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Leadership in School Social Work: Implications for Promoting the Preparedness of Tomorrow's Practitioners

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Abstract

Current research suggests that leadership skills in the field of school social work are valuable and needed. However, these skills are not always clearly outlined by governing entities as a result of little examination and research. This article examines differences of perceptions toward and engagement in professional leadership skills among school social work practitioners across the United States ($N = 686$). Using descriptive and multivariate methods, this paper examines practitioner perceptions toward and engagement in school-based leadership and what this leadership looks like in today's schools. Findings call for educators and practitioners to advocate for the incorporation of leadership training, culturally sensitive cross-discipline collaboration, and preparedness guidelines in both generalist bachelor- and master-level social work curricula in which students are trained to work in school settings. Moreover, access to training and availability of resources pertaining to leadership appear to be a point of concern. Implications for social work practice, education, and research are discussed.

Keywords

School social work, professional leadership, survey research, mixed method

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Introduction

School social workers are expected to be well rounded and provide support and advocacy while implementing both micro and macro processes within their area of specialty. However, it is suggested that leadership is a missing skill in the area of school-based social work today (Elswick et al., 2018). When defining leadership in social work, we must look at other professions who have identified the values and competencies of leadership in practice. One of the closest definitions of leadership in the field of school-based practice is the broad definition of leadership in education. Various definitions of educational leadership have been developed that include a wide spectrum of knowledge, characteristics, dispositions, and skills containing competing perspectives and understandings (Bush, 2007); however, the overarching theme in these definitions is that educational leadership is the process of enlisting and guiding the talents and energies of teachers, pupils, and parents toward achieving common educational aims (Razik & Swanson, 2010).

A central element in many definitions of leadership is there is a process of influence to obtain educational outcomes (Bush, 2007; Cuban, 1988; Harris, 2002; Leithwood, 2001; Yukl, 2002). Although school social work research has historically focused on professional development and career preparedness, leadership is often overlooked as an integral role for today's school social workers (Elswick et al, 2018; Teasley, 2018). Leadership as a missing element in social work education has been a topic of discussion for several decades (Brilliant, 1986). Although this gap in educational practices within the field of social work was identified nearly 32 years ago, only incremental changes to this gap have been witnessed (Sherman, 2016). For example, in a study conducted by Elswick, et. al. (2018), findings indicate many state-level entities evaluate school social workers on the domain of leadership. If leadership skills are expected and evaluated within the context of a larger educational framework, then school social workers must be prepared to advocate, accept, and be effective in leadership roles.

Leadership skills for school social work practitioners is imperative to the field. Without true leaders in the field of school social work, threats to the practice are all too often seen. Examples of threats to the field of school social work practice include school financial constraints, overwhelming caseloads, lack of knowledge about school social workers' professional skills and abilities, and supervision provided by personnel unfamiliar with social work (D'Agostino, 2013; Teasley, et.al, 2012; Sherman, 2016). All of these aforementioned issues are true threats to the field of school social work practice.

The growing demand for constant change in education, the increasing awareness and need for social/emotional and behavioral health, and evidence-based intervention programs for at-risk students weigh heavy on the school-based social

workers' teachings and training received in the path to being a school social worker (Berzin & O'Connor, 2010). Besides the increasing population in schools and the lack of funding to provide enough school-based social workers to serve the population, school-based social workers' positions seem to lack value to those in leadership positions (Berzin & O'Connor, 2010). There is also an increase in mental health disorder diagnoses for children and school social workers are at the forefront at aiding parents and other school personnel in developing effective academic and social plans for these children (Berzin & O'Connor, 2010). With the added pressure of the changing climate and increasing population in schools, there needs to be adequate training and teachings for school-based social workers to effectively assemble resources, navigate individuals of power, and advocate for the need of their students and practice. According to the study conducted by Berzin & O'Connor (2010), master-level work for school-based social workers have not met the demand of the changing climate in school social work. From the study, it is clear master-level programs do not adequately prepare their scholars with the necessary tools to communicate and work effectively with other schools personal (Berzin & O'Connor, 2010). Understanding different ways by which a school-based social worker can maneuver within a team, and effectively communicate the needs of the students through the practices and programs brought forth by the school-based social worker is evident to the fundamental need for leadership training and teachings (Berzin & O'Connor, 2010).

