis et al., 2018; Miller-Cribbs et al., 2016; Nurius et al., 2016) Therefore, it is logical to assume that students struggling with toxic stress, social barriers, economic burden, and inequality are at a higher risk for negative educational outcomes (Boatwright & Midcalf, 2019; Branson, 2020; Day et al., 2016). Additionally, the most noticeable indicator of toxic stress in children and adolescents is negative and non-compliant behavior (Allen-Meares & Montgomery, 2014). Because students spend an average of 35 to 40 hours a week in school, there is a very high probability struggling students are going to act out while in a classroom and a teacher is going to have to deal with the behaviors. Frauenholtz et al. (2017) states that teachers and other school staff members do not feel confident in dealing with the mental health and resulting behavioral issues that erupt during school hours due to their lack of knowledge, training, and experience with these complex issues.

Additionally, this lack of education and skills can cause a teacher to unknowingly exacerbate the problem. While teachers often have "war-stories" of atrocious behavior in class, they are often unsure how to respond. School social workers are uniquely equipped to assist with classroom de-escalation and students that are acting out with day-to-day behavior issues, connect students with needed community resources, assist families with consistency of behavior modification plans from school to home, and provide training, classroom assistance, and treatment planning with school faculty and staff (Anyon et al., 2016; Pace, 2018).

Schools are increasing their efforts to assist students with ongoing issues due to toxic stress and adversity. The ACE study revealed that the greatest deterrents to the negative effects of adversity are the presence of one consistent supportive relationship and positive coping skills (Felitti et al., 1998; Forster, Gower, Borowsky, & McMorris, 2017; Moses & Villodas, 2017). Those schools that have fully embraced this goal have found substantial, empirical success. After a concerted and school-wide commitment to addressing students at one high school with

trauma-informed interventions, the school saw a 75% decrease in fights; 85% decrease in suspensions; decrease in absenteeism, expulsions, and written referrals; and a five-fold increase in graduation rates (Redford et al., 2015). School social workers are central to developing, implementing, and sustaining similar efforts at the student, family, school, and community levels. School social workers are trained to address challenges by working with the strengths of individuals and their systems. When working with students struggling with toxic stress, a powerful dynamic and untapped resource for change is often student resilience (Gitterman & Knight, 2016). Resilience is a fluid and personal reservoir of physical, psychological, cognitive, and spiritual strengths and tangible resources that allows one to thrive, adapt, and cope (Berger, Abu-Raiya, & Benatov, 2016; Cox, Tice, & Long, 2019). Resiliency is a natural counterweight to toxic stress (Ben-Porat, 2015; Tassie, 2015), and while some students naturally have more reserves than others, this characteristic can be taught, learned, and practiced. Unfortunately, teachers do not have the dedicated time to assist students with developing and increasing their resiliency and coping skills like school social workers do. The presence of school social workers can improve behavioral and emotional outcomes for students struggling with traumatic aftermath (Heinrich, 2017). Additionally, progress in one area has the potential to positively affect other educational and life arenas. Positive outcomes are consistent across rural, suburban, and urban settings when districts invest in school social workers (Kelly et al., 2016).

Globalization

The typical American classroom composition also continues to change. Schools are experiencing increasing numbers of students who do not speak English as their first language and/or students that have come to the United Stated from other cultures. In 2017, it was estimated there were 5 million students in public school that were learning English (Sanchez, 2017). Therefore, 9.5% of students in the United States are currently learning English (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018), a primary skill to learning other subjects. Schools must accommodate students with language appropriate services, which can be difficult and costly. Rural schools especially struggle with securing teachers to assist students learning English due to financial limitations and lack of competent personnel (Provasnik et al., 2007). Policy directives from legislation impact the way schools provide services to ensure that regardless of immigration status, children are afforded an education (Segal et al., 2019). Additionally, research has shown that most English learning students initially struggle educationally, placing them at a greater risk of acting out, becoming involved in violent behavior, and/or dropping out of school (Greenberg, 2014; Sanchez 2017). School social workers can be pivotal in securing logistical services needed, implementing services in a manner that is readily accepted by students, assisting with negative behavioral presentations, monitoring students for absenteeism and school withdrawal, decreasing disruption in classrooms for other students, and assisting teachers with balancing the workload (Alsubaie, 2015; Segal et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the number of displaced, unregistered, and refugee children continues to increase, creating challenges for schools. In 2016, approximately 100,000 refugees were brought into the United States (Hartig, 2018), bringing with them different cultures, languages, and unresolved trauma surrounding leaving their country, family, friends, and way of life. Additionally, refugees often struggle with unique traumas, as they may struggle with being forced to flee a dangerous situation that was traumatic, while leaving others in hazardous

situations, creating feelings of survivor-guilt and abandonment (Bemak & Chung, 2017). Furthermore, refugees must also contend with the possibility that they may never be able to return to their former home, leaving them with an overwhelming pressure to embrace the foreign land as their new home (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2018). School social workers can provide the educational, emotional, family, and community resources refugee students need to be successful, while also collaborating with teachers and the family to increase positive assimilation and adaptation to new environments (Greenberg, 2014; Rahman, 2013).

