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Rules, Roles, and Practices: Exploring School Social Worker Preparation for Practice

Kimberly M. Knox
New Mexico State University, kimknox@nmsu.edu

Stacy Gherardi
New Mexico State University, sgherard@nmsu.edu

Allison Stoner
New Mexico State University, alstoner@nmsu.edu

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Abstract

At present, there is significant variability in the United States in regards to pre-service education and licensing requirements for school social workers. Studies have suggested that this variability impacts practice and may limit perceptions of the profession. The state of New Mexico requires a Master of Social Work (MSW) degree in order to practice as a school social worker but does not require any school-specific coursework, fieldwork, or training. This mixed-methods study describes findings from a survey of 84 school social workers in New Mexico which assessed perceptions of their preparation for practice. Quantitative survey items suggested that participants felt generally unprepared for practice when they began, although school-based fieldwork and supervision by a school social worker positively impacted perceived preparation. Open-ended survey responses outlined specific challenges practitioners faced as they entered the field, described training or experiences they felt could have mediated these challenges, and presented pathways for professional growth taken by school social workers once they were in the field. Findings suggest that lack of school-specific training in the pre-service and early-career phases of practice presented concerns for practitioners and should be an area of focused attention for social work educators, researchers, and policy makers.

Keywords

Rules, Roles, and Practices: Exploring School Social Worker Preparation for Practice

As a second century of school social work begins, the field faces critical questions regarding how to define the profession and effectively train and support practitioners. While roles for school social work have followed the general trend in social work toward more clinical and direct practice orientations (Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2018), a push to return to the more interdisciplinary, macro-oriented roots of the profession has emerged (Charles & Stone, 2019; Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2018). Shifts in practice orientation have direct implications for training and preparation. Research has found that school social workers in states with more stringent licensure or certification requirements tend to report more ecologically oriented practice than those in states with fewer requirements (Thompson et al, 2019). This relationship between school social work roles/practices and pre-service preparation likely contributes to a wide range of early-career experiences among school social workers. In turn, the variation in these experiences further shape conceptions of the profession and those that enter it. Knowing this, the relationship between training and later practice roles for school social workers presents an important area of research that has the potential to deeply impact the profession.

This study sought to shed light on these issues through a retrospective exploration of school social worker experiences upon entering the field in a state with no school-specific pre-service educational requirements. This data came from a collaborative effort between the state chapter of NASW and the researchers in order to obtain state-specific data that could describe experiences and needs in light of the current environment for pre-service preparation and school social work credentialing in the state. Current or retired school social workers in New Mexico completed a survey which asked them to rate the degree to which they felt prepared for practice in schools upon entering the field. Specifically, they rated their perceived preparation in regards to education policy, special education policy, assessment, intervention, and interprofessional collaboration. They also replied to a series of open-ended survey questions assessing challenges they experienced as new professionals, tools, or opportunities they wish they had prior to entering the field, and their pathways toward increasing competency in areas of weakness over time. In all, these questions sought to help researchers answer the following questions: 1) What challenges do new school social workers face upon entering the field? 2) What tools or experiences do they wish they had prior to entering the field? 3) How do they make up for any gaps between the demands of their job and their pre-service training over time? Because New Mexico is one state which does not require school-specific training or education, analysis of the experiences of New Mexico school social workers upon beginning practice provided an important

opportunity to understand the needs of those entering the field and how best pre- and in-service education can meet those needs.

Background

History and Evolution of the Field

In 2018, there were 43,190 social workers employed in elementary and secondary schools (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Their numbers are projected to expand 7% by 2028, (Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), representing a significant and growing sector of the social work workforce. The general role of the school social worker has been conceptualized as providing support and resources to students and families so they can be successful in the school environment to remove barriers to education (Lee, 2007).

While the profession has its roots in the community-oriented work of the *visiting teachers* movement in the early 1900's, recent history has tended to allocate school social workers to address the needs of students that could not adequately be addressed in the larger school environment (Phillippo & Blosser, 2013). During the civil rights movement social workers mobilized to begin to move in to a community school model which makes the school the epicenter resources and supports (Allen-Meares et al., 1986). School social workers also engage in community, organizational and societal social work to support students in school by bringing to light key issues, communicating to educational stake holders and impacting policy change (Lee, 2007).Since the implementation of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) in 1975 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA), school social workers have played a primary role in providing casework and individual support services for students with disabilities and less time in their more traditional role of casework in the general education environment (Sherman, 2016).