While preparedness to take on effective leadership roles appears obvious among today's school social workers (Elswick, Cuellar, & Mason, 2018), there is little empirical research that examines differences in engagement in leadership for social workers employed in schools or school-linked agencies. This is potentially problematic in terms of current curriculum in today's schools of social work, and for practice models used in general education and within the field of school social work more specifically. In fact, even the most prominent practice model for school social work, promoted by the School Social Work Association of America (Frey, et al., 2013) does not define what leadership is and under what domain this skillset should be evaluated. This paper attempts to assist the profession by examining and discussing differences in leadership engagement among school social work practitioners across the United States. Findings offer the profession evidence-driven guidance in assessing curriculum and promoting the preparedness of school-based practitioners in today's schools.

What is School Social Work Leadership?

While the implementation of leadership in school social work practice is still in its infancy, there is active research being conducted on best practices in leadership within this specialized area (Alvarez et al, 2013; Ambrose-Miller & Ashcroft, 2016; Cuellar et al, 2019; Elswick et al, 2018; Teasley, 2018). In 2013, the School Social Work Association of American (SSWAA) developed the first National School Social Work Practice Model. This SSWAA model encourages school social workers to provide evidence-based supports, promote a school climate and culture, and ensure linkage to school-based and community-based

resources. Although these are tasks often taken on by leaders in the field, a true definition and explanation of leadership in school social work practice is not provided.

Building on the SSWAA practice model, Elswick et al. (2018) expanded the concept of the original model and developed a sample matrix that would include suggested leadership practice behaviors found within the field. The researchers utilized a qualitative analysis of state-level departments of education (DOE) school social work standards, which revealed an important context for the creation of a leadership matrix and specific practice behaviors. All 50 state DOEs were evaluated, and in the 2018 research, only seven (12%) of the 50 states DOE standards for school social work were identified as having leadership-specific content. These seven states were: Indiana, Illinois, Colorado, Kansas, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and North Carolina. This information was utilized to develop 10 specific domains for leadership. These 10 identified domains for leadership in school social work included the following:

- enhance student academic achievement
- continuous professional development
- utilize evidence-based practices found in research
- consistently assess, intervene, and evaluate student progress
- utilize advocacy in practice to ensure social justice for all
- work collaboratively within an interdisciplinary methodology
- develop and assist in policy change when appropriate through knowledge of state and federal laws
- provide supportive services and linkage as needed
- engage families and enhance parental involvement
- and participate in and support crisis prevention and intervention (Elswick et al., 2018).

This was a small, but necessary, first step toward identifying ways in which to build leadership skills and practices within the field. Because the literature regarding school social work leadership specifically is so anemic, the following paragraphs will assist the reader in understanding why school social workers need more preparation, training, and support within the framework of leadership.

School Social Work Leadership Today

In the previously mentioned, broad definition of educational leadership, leadership is defined as the process of influencing systems to obtain educational success and outcomes for all; however, much of the current literature regarding school social workers perceptions of their ability to lead indicates they often report feeling “left out” in terms of school-wide and district-wide leadership opportunities, which can include decision making and policy development (Bye et al., 2009; Teasley et al., 2012). This reported perception indicates that school social workers might not feel valued within the context of the educational system as it

relates to processes of influencing school outcomes. This perception of being undervalued impacts the school social worker's implementation of leadership roles, skills, and responsibilities in practice.

Another factor that impacts school social workers' perceptions of school leadership is many school social workers have indicated feeling as if they must "prove their worth" to prevent loss of employment or support services for students and families (Alvarez et al., 2013). Again, this reflects the perceived value of school social workers in the field which creates a power differential among staff in the school setting. It has been noted within this form of power differential and dynamic within an interdisciplinary team that social workers feel as if they cannot lead initiative and might be less likely to interject or share their knowledge and skills in the practice setting (Ambrose-Miller & Ashcroft, 2016).

School social workers reports of not feeling valued, and findings that they were not included in whole school decision making, points to the lack of interdisciplinary collaboration and practice within the educational systems in which they are employed. Interdisciplinary collaboration is defined as a complex process in which different types of staff work together to share expertise, knowledge, and skills to impact student educational outcomes (Nancarrow et al., 2013). The process of interdisciplinary practice as a form of leadership is needed within the field (Altshuler & Webb, 2009). Although interdisciplinary collaboration is a noted part of school social work practice, these aforementioned reports from school social workers indicate they are not participating in these processes consistently within their daily practices. Supporting school social workers with developing their skills in interdisciplinary collaboration in the form of leadership is needed.

