



Leadership and School Social Work in the USA: A Qualitative Assessment

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Abstract

School social workers provide unique insight into the biopsychosocial factors that influence students and overall well-being. Social work training in the person-in-environment perspective offers a unique understanding of issues within the school environment, making them ideal professionals to lead holistic, interdisciplinary response options and programs that help foster positive school climates and student success. However, current research suggests there is little information about what school social work practice actually looks like in the schools and how this practice is consistent with leadership roles and tasks. The purpose of this study is to examine school social work leadership in today's schools. A sample of school social work practitioners across the USA ($N = 375$) provided a response to the question: "In what ways do you provide leadership within your school setting?" An inductive, thematic study was conducted to determine the aspects of leadership in which school social workers engage in most. Using coding procedures, three salient themes of leadership emerged: (1) increasing training and services; (2) focusing on school–community partnerships; and (3) advocating for policy and school structural changes that affect school safety. Findings from this study build upon past research and suggest that efforts to prepare and improve current leadership skills for school social workers are warranted. Implications for student education and social work programs are discussed, and recommendations for future research are provided.

Keywords Leadership · School social work · Qualitative analysis

Introduction and Literature Review

School social work is a very versatile field of practice, one in which many practitioners across the nation provide very different levels of intervention and support. As an example, within the school social work literature, variations in school-based mental health practices are seen (Constable, 2009; Monkman, 2009). This phenomenon of lack of clarity and defined roles and responsibilities for school social work is due to the multifaceted nature of school social work practice, and the inevitable historic ebb and flow of services delivered based on societal needs (Sherman, 2016). Social workers take on the tasks of direct practitioner, advocate,

trainer, and policy driver, all while keeping a direct focus on an ecological perspective and framework of service delivery (Constable, 2009).

Due to the complex nature of the field of school social work practice, many school social workers feel unsupported and misunderstood by the larger educational frameworks (Bye, Shepard, Partridge, & Alvarez 2009; Tham & Lynch, 2017; Richard & Villarreal-Sosa, 2014). This lack of understanding and support for the field are part of the reason why school social workers are typically not viewed as leaders within the larger social work education constructs. To illustrate this lack of acknowledgment, a search of the literature produced 50 recent articles on school social work, with only three (Elswick et al., 2018; Frey, Lingo & Nelson, 2008; Goldkind, 2011) having leadership in the title and focus, which found that the majority of states do not have consistent guidelines concerning school social work leadership. Moreover, this research suggests that current governing bodies are not consistent or uniform in how leadership in school social work is defined.

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To better understand this phenomenon, common issues found within the field include supervision by nonsocial work staff (Sherman, 2016), feeling underutilized within their schools, (Beauchemin & Kelly 2009), feeling left out in decision and policy making (Teasley, Canfield, Archuleta, Crutchfield, & Chavis 2012; Bye et al., 2009), and feeling a constant need to justify their positions in schools (Alvarez, Bye, Bryant, & Mumm, 2013; Richard & Villarreal-Sosa, 2014; Goren, 2016). All of these factors contribute to a negative image of school social work, one that several recent authors have attempted to counter with positive descriptions of school social work practice (Corbin, 2005; Franklin & Kelly, 2009; Sabatino, 2009).

Many school social workers report being supervised within their work by non-clinical education personnel who do not understand the intricacies of the field, nor do they have the understanding to best support the clinician within their practice (Sherman 2016). Best practices in supervision would place a school social worker within an administrative and leadership role that would allow them the oversight of other mental health and school social workers within the districts in which they are employed. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (2010) developed a set of standards that include the importance of staff supervision as a competency. This is another indication that there is a need for adequate supervision within the field provided by knowledgeable clinicians. School social workers need to be at the table when discussing supervision for direct practitioners. Additionally, many school social workers report feeling as if they are underutilized within their schools, and often feel as if they have to advocate for themselves and their own practice in order to support the children and families they serve (Beauchemin & Kelly, 2009).