Despite this emphasis on direct practice to support individual student needs, school social workers currently provide individual, family and group-based intervention, provide support services for students with disabilities, and are informed about child welfare, attendance, and migrant policies (Shaffer, 2007). They provide evidence-based practices for long-term individualized interventions when a student is experiencing a significant academic, behavioral, or emotional challenge that continues to impact their functioning academically, behaviorally, or emotionally in the educational setting and assist in data collection to identify potential need and eligibility for special education services (Alvarez et al., 2012).

Roles and Responsibilities

Given the range of roles that school social workers play, professionals entering this field need to be prepared to meet the diverse needs of school systems including supporting students, parents, teachers, and administrators in response to a wide range of social, emotional, and behavioral concerns that can pose barriers to

educational success. In an effort to better define the role of the school social worker, practice principles and frameworks have emerged. Both The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the School Social Work Association of America have identified the importance of how school social work supports students, families, and communities. However, NASW provides school social workers with *standards of practice* and *guiding principles* whereas the School Social Work Association of America developed a *practice model* to outline the skills required and supports that school social workers can provide (Frey et al., 2013). Both aides are to be used congruently as they both offer guidance to the school social worker as to practice models, roles, and standards of practice.

NASW, a contemporary professional social work organization founded in 1955 which has been influential to the field of school social work, outlined guiding principles for practice. (Alvarez et al., 2012). These principles included advocating for equal opportunity for education, removing barriers to opportunity, and social justice. Specific activities that reflected these principles included the promotion and provision of tiered supports for positive behavior intervention through Response to Intervention frameworks, provision of short-term interventions to combat academic challenges, and encouragement of social and emotional behavior supports.

The School Social Work Association of America practice model for school social work (Frey et al., 2013) presented another conceptualization of school social work practice. This model placed students at the center of a framework built on h*ome-school-community linkages, ethical guidelines and education policy, education rights and advocacy, and data-based decision making.* The model also asserted three critical roles for school social work: 1) *Providing evidence-based education, behavior, and mental health services, 2) Promoting a school climate and culture conducive to student learning and teaching excellence, and 3) Maximizing access to school and community-based resources* (Frey et al., 2013). This model seeks to situate school social work praxis within a model which emphasizes the broad and unique skills of school social workers and highlights the range of potential activities in which school social workers might engage in order to better define the role of the school social worker.

Despite the ways in which this model incorporates multiple levels and domains of practice, school social workers generally report they less frequently engage in interventions aimed at improving school climate and that they are less involved in primary preventative interventions than in direct-practice activities (Kelly et al, 2016). Importantly, data suggests that school social workers in states with specific school social work certification requirements engaged schoolwide supports and community partners in their work more often than school social workers in states without certification requirements (Kelly et al, 2016). These findings led the 2016 assessment of the School Social Work Practice Model (Kelly et. al., 2016) to conclude that many components of the model are not readily

reflected in the day-to day work of school social workers and that this has direct implications for training practitioners to build capacity for such larger-scale intervention.

School Social Work Pre-Service Training

Most states require that school social workers hold an MSW (Sabatino et al., 2011), although some states have BSW-level practitioners. Specifically, 27 states require school social workers hold a master's degree, thirteen require a bachelor's degree and ten do not specify certifications (Mumm & Bye, 2011). Outside of this general level of social work education, however, requirements for school social workers vary from state to state as State Departments of Education do not agree or have consistent requirements. Some states do not have any endorsements or certification requirements for school social workers (Sabatino et al., 2011), while others require extensive school-social work specific education, field work, and testing. Horton et al., (2017) reviewed state requirements regarding exams for school social work and found that only two states require a basic skills exam and a content exam. Twenty-seven states only require licensure through the state social work board, thirteen had no license or certification requirements, and ten states require a basic skills exam. Some states, like Illinois, required both basic skills and content exams although this raised concerns from students in the field regarding the amount of documentation and the resulting impact on diversity and access in the field. This research raises important questions about balancing the need to ensure that school social workers are adequately prepared for practice in this setting without placing barriers on the field which adversely impact access for new practitioners or inadvertently limit the number of emerging school social workers.