Due to the lack of scholarly research on the topic of leadership in school social work, there is also an evident gap in determining best practices in preparing school social workers for leadership roles. Based on previous findings of the lack of leadership implementation in practice and the reported perceptions of school social workers in not feeling valued (Bye et al., 2009; Teasley et al., 2012; Alvarez et al., 2013), the field of social work education must better prepare school social workers for leadership in practice. This study will gather information necessary for determining what leadership in school social work is, how school social work training and implementation should be delivered, and how leadership should be developed within the field.

Dynamics of Leadership in Schools

According to Teasley (2018), leadership involves understanding and "[negotiating] power positions, engage in advocacy, mobilize resources, and generate interdisciplinary collaboration" (p.67). Leadership in schools has an important role in allocating funds to essential programs in the school. If school social workers are not involved in this process of mobilizing resources, navigating a leadership meeting, and advocating for programs, key components to that school

social workers' ability to effectively serve the children in the school community can be negatively affected (Teasley, 2018). Programs that are key to children's educational and emotional growth, like a functioning social work program, training for school social workers, and the necessary resources to sustain a social work program can be neglected in the process (Teasley, 2018). School social workers need the tools to advocate for the value of their work and the need for adequate funding (Teasley, 2018). In order to determine where we need to go in regards to leadership development within the field, we first have to investigate the current perceptions of school social work leadership and the level of current leadership engagement found within the school social work population.

Summing Up: Advancing Research on School Social Work Leadership

School social workers are versatile professionals who provide support and advocacy for students while implementing both micro and macro processes within often specific areas of specialty. However, current literature suggests inconsistencies in leadership among this professional subspecialty, with little understanding of why these inconsistencies exist (Elswick et al., 2018). While school social work research has primarily focused on professional development, career preparedness and intervention effectiveness and efficiency, leadership is often overlooked as an integral role for today's school social workers. Although this gap in educational research within the field of social work was identified over 30 years ago, only incremental changes to this gap have been witnessed (Sherman, 2016).

The Present Study

This research attempts to examine engagement in leadership practices and the extent to which this engagement differs by individual- and school-level indicators. This study has three objectives:

- 1) Examine school social workers perceptions toward education, resources, and role understanding as they concern leadership in today's schools.
- 2) Determine if engagement in leadership is attributable to student- and school-level indicators.
- 3) Explore how perceptions toward leadership domains predict engagement in leadership in schools.

Meeting these objectives can assist the discipline in addressing curriculum needs and optimizing the preparedness of the next generation of school social workers in the United States. Moreover, identifying trends in school social work leadership can help researchers and practitioners address gaps in this body of literature.

Methodology

Sample

A purposive sampling strategy was used to collect quantitative data from school social workers across the United States. Participants were recruited through the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA), the American Council on School Social Work (ACSSW), and 36 additional state-level school social work associations. The remaining state-level organizations in the nation were not recruited on the state-level as there was not an effective method for accessing, reaching, and surveying these clinicians due to the lack of identified professionals within those states and no state-level school social work association representation. A total of 686 school social workers responded to the quantitative components of the survey. All respondents were actively practicing school social workers at the time of the survey. All protocol was approved by the researcher's Institutional Review Board at the time this study was conducted.

Data Collection

Cross-sectional data were collected via an anonymous electronic questionnaire. Ten items were used to operationalize perceptions of and engagement in leadership. The survey was developed for exploratory purposes and designed to be a short assessment of leadership in school social work with consideration of Elswick et al., (2018).

The survey was initially distributed by email through the SSWAA, the ACSSW, and identifiable state-level associations. Through this method, the researchers aimed to gather responses from participants in all states within the United States. A small incentive was used to increase study participation in the form of a prize drawing. This was done by having each participant include his or her email address in a separate survey that was unlinked to the initial survey. Participants who entered their email were then selected at random to receive one of five Amazon electronic gift cards. Data collection began in March 2017 and ended in May 2017.

Participants were asked to think of only one school in which they were employed during the 2016 – 2017 school year by the following prompt: “Thinking ONLY of the school in which you have spent most of your time at as a school social worker during the 2016 – 2017 school year, please answer the following question.” Using this approach, respondents were asked to consider a full academic school year as opposed to the few weeks of school that had begun at the time the survey was initially distributed (the middle of the 2016-2017 academic school year). This was done so that practitioners were required to report on a single academic year (i.e., maintain independence of observation assumption for analysis).