The literature suggests school social workers often report feeling “left out” in terms of school-wide and district-wide decision making and policy development (Bye et al., 2009; Teasley et al., 2012). Best practices would include the school social worker as a part of the administrative and interdisciplinary team within the district. In doing so, their voices support effective, evidence-based decisions making regarding the social–emotional, mental health, and well-being of the student population. This process suggests that interdisciplinary practice as a form of leadership is needed within the field (Altshuler & Webb, 2009).

Lastly, school social workers have reported feeling as if they must always justify their existence within the school fabric. They 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). Because tracking behavioral and mental health outcomes of students and large systems is difficult, many social workers clinicians and school administrators report having to struggle with justifying these mental health positions. This is

so even when evidence on educational outcomes is closely connected to student behavioral and mental health (Haynes, 2002). Although this connection is apparent, there is very little evidence and research that attributes the use of school social workers and the direct impact their work on school district and student outcomes (Alvarez et al., 2013). Alvarez et al. (2013) did identify a specific relationship between school social workers and higher rates of high school completion. More research on the positive effects of school social workers in practice on student behavioral and academic outcomes is needed to illustrate the positive effects of the profession. School social workers can take action steps to assist in developing new research and findings for this purpose.

Too often budget cuts dictate school social workers ability to serve and support the needs of all learners within their schools (Lieb, 2009). With school social workers in leadership positions, the use of data driven decision making related to the mental health and social–emotional development of children and families would potentially be reviewed and positive findings would shore up their positions as integral and important in the educational framework. As it currently stands, very few educational entities can comprehend the effectiveness of school-based mental health supports. There are no clear rubric, no true benchmark, and no quick assessment or rapid intervention that can remediate student behavioral and emotional needs. Without the educational system knowing how to gauge the behavioral and emotional success of students, the system will often fail to see the long-term gains and progress that site-based school mental health provides the children, system, and community as a whole (Alvarez et al., 2013). This is where school social work leadership in these evaluative practices is needed, and is currently a large missing piece to the evaluative outcomes being discussed and reviewed by state and federal entities. Previous research conducted by Elswick et al. 2018 suggested a framework and grounding theory to fill in this gap. With the addition of research and findings, the profession of school social work can begin to enhance leadership competencies and standards of practice (Elswick et al., 2018).

In order to better define and understand what leadership in school social work really should be, we must first understand what leadership within the field of school social work looks like in today’s schools. With a clear understanding of current leadership practices and skills, or lack thereof, then we can begin the process of building specific theory around leadership in school social work, thus improving and strengthening practitioner preparedness and future practice. As indicated, the extant literature alludes to areas of concern for school social workers practice, and areas in which leadership within the profession are needed. Although this previous research and perspectives are helpful, gathering additional insight from current school social workers about

their experiences on the subject of leadership within the field is crucial.

The Present Study

This research study aims to shed light on commonly reported school social work leadership roles and processes currently found within schools across the nation. Identifying current leadership processes will assist in building on the strengths found within the field, while also looking at the evident gaps in leadership opportunities for school social workers. The present study attempts to examine what school social work leadership in today's schools looks like using a qualitative methodology. Practitioners across the USA were asked how they currently engage in leadership in their school(s). Responses were examined to highlight school-level characteristics that contribute to leadership engagement in school social work practice. This study follows a thematic, ethnographic approach for qualitative analysis of school social workers' reports on engaging in leadership activities.

Methodology

Sample

A purposive sampling strategy was used to collect quantitative and qualitative data from school social workers across the USA. 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. A total of 375 school social workers responded to the qualitative section of a larger survey with a sample of 686. All respondents were actively practicing school social workers at the time of the survey. Approval from the institutional review board (IRB) was obtained prior to beginning this research and national survey. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Data Collection

Cross-sectional data were collected via an anonymous electronic questionnaire. As noted above, the survey was initially distributed by e-mail through the SSWAA, the ACSSW, and identifiable state-level associations. 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 e-mail address in a separate survey that

was unlinked to the initial survey. Participants who entered their e-mail 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. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Study Design

The survey used for data collection was created for the purpose of this study. School social work practitioners provided demographic information as well as information pertaining to their engagement in leadership activities.