There are 44 accredited MSW degree programs with a concentration in school social work listed on the Council on Social Work Education (2019) website. While CSWE does not specify competencies or curriculum related to school social work, it does state that school social workers should have specialized knowledge of education systems or should seek out specialized training (Alvarez et al, 2012). Allen-Meares and Montgomery (2014), suggest that pre-service programs for school social work should include professors that are knowledgeable about the most recent research in the field of school social work and encourage projects that enable them to communicate with school social workers in the global community.

Berzin & O'Conner (2010) reviewed 27 MSW program syllabi from universities that have school social work courses. They found most programs covered school social work history, clinical practice, Special Education and collaborating with parents. While clinical practice was mentioned, practices relating to group work and specific evidence-based practice techniques were lacking. The study found that course content on syllabi addressing Response to

Intervention (RTI), Positive Behavior Supports (PBS), school failure, and the achievement gap, was sparse. The authors concluded that MSW pre-service content should include preparation for educating school social workers on multi-tiered school-based intervention (Berzin & O'Conner, 2010).

As challenges to the legitimacy of school social work as a field arise (Callahan Sherman, 2016), it is reasonable to question whether the wide variability in training (and resulting variability in roles) contributes to these challenges. For comparison, school psychologists and school counselors have specific pre-service education/certification requirements in all 50 states for education, experiences, and examinations, a fact that likely legitimizes their expertise in schools (Altschuler & Webb, 2009). School social workers feel the need to explain and clarify their capabilities as administrators typically do not understand or utilize their expertise (Forenza & Eckhardt, 2020; Garrett 2006)

Standards and Credentialing

Despite these differences in educational requirements, clear suggestions for improving school social work pre-service preparation emerge from the literature. In addition to generalist social work preparation, pre-service programs should focus on advocating for availability for high-quality education for all children, accessibility to services, and education including culturally responsive practices (Allen-Meares & Montgomery, 2014). In addition, school social work curriculum should include training on school culture and engaging with school leadership to utilize strategies to influence the school community including skills for committee participation, cultural competence training, developing presentations, and collecting and using data to help inform decisions of the school system-wide (Berzin & O'Connor, 2010).

Even though NASW offers a school social worker endorsement and SSWA outlines national guidelines for practice, there are no national standards for school social work that govern training or practice. Additionally, The NASW School Social Worker Certification does not require any education or training specific to schools (only the documentation of supervision of practice in schools). As the number of school social workers continues to increase and the needs of students and schools diversify, MSW curriculum programs need to examine if lack of specialized training at the pre-service level leads school districts to believe recent graduates are underqualified for practice in schools (Sabatino et al., 2011). The development of nationally accepted standardized credentialing and pre-service training for school social workers has been posed as one pathway to ensure the competency of practitioners in this field (Mumm & Bye, 2011).

Gaps in the literature exist in identifying the variation of pre-service experiences and how those experiences prepare social workers for a career in schools. The following retrospective exploration of the experiences of new school social workers in New Mexico, a state without any school-specific training

requirements for school social workers, seeks to add to the literature informing such proposals.

Methods

Sample

This study analyzed data from a 2018 survey of school social workers across the state of New Mexico. Current or former school social workers were sent a link to the survey via the electronic mailing list of the state chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, who had partnered in the creation and distribution of the survey. Additional participants were recruited through direct email outreach to school social workers listed on school and district websites, and through emails sent to electronic mailing lists utilized by informal networks of school social workers across the state. Participants completed an online survey that provided information about their own practice, educational, and licensure background. Additional demographic information was not collected in an effort to limit the length and scope of the survey in order to quickly get and use results to inform professional development opportunities. The survey also collected information about their experiences as new school social workers and how those experiences changed over time. This exploratory survey was intended to provide basic information about social workers in this field to inform ongoing efforts at professional development and gather information that could inform policies around licensure and preparation. The survey was open from March 2018 through November 2018 during which 84 current or former school social workers responded.