Variables

The survey used for data collection was created for the purpose of this study. This study used data collected as part of the American Council on School Social Work (ACSSW) project on leadership (Elswick et. al., 2018). The survey was developed through an iterative process involving project researchers, the ACSSW staff, and an external panel.

Practitioner- and School-Level Characteristics. Practitioner-level characteristics include age in years, gender (0=Female; 1=Male), race (dummy coded), licensure (dummy coded), and number of years practicing as a school social worker (recoded around mean of 11.16: 0 = < 11.16; 1 = > 11.16).

School-level characteristics include the school education-level (i.e., 0=elementary; 1=middle; 2=high), school size (i.e., 0=0-249 students; 1=250-499 students; 2=500-749 students; 3=750-999 students; 4=1000+ students), school location (i.e., 0=rural; 1=suburban; 2=urban), neighborhood crime rate (i.e., 0=low; 1=medium; 2=high), percentage of low-SES students served in the school (i.e., 0=0-24%; 1=25%-49%; 2=50%-74%; 3=75%-100%), percentage of minority students enrolled (i.e., 0=0-24%; 1=25%-49%; 2=50%-74%; 3=75%-100%), and number of other school social workers the practitioner works with.

Perceptions of Leadership. Question construction was based on a review of school social work practice literature and a modified version of the *Leadership Styles of Social Work Educators* survey produced and used by researcher Desrosiers (2009). The survey was revised with the input of a six-person expert panel consisting of academics, practitioners, and leaders of national and state school social work associations. In addition, the survey was field-tested by the panel for clarity, readability, and content prior to disbursement. School social work practitioners provided demographic and practice related information as well as information pertaining to their engagement in leadership activities. Answers to the leadership questions assisted researchers with understanding the level of activity, participation, and comfort in participating in leadership activities within the field of school-based practice. A total of 10 items measured participant perception of leadership in their school. These items can be found in *Table 1* and operationalized the perceived agreement from the practitioner for each of the statements. The first nine items were developed to operationalize three constructs using ordinal indicators (0 = strongly disagree; 1 = disagree; 2 = agree; 3 = strongly agree). These constructs include *Education, Resources, and Role Understanding*, all reflecting perceptions of leadership ($\alpha = .89$). Participants were also asked if leadership was an area in which they are formally evaluated, which was a dichotomous response (0 = no; 1 = yes).

Engagement in Leadership. A nominal item was used to operationalize engagement in leadership. Participants were asked whether they are currently engaged in leadership in their school (0 = no; 1 = yes).

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Perceptions Toward Leadership

	SD (%)	D (%)	A (%)	SA (%)
Education				
My education prepared me to take on a leadership role as a school-based social worker.	18 (3.1)	106 (18.1)	333 (56.9)	128 (21.9)
During my coursework, leadership in the field of school-based social work was discussed.	138 (23.6)	243 (41.6)	178 (30.5)	25 (4.3)
Resources				
I need more training on how to be an effective leader as a school-based social worker.	51 (8.8)	174 (29.9)	288 (49.5)	69 (11.9)
My current employer offers training on leadership for employees in roles other than teacher/ principal.	193 (33.2)	269 (46.2)	96 (16.5)	24 (4.1)
I know where to get additional information and training on enhancing my leadership skills.	70 (12.0)	216 (36.9)	236 (40.3)	63 (10.8)
My state has a specific certification/ license for school social work practitioners offered through the State Department of Education.	53 (9.1)	45 (7.7)	204 (34.9)	283 (48.4)
Role Understanding				
Other disciplines (educators, school administrators, teachers, etc.) believe that school-based social workers should/ could be in leadership roles.	40 (6.9)	170 (29.2)	301 (51.6)	72 (12.3)
I believe if there was a definition of leadership or a leadership focus within the field of school-based social work, that leadership opportunities would be more readily available for school social workers.	10 (1.7)	83 (14.3)	351 (60.3)	138 (23.7)
Leadership is one of my strengths in my current school-based social work practice.	13 (2.2)	133 (22.9)	300 (51.5)	136 (23.4)

Note: Valid Percentages Reported

SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree

Data Analysis

Building on the qualitative analysis of Elswick, Cuellar, & Mason (2019), a quantitative approach was used to meet research objectives and to examine school social work leadership engagement in today's schools. RStudio Version 3.4.2 was used for all analyses (The R Project for Statistical Computing, n.d.).