Cultural Humility

With each new student comes a new set of cultural standards and dimensions of diversity. Research indicates that embracing diversity can be beneficial to all members of a classroom (Angioloni & Ames, 2015; Vanalstine, Cox, & Roden, 2015); however, it can also set up educational challenges (Chan & Ross, 2014). Hall's (1976) cultural iceberg is a seminal illustration of cultural differences that can create interest and intrigue in diversity, as well as prejudicial thinking and discriminatory practices. When differences are experienced, it is normal to have an aversive reaction, a feeling of superiority, and an innate feeling that the difference encountered is iniquitous (Vanalstine et al., 2015). Problems commonly erupt when cultural differences from the shallow and deep culture conflict in the classroom. Even the most culturally proficient teacher may struggle with cultural differences, insisting that students are being disrespectful and disobedient, when really it is an appropriate behavior for his/her culture (Branson, 2020). School social workers are well versed in cultural diversity, cultural humility, and the importance of appreciating a student's culture when approaching educational and behavioral problems (Greenberg, 2014). School social workers can intervene on behalf of the student and represent his/her cultural ideas in displayed behavior, as well as the teacher's cultural ideas to help navigate the conflict to resolution (Allen-Meares & Montgomery, 2014; Richard & Sosa, 2014).

Hidden Curriculum

The presence of the hidden curriculum is another barrier for some students that school social workers can help to transverse (Rahman, 2013; Teasley, Archuleta, & Miller, 2014). The unspoken behaviors and norms that are generally considered universal and expected by teachers (Schaefer, 2018) are often unknown to students from different cultures. The hidden curriculum is a poorly understood phenomena that is often unaccounted for in classrooms. Not only does it incorporate expected behaviors, but also values that the majority of students have learned through socialization (Safta, 2017). This gives students that have been in similar cultured classrooms a distinct advantage and serves as an overlooked bit of privilege students of different cultures are missing. Students from different cultures, non-dominant groups, or oppressed populations already struggle with more barriers in education (Sue, Rasheed, & Rasheed, 2016). This increases the chances of conflict with other students, teachers, and administration, which can result in a cascade of negative behavior and/or emotional issues. School social workers can provide needed advocacy efforts for students, encourage the school community to present themselves as life-long learners of culture, provide in-service trainings on cultural humility and multicultural education, work to educate students on expected behaviors and how to marry

student cultural values with new values being presented, and increase overall classroom efficiency for students and teachers (Alsubaie, 2015; Chan & Ross, 2014; Segal et al., 2019). Students who feel supported, validated, and represented are more likely to feel welcomed in educational settings, approach teachers and staff with needs, attend school on a regular basis, and perform better academically and behaviorally (Heinrich, 2017; Rahman, 2013; Teasley et al., 2014). Success in adjusting to cultural differences has a positive ripple effect on numerous other areas of the educational system, reinforcing the need for school social workers.

Money and Defining Roles

Trauma-related manifestations and cultural issues are a small part of the issues that school social workers respond to as part of their job. School social workers address the intricate web of multi-faceted issues that continue to erupt from systemic problems. Schools do not have a difficult time justifying the need for school social workers (Ayasse & Stone, 2015); however, there are two specific challenges to obtaining the correct ratio of school social worker-to-student population: budgetary deficits and the lack of role definition of the school social worker (Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2018). Because a significant portion of a school's operating budgets comes from local and property taxes, those communities with economically successful families and businesses receive more operating capital than poorer communities. Additionally, there is research to show that the gap between the wealthier school districts and poorer school districts is widening (Turner et al., 2016). Therefore, there exists a tangible piece of institutional discrimination—the schools that need school social workers the most, that is, schools with the highest population of poor, vulnerable, oppressed, and/or rural students, are the schools that are least likely to be able to afford school social workers (McLaughlin, Shoff, & Demi, 2014). Although federal and state programs may supply additional income to schools with certain percentages of students that fall below the poverty line, most states have seen a decrease in the amount they receive over the past decade (Turner et al., 2016). Additionally, this does not make up for increase in social services needed in schools with concentrations of students in poverty. Often government or program-based monies are restricted in how the funds can be used. For example, needed computers, textbooks, and improvements to the school library may be permitted, but not the hiring of school social workers since the hiring of personnel is an ongoing response as opposed to a one-time response. Additionally, if a school is able to hire a school social worker, the role is often district wide, creating a caseload that is too large to effectively manage (Kelly et al., 2016). The NASW standards concerning school social workers recommend a 250:1 student-to-school social worker ratio, and in school districts with students requiring intensive services, the suggested ratio drops to 50:1 (Dietsche, 2018).