New Mexico is a large state by area that is sparsely populated. Nearly half of the state's population lives in the Albuquerque-metro area with the rest of the population clustered near a few mid-sized and many small towns. In 2010 it was estimated that there were approximately 200 school social workers in New Mexico (Whittlesey-Jerome, personal communication, 2010). More recently, communication with school social work administrators in the three largest districts in the state provided an estimate of approximately 200 school social workers in these four districts alone (including charter schools in these metro areas). Importantly, these districts are significantly larger than any others in the state and systematically employ a much larger number of social workers that other areas. Publicly available information on websites of 78 other smaller districts and informal communication with school social work leaders suggested that 80-100 additional school social workers in the state would be a reasonable estimate. Several smaller rural districts do not hire school social workers directly but rely on contracted service-providers. These factors make it difficult to clarify the number of school social workers in the state. Using the information available, we estimated a population of 300 yielding a response rate of approximately 28%.

Of the 84 respondents, 62 identified as Licensed Independent Social Worker (LISW) or Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW), while16 identified as Licensed Master's Social Worker (LMSW). Four were not licensed and two identified as "other." Of the six that identified as not licensed or "other," five were

former school social workers and one worked at a charter school. 84.5% of respondents were employed in traditional public schools, 9.5% in charter schools and 6% in other settings such as school-based head start. 86.4% reported their highest earned degree to be a master's in social work compared to 3.6% who held a bachelor in social work only. Most likely, the respondents who earned a BSW were grandfathered in to be able to provide social work services in the schools due to changes in credentialing in the early 2000's after which the MSW was required.

In regards to experience in school social work 25% had 0-5 years, 15.5% had 6-10, 15.5% had 11-15, 14.3% had 16-20 years and 29.8% had over 20 years; only two respondents reported school social work experience outside of New Mexico. Exactly half of the respondents participated in school-based field practicum during their social work education whereas half had not had any experience in schools prior to their first job in this profession. 56% of respondents reported that their MSW concentration was "advanced generalist" compared to 35.7% who identified "another concentration" (such as mental health) and 8.3% reported a concentration in school social work. Only 19% of participants had taken any courses that addressed practice in schools during their social work education. For those participants that had a clinical or independent license, 54% received supervision from a school social worker prior to licensure whereas 46% had not.

Data Collection and Analysis

The survey included both closed (quantitative) and open-ended (qualitative) items to allow for multiple forms of analysis. Closed-ended items asked participants to use a Likert scale from 1-5 (1=Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree to indicate the degree to which they agreed with series of statements relating to their experiences when they began working as a school social worker. These statements assessed their sense of preparation for school-based practice including school-specific assessment and intervention skills, their general knowledge of education policy, knowledge of special education, and their experiences with interprofessional collaboration. These areas were chosen to help assess needs and experiences in areas of unique interest to state social work organizations, providers of professional development, and pre-service education providers. In addition to these questions, they were then asked to respond to open-ended items assessing what challenges they experienced as new practitioners, what tools they believe could have prepared them for these challenges, and what they had done over time to help address any initial challenges they encountered. The survey was expected to take 10-15 minutes. Response times ranged from 5-20 minutes.

Due to limitations with sample size and the use of an exploratory survey tool, quantitative data analysis was limited to descriptive statistics for each survey item. Mean scores on Likert scale items are recorded below.

Qualitative analysis of open-ended survey items utilized inductive content analysis based on Creswell's (2012) articulation of a systematic grounded-theory design. Participants were asked to identify 1) Areas of practice for which they felt unprepared or challenges they experienced upon beginning practice, 2) Experiences or course content that could have equipped them for those challenges or better prepared them, and 3) How/where they obtained any knowledge or skills that they lacked upon beginning practice. Initial coding of this data separated responses into three categories: initial challenges, retrospective tools, and changes/supports. Following this segmentation, axial coding took place to identify emergent themes within each group. Two researchers independently coded responses in each of the three areas and then compared and refined emergent themes in order to ensure inter-rater reliability. Finalized themes that emerged are identified and are described below.

Researcher Positionality

The researchers involved in coding qualitative data are former or current school social workers. One is a graduate MSW program that at the time had a concentration in family therapy in a multicultural setting in New Mexico and another is a graduate of an MSW program with a concentration in school social work from another state. They did not respond to the survey, although they have experience with school social work practice in New Mexico, either practicing directly or supporting practitioners. Although their interest in this research stems from their own experiences, the coding methodology they utilized focused on discretely identifying themes that emerged directly from responses.