RO1. To describe participant responses to quantitative survey items pertaining to leadership, descriptive statistics for all leadership knowledge items are reported. Descriptive statistics were produced using the `stats()` package in base R language.

RO2. To explore differences in engagement in leadership among participants, bivariate analyses were conducted to estimate the association between practitioner- and school-level characteristics and engagement in leadership. Appropriate X^2 analyses were conducted with engagement (0 = no; 1 = yes) as the dependent variable. Models were estimated using the `gmodels()` package in base R language (i.e., the `CrossTable` function).

RO3. To examine the relationship between perceptions of leadership and leadership engagement, multiple indicators and multiple constructs (MIMIC) model was estimated using the `lavaan()` package (Rosseel, 2012). The model was estimated using a weighted least square mean-variance estimation (WLSMV) method as all observed indicators in the model were binary or ordinal. The “`mimic=Mplus`” option was employed to reproduce results that would have been yielded through a WLSMV estimated model in *Mplus*8. Missing data were assumed MCAR and were handled through FIML during model estimation.

Results

Data from 686 school social workers were included in analyses. The average participant age was 43.55 years old. The majority of participants were female (92.8%) and White (83.4%). A large majority reported having a Master of Social Work degree (89.0%) and held a professional social work license (State-issued School Social Work Certificate – 61.2%; Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) – 37.2%; NASW Academy of Clinical Social Workers – 2.9%; NASW School Social Work Specialist – 4.2%). The average number of years spent as a school social worker in the sample was 11.16. More than 87% of participants reported working in public school systems, with 248 spending most of their time in elementary schools (serving up to grade 6), 145 in middle schools (serving up to grade 8), and 210 in high schools (serving up to grade 12+). All states across the United States were represented in the sample. Demographic information drawn from these data are consistent with that of previous surveys of school social workers in the United States over the past few decades (Allen-Meares, 1994; Astor, Behre, Fravil, & Wallace, 1997; Cuellar, Elswick & Theriot, 2017; Cuellar & Theriot, 2017; Kelly et al., 2010a; Kelly, et al., 2016; Kelly, et al., 2010b).

RO1. *Table 1* provides the frequency distributions of survey items used in this study. The items are categorized by the domain of leadership they represent. Approximately 21.2% report strongly disagreeing or disagreeing with the perception that their education prepared them to take on leadership roles as a school-based social worker. Moreover, approximately 65.2% of school social workers reported a lack of discussion on leadership during their coursework. Similar distributions were identified on the resources domain. In fact, approximately 79.4% of participants reported disagreement to the statement that their current employer offers training on leadership in roles other than to teacher/principals. Additionally, approximately 48.9% of clinicians in this sample report not knowing where to get additional information on training and enhancing leadership skills; a concern for anyone promoting continuing education for this subspecialty of social work. Finally, almost 25% of participants reported some disagreement to the statement that leadership is one of their strengths in their current practice.

RO2. There were non-significant differences in the probability of engaging in leadership attributable to gender ($X^2(2) = 1.72, p > .05$) and race ($X^2(10) = 4.50, p > .05$). Professionals who had an LCSW had a higher probability of engaging in leadership compared to those who did not have an LCSW ($X^2(2) = 6.60, p < .05$). Similarly, professionals who reported working at or above the mean years as a school social worker (11.16) had a higher probability of reporting engagement in leadership compared to those under the mean years as a school social worker ($X^2(2) = 6.81, p < .05$).

In regard to school-level differences, there were no statistically significant differences in probability to engage in leadership by education level of the school ($X^2(2) = .72, p > .05$), location ($X^2(2) = 4.58, p > .05$), crime rate ($X^2(2) = 2.20, p > .05$), school size ($X^2(4) = 4.09, p > .05$), proportion of minority students enrolled ($X^2(3) = 5.24, p > .05$), percentage of low-SES students enrolled ($X^2(3) = 3.72, p > .05$), or number of school social workers employed alongside the practitioner ($X^2(4) = 7.37, p > .05$).