Currently there are more resource officers, police, or safety officers in schools than school social workers. As of 2016, there were 96,000 public school in the United States; 27,000 of these schools had the presence of resource officers, but only 23,000 had a school social worker. Therefore, approximately 10 million students attend schools without access to a school social worker (Willingham, 2018). The increase in school shootings and violence has motivated schools to invest monies in resource officers (Bent-Goodley, 2018); however, the presence of school social workers could drastically decrease the prevalence of violence in schools and increase the overall level of safety of students (Cowan, Vailancourt, Rossen, & Pollitt, 2013; Day et al., 2016; Pace, 2018). It is imperative that school social worker associations, social worker

programs at the BSW and MSW levels, educational institutions, and legislators work together to advocate for increased funding for school social workers. Additionally, innovative methods of support also need to be developed, such as grant-sponsored positions with school-committed sustainability. Some school districts have partnered with local community agencies to share the cost of school social workers for a specific time period. Usually the community agency initially provides the bulk of financial support for the positions, then gradually moves the cost of school social workers to the school district until it becomes a fully supported budget item (Branson, 2020). Due to the clearly demonstrated need for school social workers, financial barriers should be aggressively approached for solutions.

A second barrier to schools obtaining school social workers is poor role definition (Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2018). Unfortunately, there is a common misperception that guidance counselors and/or school psychologists provide the same services as school social workers (Richard & Sosa, 2014; Sherman, 2016). Guidance counselors are primarily responsible for the educational path of students while in school and assist with launching students to the next step in their future (American School Counselor Association, 2019), whereas school psychologists are primarily responsible for psychological testing and academic evaluations to aid in the assessment of specific learning disorders or other mental health issues that constitute individualized education plans (National Association of School Psychologists, 2019). While guidance counselors and school psychologists are both vital parts of the multidisciplinary team, they do not have the time or resources to also provide the services of school social workers. Although school social workers have been an established school position since 1906, first called "visiting teachers" (Segal et al., 2019), they continue to be marginalized due to misperceptions of their role (Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2018; Sherman, 2016). Therefore, it is important to provide awareness and education concerning what school social workers are and what this position can do for a school system. Additionally, when schools obtain school social workers it is important to define their roles to decrease over- or under-utilization of the position. Well-defined roles also prevent resentment between school staff and faculty members and decreases gaps in service provision (Richard & Sosa, 2014). Schools that acquire school social workers report an increase in assessments and evaluations of student needs, comprehensive service coordination, confidence in providing the services by the multidisciplinary team, and students proactively reaching out for assistance. Additionally, school social workers provide encouragement to other school staff in times of student regression in behavioral presentations (Ayasse & Stone, 2015). Often, once a school system obtains school social workers, they quickly become dependent on their services, and work diligently to keep the positions, even in times of economic hardship (Segal et al., 2019).

Because of the complex nature of students, the demand for on-site social services, awareness of traumatic aftermath, attention to mental health needs of students and their resulting behaviors, the increasing globalization of the classroom, the educational standards that must be met, and accountability to evidence-based practices, there is plenty of work to go around for the members of the multidisciplinary educational team. In the policy recommendations and cited best practices for establishing a framework for safer and more successful schools, acquiring school social workers is noted multiple times (Bent-Goodley, 2018; Cowan et al., 2013; Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2018; Kelly et al., 2016). Awareness of the specific duties of school social workers, how school social workers differ from other support staff, and the benefits to

students, families, schools, and communities is needed to increase schools acquiring school social workers. Additionally, schools need to be dedicated to ensuring that school social workers are hired at the appropriate ratio and their roles are well defined to effectively complement other members of the multi-disciplinary team. Social work organizations, educational organizations, school social worker preparatory programs, and community leaders need to advocate for increased funds to hire school social workers. Special legislation needs to be drafted to fund school social work positions for especially challenged school districts, such as rural settings. Furthermore, community social agencies need to partner with schools to devise innovative methods to obtain and sustain school social worker positions. The increase of school social workers equates to increased safety and success for students and schools, today and tomorrow.

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