Results

Analysis of Closed-Ended Items

Participants indicated the degree to which they agreed with a series of statements that described their preparation for various aspects of their practice as school social workers when they first began (1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly Agree). Table 1 lists the mean responses to each statement for the entire sample. Mean scores were below three in the areas of: general preparation (2.57), knowledge of education policy (2.43), knowledge of special education (2.53), knowledge of school-specific assessment (2.185), and knowledge of school-specific interventions (2.54). Items assessing ease of collaboration with teachers (3.27) and administrators (3.08) were slightly higher. Researchers calculated a margin of error of 10% or ±.5 based on the estimated sample size.

Table 1: *Mean Responses to Statements about Initial Preparation and Experiences*

Statement – When I began practice as a school social worker in New Mexico…	Mean response* (n=84)
I felt generally prepared for practice in schools	2.5679

I had adequate knowledge of education policy to support my practice	2.4321
I had adequate knowledge of special education to support my practice	2.5309
I had adequate knowledge of school-specific assessment practices and tools	2.1852
I had adequate knowledge of school-specific interventions	2.5432
I found it easy to collaborate with teachers	3.2716
I found it easy to collaborate with administrators	3.0864

*Margin of error=10% or ±.5

Analysis of Open-Ended Responses

Respondents were asked three open-ended questions to assess their experiences as new school social workers and the impact of the training, education, and other supports on those experiences. The first question which sought to assess *initial challenges*, asked respondents to describe any areas of school social work practice for which they felt especially unprepared for or challenges they encountered when they began practice. The second question, categorized as *retrospective tools,* asked participants to describe any course content or practice experiences that they felt could have better prepared them for school social work practice. The third question, categorized as *changes and supports,* asked participants to describe how and where they obtained relevant skills and/or knowledge to meet any identified challenges. Emergent themes are described in detail below.

Initial Challenges

In general, respondents reported difficulties upon entering the field of school social work. One participant stated, "I was unprepared for ALL of it. I learned everything the hard way." Thirty-seven respondents described specific challenges which fell into three main themes: school-specific *skill* deficits, school-specific *knowledge* deficits, and role issues.

School-Specific Skill Deficits. Three key areas of skill deficits emerged from respondents: Advocacy skills (especially relating to special education), skills for school-based assessment and progress monitoring, and crisis intervention skills. Importantly, these themes were not suggestive of a general lack of skill in advocacy, assessment, or crisis response. Rather, participants explained that they did enter practice with the ability to employ these skills as they were required *in schools*. The unique types of advocacy, assessment, and crisis intervention required in school social work practice were a significant initial challenge for six of the thirty-seven respondents. In the area of Special Education advocacy, respondents noted

limitations in navigating the stigma associated with Special Education while providing services to students and advocating for their needs on a larger scale. One noted:

> *Teachers and staff who work with special ed students are seen as dragging the school down...That made it difficult to provide services to students because they felt the stigma.*

Respondents reported that they did not begin their practice with the necessary skills in school-specific assessment skills in order to conduct Functional Behavior Assessments (FBA), write Behavioral Intervention Plans (BIP), progress monitor interventions, or administer educational testing that would qualify students for special education. Writing goals based on assessment was another challenge identified. In regards to crisis intervention, respondents reported they did not have skills for intervening with or deescalating physically aggressive students when they began practice.

School-Specific Knowledge Deficits. Seventeen out of thirty-seven respondents articulated an area of limited knowledge that adversely impacted their early practice. These included lack of knowledge of general education policy, lack of knowledge of special education policy, and lack of disability-specific knowledge including special education eligibility or evidence-based practices for working with students with disabilities. Three respondents reported specific initial challenges in their knowledge of Autism Spectrum Disorders whereas two mentioned Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and one mentioned issues related to child development for students with cognitive impairments. While five respondents described "education policy," "education law," or some variation of this as initial challenges, nine respondents (more than any other category) specifically identified special education law/policy as an initial challenge.