RO3. The MIMIC model demonstrated acceptable fit for the exploratory purposes of this study: ($X^2(30) = 77.84, p < .05$; RMSEA = .05 (90% CI .038, .067); CFI = .926; TLI = .889; WRMR = 1.094). *Table 2* provides the output for the MIMIC model, with both factor loading and regression coefficients per group provided. Interestingly, knowledge and role understanding were both positively associated with engagement in leadership in the high school subgroup, while only role understanding was associated with active engagement in leadership in the elementary school subgroup. The number of parameters estimated was determined appropriate for model inference as per Babyak (2004) and (Muthén & Muthén, 2012). Factor loadings of the latent constructs in the MIMIC model can be found in *Table 2*. Regression equations of engagement in leadership on domains of leadership are provided in *Table 3*.

Table 2 Results of the MIMIC Model ($N = 680$)

	<i>STDYX</i>	Std. Err	95% CI
Education			
My education prepared me to take on a leadership role as a school-based social worker.	.50	.04	.42, .57
During my coursework, leadership in the field of school-based social work was discussed.	.43	.04	.35, .50
Resources			
I need more training on how to be an effective leader as a school-based social worker.	.33	.04	.25, .40
My current employer offers training on leadership for employees in roles other than teacher/ principal.	.28	.04	.20, .35
I know where to get additional information and training on enhancing my leadership skills.	.64	.04	.56, .71
My state has a specific certification/ license for school social work practitioners offered through the State Department of Education.	.31	.05	.11, .30
Role Understanding			
Other disciplines (educators, school administrators, teachers, etc.) believe that school-based social workers should/ could be in leadership roles.	.42	.04	.34, .49
I believe if there was a definition of leadership or a leadership focus within the field of school-based social work, that leadership opportunities would be more readily available for school social workers.	.38	.03	.22, .33
Leadership is one of my strengths in my current school-based social work practice.	.48	.05	.38, .57
Leadership Engagement <i>ON</i>			
Education	.41	.07	.27, .54
Resources	.01	.04	-.06, .08
Role Understanding	.10	.04	.02, .17

Note: ($X^2(30) = 77.84, p < .05$; RMSEA = .05 (90% CI .038, .067); CFI = .926; TLI = .889; WRMR = 1.094).

Discussion and Implications

The main theme across all results is that school social workers, while potentially not as engaged in leadership as desirable by the profession, are more likely to engage in leadership with increased training and preparedness in school-based leadership. Within the context of higher education, if the graduate level programs focus on the topic of leadership during the student's educational journey, the prospect of school social workers as leaders in practice becomes a more practical reality. This may be the key to implementation of school social work leadership in practice.

While approximately 78% of the sample reported some level of agreement that their education prepared them to take on school-based leadership roles, approximately 65% of the sample reported disagreement to the statement that leadership in the field of school-based social work was discussed during their coursework. This is concerning as leadership was reported as an evaluated practice among 32.4% of the current sample and is pushed in local practice models across the country (Elswick et al., 2018). The method in which we might rectify these issues is illustrated in the model results; educators should prepare school social workers to engage in leadership before they are introduced to the field, and this role should be discussed more in school social work curricula. This training must include a clear understanding of the role school social workers might play as leaders in their organizations. This content would be ideal to incorporate in school social work certificate training or additional training for school-based employment in master-level social work curricula. More importantly, ongoing continuing education might be helpful to practicing school social workers, as nearly 80% of the sample reported disagreement to the statement that their current employer offers training on leadership for employees in roles other than teacher/principal. This suggests school social workers might be employed in settings where leadership training is not provided, and therefore fortifies the notion that training during the social work education would be ideal to promote preparedness for tomorrow's practitioner.

The results of Objective 1 highlight the need for leadership to be incorporated in school social work training and continuing education. School social work curriculum and those institutions training the future of this field must discuss roles and expectations around leadership. This is especially important for social work practitioners who are being trained to provide services within the schools setting. This training and preparedness could include discussion around expectations as well as working with and translating ideas to a multi-disciplinary audience. This could come in the form of case scenarios and role-playing leadership scenarios in the classroom setting under appropriate supervision. School social work curriculum must also highlight the importance of promoting leadership in the discipline as a standard of practice. For those school social workers already in the field, governing bodies and discipline leaders must help practitioners identify and understand where to get information to develop their skills in leadership. As the subsequent MIMIC

modeling highlights, there was a significant association between practitioners who stated they felt their education covered leadership and reported engagement in leadership; an association that suggests those practitioners who were trained to some extent in leadership are more engaged in leadership in today's schools.