Demographic Information

Demographic information was collected from participants to characterize leadership engagement at the individual level. School-level demographic information was also collected to characterize the types of schools in which school social workers engage in leadership. Individual-level demographic variables included age, gender, race, education level, and professional licensure. School-level demographic variables included the school's education level, school setting, school size, the percentage of socioeconomically disadvantaged students served, the percentage of minority students served, and the type of organization in which they work.

Engagement in Leadership

An open-ended question, “In what ways do you provide leadership within your school setting?” prompted participants to report the ways they served as leaders within their schools. There were no restrictions in how the participants could respond. The researchers compiled all qualitative responses to this item and used a thematic approach to examine emerging themes in school social work leadership. The thematic approach was selected by the researchers to focus on an issue likely to be a concern to research participants. Therefore, the inductive quality of the research emerged after the initial issue was supplied. The leadership issue for school social workers was taken from the literature (Bye et al., 2009;

Teasley et al., 2012), as a likely concern. Organizing questions around known issues without employing intervening strategies is an approach where inductive themes can be informative (Patton, 1990).

Data Analysis

Data were coded using the open, axial, and selective category approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Initially, researchers worked independently coding by hand, to create matrixes in Excel for the first two coding stages. They came together for selective coding to finalize the outcome. The large sample was managed by providing limited space for responses, resulting in concise statements.

The research approach followed a strict inductive model based on respondent data. Findings were later interpreted using elements of a priori knowledge where what was learned from this study was infused into information previously reported (Padgett, 2017).

The themes created represent the majority of responses. Although there were several responses that did not fit with the themes, they were in a small minority and referred to in a later section of this article. The researchers subscribe to the idea that all voices need to be heard a position taken by Guber and Lincoln (2005) called “fairness,” and by Patton (1999) to insure credibility. This eliminates marginalization of any respondent who does not agree with the majority and provides an alternative view for consideration.”

Results

As noted above, data from 375 school social workers (approximately 54.6% of raw responses) were included in analyses. Among the sample included, the average participant age was 44.19 years. The majority of participants were female (92%) and White (84.5%). A large majority reported having a Master of Social Work degree (88.0%) and participants held a variety of professional licenses. 86.1% of participants reported working in public school systems, with 155 spending most of their time in elementary schools (serving up to grade 6), 81 in middle schools (serving up to grade 8), and 127 in high schools (serving up to grade 12+). All states across the USA were represented in the subsample used in this study. Sample characteristics are consistent with that of previous surveys of school social workers in the USA over the past few decades (Allen-Meaers, 1994; Astor, Behre, Fravil, & Wallace, 1997; Cuellar, Elswick, & Theriot, 2017; Cuellar & Theriot, 2017; Kelly et al., 2010, 2016). Important to note is that 38.2% ($n = 143$) reported working for a supervisor who was a licensed social worker, while 47.1% ($n = 176$) reported not working under a licensed supervisor. Approximately 14.7% ($n = 55$) reported not being

supervised at all. Demographic information for the sample is given in Tables 1 and 2.

Sample Characteristics of Included Participants

Chi-square tests of independence were used to determine whether the sample in this study was representative of the larger sample from which it was drawn. To examine these differences, participants with completed surveys were coded as one and those with uncompleted surveys (i.e., those that did not complete the qualitative prompt) as zero. Nonsignificant differences across gender, race, education, and license were found, suggesting that those who completed the qualitative item did not differ significantly in these areas than those who did not.

Qualitative Data

Using the data from this study, we identified three salient themes: (1) increasing training and services; (2) focusing on school–community partnerships; and, (3) advocating for policy and school structural changes that affect school safety. Table 3 summarizes leadership themes.