They reported feeling overwhelmed by the importance of general laws and policies in the educational setting of which they had minimal or no knowledge. In particular, they described limited knowledge of special education including the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA), eligibility requirements for special education, and responsibilities surrounding the IEP. Many of the respondents used the term "overwhelming" when describing understanding issues surrounding special education policy. One respondent wrote, "I was totally unprepared for IDEA application and practice. I wasn't aware nor trained on IDEA nor the local and state laws governing my practice with children."

Role Issues. Eleven respondents identified role issues as initial challenges. These responses included issues relating to poorly defined roles for school social work or the challenges of working in a "host setting." Some respondents reported challenges working in a multisystem work environment which required

understanding the difference between psychoeducational intervention, direct practice, and behavior modification. While they had knowledge and skills for these approaches, they struggled to know when and how to use them due to challenges with role definition. Other respondents identified a lack of support from teachers and administrators who did not understand their role as a social worker. One respondent described:

> *Back when I started in school social work, I have found administrators and teachers overall have never been supportive and do not appear to understand the role of the school social worker in special education.*

A small number of respondents specifically described special education teachers as supportive, while general education teachers tended to not be responsive or willing to work with them. One respondent felt that they were undervalued as an LCSW when compared to a school psychologist:

> *School psychologists' expertise is often more valued more than School Social Workers, with their LCSWs, even though most school psychologists are not licensed mental health providers and cannot practice outside the schools.*

Retrospective Tools

In response to the challenges identified, respondents identified a variety of tools that they felt would have improved their preparation for practice as school social workers. These included school-specific fieldwork, interprofessional learning, and pre-service coursework, as well as improved onboarding and professional development for new school social workers. Responses in this area generally expressed a desire for increased pre-service education/experience or early-career training that would ensure that practitioners were equipped with knowledge of school-specific *rules*, and school-specific *roles*, and that they had the skills to implement school-specific *practices*.

Rules. Fifteen respondents reported that policy specific learning would have improved their preparation. Special education policy (including IDEA, the history of special education and policies for assessment and eligibility) FERPA, and HIPAA were given as examples of *rules* that governed practice in schools and of which practitioners sought increased pre-service awareness. Respondents noted that their clinical training did little to prepare them for the policies and resulting ethical questions that arose in schools. One participant wrote:

> *When I was in grad school, it was all a focus on being a generalist. Nothing was offered that prepared me for any of the fields I have worked in during*

my career of 20+ years. And school social work was not presented to us as an option at the time that I was in school.

While most suggested that a course in education or special education would have been helpful, one respondent also suggested that this policy education could have been provided by the school district but was not.

Roles. Six respondents reflected a desire for training of experience that could have improved their understanding of the role of the school social worker prior to entering the field. They identified specific courses that could be offered to help define the functions of school social work and train practitioners appropriately. They also identified opportunities for interprofessional learning with other education professionals (such as teachers, nurses, and counselors) as potentially valuable tools given the importance of these teams to school social work. One respondent discussed having joint graduate electives with teachers and administrative candidates as a deeply valuable opportunity.

Practices. Respondents reported several specific areas of practice knowledge and experience that would have supported their work as school social workers. In particular, they described wishing they had entered the field with increased knowledge of/experience with school-based assessment tools, FBA/BIP, writing social work reports, and evidence-based practices/interventions in schools. Respondents also identified training and experience with goal writing and group work with students, parents, and teachers as important practice knowledge they would have benefitted from.

Changes and Supports

Respondents described the ways in which they sought to increase their knowledge and skills in response to the challenges they encountered. Participants described *learning from others*, *learning on their own*, and *professional learning* as the primary ways they responded to the challenges they encountered.

Learning from Others. Respondents identified they learned from others via interprofessional learning, supervision, and peer support. Respondents sought out diagnosticians, special education teachers, and educational assistants who shared their experiences and knowledge. A respondent identified, "Support from other school social workers involved with the NASWNM Alliance for School Social Workers" as being a resource. Some respondents participated in clinical supervision provided by their employer and others sought out peer consultation with veteran school social workers. One explained that since they were an independently licensed practitioner, the school district did not provide them with clinical supervision, so they paid for a school social worker to mentor them.