One finding that emerged was the difference between those with an LCSW and those without and the probability of being evaluated/engaging in leadership. There may not be a direct correlation between the advanced degree of an LCSW and their leadership abilities, but there was an identifiable trend that needs to be addressed. While LCSWs likely have more experience to drive independent engagement in leadership practices, this disparity could be addressed in early training on leadership skills both inside and in early career. This might be done by incorporating supervised team development and coordination of activities while social work students are in their first year of the field in a school-based organization. Additionally, students should become familiar with the basic political climate of the school system in which they will work (e.g., state level) so they can be prepared to navigate policy development and facilitate program implementation. This will increase student preparedness to take on leadership activities within their professional capacity. Upon graduation, students should be prepared to coordinate and lead meetings with key personnel (i.e., school personnel other than teachers and administrators) to improve school health and student well-being. These interdisciplinary collaborations might include work with the school nurse, administrators, other professional support staff, disciplinarians, other school mental health providers, teachers, and student representatives. This approach can help practitioners ensure holistic service provision for their clients and schools.

Findings also call for research on leadership in school social work. The field would benefit from a better understanding of how leadership affects policy development and implementation, as well as student well-being. One key to the relationship between leadership and policy decisions is funding. As scholars and practitioners call for advocacy for leadership in school-based settings, researchers must take steps toward understanding how such engagement might affect the school climate and the students served. Exploratory and explanatory research in this field can potentially contribute to the advancement of school health in the United States.

School social work practitioners are in a unique position to understand the environment and its effects on students and school personnel. These findings suggest that practitioners in today's schools are more likely to engage in leadership if they feel their training covered leadership content and they feel they have a good understanding of their professional role. Practitioners in today's schools and school health, in general, will benefit from continuing education on leadership topics for school social workers or other mental health professionals.

Host settings and advocating for children through the interdisciplinary team is necessary for the complex situations school social workers' encounter. The ability to conduct these meetings as a leader is a necessary skill to resolve any

matters a child may have that leads them to seek assistance from the school social worker. This is an element to school-based social workers duties, however more than half of school social workers responding to the survey agreed or strongly agreed to the statement, “I need more training on how to be an effective leader as a school-based social worker.” In contrast, although the majority of school social workers responding to this questionnaire agreed or strongly agreed to the statement, “Leadership is one of my strengths in my current school-based social work practice,” the uncertainty that the leadership skills they acquired is not adequate enough to be an effective leader as a school-based social worker should be a focus. Based on the MIMIC model, there is an understanding among school social workers that elements of leadership consist of team (teamwork), meetings and lead (communication). All corresponding words associate with those words are a strong indicator of attributes school-based social workers need in order to be effective in their field. Further research on the specifics of these attributes school-based social workers feel they lack and methods to closing the gap in those topics should be addressed in undergraduate and graduate curricula, and/or training through associations and schools.

Limitations

There are several limitations that are important to note. In regard to the internal validity of this research, there are significant limitations in the development of an instrument for exploratory purposes and the anonymous methods by which data were collected. The instrument used in this research, while adapted from previous researchers’ efforts, has not been tested on a similar sampling frame in past research; therefore, it is not certain if the outcomes measured represent what they were intended to measure. Moreover, this research is cross-sectional and does not give us an idea of how leadership might be operationalized over time. This is problematic as the constructs examined might appear different over a given period of time. Due to the exploratory nature of this research, none of the presented models account for control variables that must be considered in future research. Future researchers must dive deeper into understanding what proportion of variance in leadership is attributable to individual and school level factors. Another limitation concerns the generalizability of the research. In regard to external validity, the non-probability purposive methodology does not allow for the generalizability of this research to the target population in any way. However, the findings do warrant further investigation through longitudinal or quasi-experimental examination.

Conclusion

Leadership is imperative to success and advancement for several disciplines, both in practice and research. According to Teasley (2018), due to the increasing change in schools’ policies and practices to fit the needs of charter schools, and the growing awareness and need of services such as mental health care, and social services, there needs to be a refocusing on the importance and training of school social workers involvement in leadership. This paper calls for social work

educators to advocate for leadership in the training of the next generation of social service providers. Research consistently demonstrates the importance of social workers in advocacy and understanding the Person-In-Environment (PIE) perspective (Kondrat, 2002). Therefore, educators and scholars must find ways to promote school social workers as leaders in their schools, which can include everything from direct service to contributing to the development and implementation of school policy. In this regard, ensuring school social worker engagement in quality leadership within today's undergraduate and graduate educational programs is evident, will help us continue to take steps toward ensuring the healthy development of all youth.

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