Table 1 Individual-level information for sample ($N = 375$)

	%	<i>n</i>
Gender	100	375
Male	8	30
Female	92	344
Race	99.5	373
White	84.5	315
African-American	9.4	35
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.3	1
Asian	0.5	2
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.3	1
Other	5.1	19
Hispanic/Latinx	9.5	35
Education	99.7	374
Bachelor of Social Work (BSW)	3.7	14
Master of Social Work (MSW)	88.0	329
Doctorate of Social Work (DSW)	0.8	3
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)	0.8	3
Professional Licensure		
State-issued School Social Work Certificate	73.6	276
Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW)	42.4	159
NASW Academy of Clinical Social Workers	4.0	15
NASW School Social Work Specialist	5.6	21
None	3.2	12
Other	27.2	102

Valid percentages reported within categories

Table 2 School-level information for sample ($N=375$)

	%	<i>n</i>
Education level	97.9	367
Elementary	42.2	155
Middle	22.1	81
High	34.6	127
Other	1.1	4
School setting	99.7	374
Rural	25.9	97
Suburban	37.4	140
Urban	36.6	137
School size	99.7	374
0–249	10.7	40
250–499	30.7	115
500–749	26.7	100
750–999	11.5	43
1000+	20.3	76
Percent students socioeconomically disadvantaged	99.7	374
0–24%	17.6	66
25–49%	21.9	82
50–74%	25.4	95
75–100%	35.0	131
Percent students ethnic minority	98.9	371
0–24%	37.2	138
25–49%	15.4	57
50–74%	17.5	65
75–100%	29.9	111
Type of organization	99.7	374
Public school	86.1	322
Private school	1.6	6
Agency that delivers contract services	2.9	11
Other	9.4	35

Valid percentages reported within categories

Theme #1: Increasing Training and Services

When evaluating the leadership theme of “increasing training and services,” the survey respondents indicated areas of concern and programs in which they provided leadership and guidance for the larger school framework. These specific leadership areas included the following: mental health processes and programs; interventions and responding to bullying and trauma; and conflict resolution, social–emotional learning, stress reduction, and anti-racist programs.

Mental Health Processes and Programs

Mental health processes and programs included respondents’ suggestions on training school personnel, providing direct services to students, and developing and training in suicide and crisis interventions and preventions, as well as

post trauma procedures. Several school social workers self-described as providing training and supporting students, teachers, administrators, and community members on mental health awareness. It is important to note that families and communities were included in many of the responses indicating a concern for the out-of-school environment’s effect on the student population. School social workers saw themselves as leaders in the process of mental health assessment and service delivery both within and outside of the schools through referrals. Leadership in trainings and advocacy for services were viewed by respondents as central to school social work roles. Here are examples of responses.

Facilitating eligibility meetings, being the “go-to” person for providing mental health referrals for families. During crisis involving mental health issues I am sought by school administrators

Take lead in crisis response situations; child study/child find process, take lead in behavior risk assessments

I am the lead school social worker. All mental health issues go through me.

I provide training to school wide staff on bullying, suicide prevention, and behavior issues. I am often looked to handle concerning behavioral issues, as well as lead in crisis intervention.

I train and supervise a team of interns. I often initiate consultations with other professionals, teachers and administrators in the system.

I coordinate all the mental health services throughout the district so many non-district employed staff and interns, as well as school admin and district employed academic counselors look to me to lead/make decisions/revise policy, etc.

Interventions and Responding to Bullying and Trauma

Under the theme of increasing training and services, school social work respondents identified a topic of specialized programs for confronting bullying and trauma within their schools. Respondents indicated their roles in improving anti-bullying programs, making the school a safe place for students to speak about bullying, and violence, and teaching students how to ask for help. Additionally social workers self-identified as leaders in developing and offering educational programs on trauma identification and reduction. Examples of these responses included:

I co-facilitated a training re: trauma informed practices.

Participating in team meetings about students, developing district protocols for threat/suicide assessment, and bullying, meeting with administration to discuss issues.