Learning on Our Own. Respondents discussed learning from experience or "learning the hard way" as their primary means of understanding their role or making up gaps in knowledge or skills. They stated they learned from trial and

error, learning how to become more assertive, engaging in self-directed learning, attending meetings/trainings, and reading relevant resources and policy/procedure documents. No respondents identified a specific website or journal that they utilized to enhance their knowledge. One respondent identified:

> *I knew I had to gain knowledge I just didn't know how much I had to learn so quickly so that I could function. My first step was to talk to special education teachers, Diags and the head teachers in special ed…School Admin are very busy they didn't have time to really share the skills and knowledge about specifics. I attended a lot of trainings on my own and I read a lot on my own. The school did provide Professional Development but on therapeutic interventions. A more concentrated effort should have been made for new employees to learn the basic not of SW but of the school system's procedures and protocols.*

Respondents sought out knowledge about the various systems involved in school social work, including district-level bureaucracy and special education. One respondent wrote,

> *It took me about two years as a school social worker to really get an in-depth understanding of how special education functions within the school system.*

Professional Learning. Seven respondents described gaining knowledge from professional learning experiences. Less than half reported that the school districts where they were employed provided them with continuing education, including therapeutic interventions, skill development, and best practice interventions. Respondents acknowledged therapeutic intervention professional development but lacked professional development on the basics of evaluation, education report writing, special education law and responsibilities, and education mandates. Others explained that there were minimal training opportunities available or they had to seek professional development training outside of the school district.

Discussion

This study sought to understand the experiences of school social workers as they entered the field in a state that does not require school-specific training or education prior to practice . Retrospective survey responses were designed to help researchers understand what challenges these practitioners faced upon entering the field, what tools or experiences they wished they had accessed prior to entering the field, and how they addressed any gaps between the demands of their job and pre-service training over time.

Quantitative data from Likert-scale items suggested that respondents felt generally underprepared for practice upon entering the field. This lack of preparation was felt generally and in regard to four areas of school-specific practice: knowledge of education policy, knowledge of special education, knowledge of school-based assessments and knowledge of school-based interventions. Mean scores indicated that participants "disagreed" that they had adequate knowledge in these areas, even when adjusting for the margin of error. Scores relating to two addition areas of school-specific practice, ability to engage in interprofessional relationships with teachers and administrators, were slightly higher although they remained below four even when adjusting for margin of error. The general sense of under-preparedness among participants in this study was pervasive. The reality that no areas achieved mean scores of four or higher (which would have reflected that practitioners at minimum "agreed" that they were prepared for that aspect of practice) should be of concern to researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers alike.

Open-ended questions yielded important information about the types of challenges most commonly reflected by new practitioners, respondents recalled challenges related to school-specific *skills* for crisis intervention, assessment, and advocacy. They also recalled challenges related to lack of school-specific *knowledge,* much of which related to limited knowledge of education policy and special education; advanced knowledge of needs and interventions for specific types of disabilities including Autism, Cognitive Disabilities, and ADHD were also identified. Finally, respondents described challenges relating to *roles* including confusion about their specific role in the school environment, and either challenges or support that came from collaboration with other school-based professionals.

Open-ended responses also identified experiences that participants believed could have prevented or mediated these challenges. Respondents reported that specific course work in school-specific tasks (such as conducting FBA's and creating BIP's) and interventions would have improved their preparation for practice. In addition, policy-specific training around laws such as IDEA, FERPA, and HIPPA would have been beneficial. Finally, opportunities to better understand school social work roles were often wished for by participants. In particular, opportunities for interprofessional learning with other school-based professionals such as teachers, administrators, and other ancillary providers were identified as experiences that would've supported preparation for practice.

In order to address identified challenges, respondents sought out opportunities to learn and build their skills. Respondents described professional development, peer-supported learning, or self-directed learning as important tools for building competence in school settings. While some respondents attributed growth to school/district provided professional development or consultation, the majority of respondents who described meeting their needs for professional growth

through learning "the hard way," self-directed, or self-initiated learning opportunities. They shared experiences of seeking out books and courses when such resources were not provided by their employer and seeking supervision or support from other social workers as well as other school-based professionals. Respondents were self-advocates and sought out training, supervision, and consultation to overcome challenges in the schools.

Overall, responses to the open-ended questions supported and extended findings from the Likert scale items. While no open-ended items specifically asked whether or not participants felt prepared for practice, in identifying challenges they encountered many described extensively their overall sense of under-preparedness. Open-ended responses also seemed to identify challenges relating to school-specific assessment, special education knowledge, and education policy broadly that mirrored findings on closed-ended questions. Finally, there appeared to be convergence between quantitative and qualitative data regarding the value of peer support and supervision as a critical pathway for professional growth among school social workers.

Implications

Several key conclusions emerged from this research. Critically, participants in this study reflected that they did not feel they had adequate skills and knowledge to meet the requirements of their job when they began. Participants clearly articulated specific knowledge and skills that could have been provided in their pre-service education which would have supported their efficacy including specific coursework or experience that addressed social work roles, skills and policy-knowledge specific to schools; interprofessional learning also appeared to be an important potential tool. In addition to concerns about pre-service preparation, in-service training and support was limited and participants suggested that there were not clear pathways to get needed knowledge and skills once they were in practice, requiring heavy reliance on independent learning to do so. Finally, participants noted that foundational issues stemming from the lack of clarity around the role of school social work impacted their efficacy upon entering the field. Implications support findings from previous research that school social workers experience lack of legitimacy of social work in schools from administrators, teachers, and educational stakeholders (Forenza & Eckhardt, 2020; Garrett, 2006). Perhaps seeking role integration for social workers to work with schools is crucial to create collaborative spaces to utilize their systematic approach benefit students, families, and schools (Gherardi & Whittlesey_Jerome, 2017).

These findings hold important implications for practice, policy, and research around school social work roles, training, and credentialing. Data from this study support the notion that school social work is a specialized field of practice which requires knowledge and skills that are unlikely to be addressed through generalist pre-service preparation. Our findings support conclusions from Forenza

& Eckhardt (2020) that school social workers would benefit from pre-service classes in special education and educational policy to prepare them for a career as a school social workers. Data also suggest that practitioners in states like New Mexico may be largely on their own in seeking to access such specialized knowledge/skills once they enter the field, implicating a need for in-service access to field-specific training.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. The sample size required a margin of error of ten percent. Although five percent would've yielded stronger data, a review of responses suggests that the margin of error did not impact conclusions. Beyond this, the reliance on retrospective ratings of perceived competence has limitations. If practitioners consider their early experiences in light of their current knowledge and skill set, they may be inclined to overemphasize under-preparedness. However, many participants were still early in their career at the time of the survey and the use of retrospective data for more experienced practitioners could also have yielded important insights about potential remedies. Importantly, this survey examined practitioners' *feelings* of preparation/efficacy but cannot speak to the impact this had on their actual efficacy. While the mixed-methods format of the survey allowed researchers to assess experiences in multiple ways, it is possible that responses on Likert scale items (which were presented first) may have primed respondents to answer open-ended questions in ways that reflected the areas addressed in the first part of the survey. For example, specific questions about their preparation relating to education policy, special education, assessment, intervention, or collaboration may have made it more likely that these would emerge as themes from open-ended responses.

Finally, this study focused on practitioners in one state in which school social workers are required to hold an MSW degree, although there are no school-specific training requirements for school social workers. While personal demographic information was not collected from participants in this study, this information could have provided interesting opportunities to compare this sample to the state as a whole or to school social workers in other regions. Additionally, the majority of school social work positions in New Mexico are explicitly limited to provision of special education related services. Findings reflect this context and are not fully generalizable to other states with different pre-service requirements or practice roles. More research exploring the relationship between standards/credentials and practice models as well as the relationship between pre-service preparation and practice experience is needed in order to fully interpret the findings from this study.

Conclusion

School social workers play a critical role in the lives of students across the country. In underserved or rural communities with limited access to mental health

care and social services, school social workers can be a lifeline for children and families. This is the reality in many New Mexico communities, although this study suggests that gaps between training and practice could inhibit perceived efficacy of social workers in New Mexico and places like it. The pervasive reality of *on-the job* learning in settings where there is rarely another school social worker from whom to learn and limited access to in-service training from other providers should be a concern to school social workers and educational leaders alike. While many factors shape debates around the need for national standards for school social work and whether states adopt school social work-specific credentials, this study suggests that their absence negatively impacted self-efficacy of new practitioners. This data serves as a call to continue the dialogue around credentialing and preparation for school social work as these issues directly impact the practice experience of school social workers and the development of the profession.

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