Table 3 Themes for engagement in school social work leadership

Mental health programs

1. Provide mental health training in the schools to teachers, staff, students, and families to reduce stigma and encourage acceptance and understanding of students with psychological and emotional problems
2. Offer mental health services to students and families and include school-based therapy, mentoring, and trauma reduction programs
3. Train students how to respond to crises experienced by their peers
4. Train teachers how to identify and respond to student crises

Interventions and responding to bullying and trauma

5. Improve anti-bullying programs and teach students how to ask for help
6. Offer educational programs on trauma identification and reduction
7. Make the school a place where students feel comfortable to speak about their concerns about bullying, and violence
8. Engage families and provide support for their trauma and bullying concerns

Conflict resolution, social and emotional learning (SEL), stress reduction, and anti-racist programs

9. Provide conflict resolution and social and emotional learning programs (SEL) and ensure administrative participation (not just checking it off on a list)
10. Mandate stress reduction training for teachers, teaching assistants, bus drivers, monitors, and administrators
11. Implement training in conflict resolution and supervision for principals (not police)
12. Offer peer mediation services to students
13. Provide anti-racist training to help students who need it the most
14. Offer the Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS) Program recommended by the US Department of Education

School-community partnerships

15. Have schools become the centers of the community with workshops and resources for community members
16. Focus on community safety as a way to increase school safety and encourage partnerships
17. Support community efforts to reduce domestic violence and racism

Structural changes

18. Eliminate physical obstacles in the way of emergency exits
19. Reduce potential chaos with emergency drills
20. Increase cameras and checks on visitors

Anti-bullying programming; safety planning with students; emergency response -planning/consulting.

Introducing trauma aware services, making discipline policy recommendations, bringing new services or outreach from other valuable organizations into the school.

Conflict Resolution, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), and Stress Reduction and Anti-racist Programs

Under the theme of increasing training and services, school social work respondents identified a topic of conflict resolution, social and emotional learning, stress reduction, and anti-racist programs as an aim or focus for supports and programming within their schools. Respondents indicated providing conflict resolution and social and emotional learning programs (SEL) for the entire school. They helped develop and led stress reduction training for teachers, teaching assistants, bus drivers, monitors, and administrators. They implemented trainings in conflict resolution and supervision for principals. They offered peer mediation services to students, provided anti-racist training to students, and offered students the Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS)

Program recommended by the US Department of Education. Participant responses included:

I am a leader for our school crisis team and school social emotional learning team. PBIS team leader.

Provide consultation to administration regarding EBPs for SEL, sit on a number of school and community committees to address SEL/MH issues.

Cultural competency series director, special education consultant, planning committee member.

I serve as the PBIS Team Leader, participate in school and district level leadership committees, the school liaison for PTO. Additionally, I am on the school planning team.

Co-leader of a peer to peer student suicide awareness/prevention group. I have trained staff and faculty on issues of abuse/neglect/and discrimination.

Theme #2: Focusing on School and Community Partnerships

Looking at the second theme, “focusing on school and community partnerships,” the many survey respondents were

aware of the importance of having the schools be viewed as part of the community. They indicated leading collaborations with community partners on decreasing and ending community violence, domestic violence, and decreasing racism within the community at large as a way to enhance school safety. Several school social workers stated the following:

[I am a leader]When coordinating parent/teacher meetings. When advocating for families within the community.

I lead by example. My service is driven by community needs. I advocate for the community. I am a positive role model.

Leading truancy meetings and initiating contact/referrals with parents or community partners.

Sitting on community boards and committees as a School District representative.

Building relationships within the community and sharing these networks with other staff, students and parents so they can access resources. I am a leader because of my knowledge and my ability and willingness to use that knowledge to help others.

I have a year-round administrative contract, I sit in the administrative team meetings, and I represent the district in creating and maintaining community collaborations.

Themes# 3: Advocating for School Policy and Structural Changes that would affect School Safety

The final theme, “advocating for school policy and structural changes that would affect school safety,” revealed school social work practitioner concerns about community safety, and a variety of societal issues that potentially affect school climate and safety within a school setting. These include but are not limited to child abuse, suicidal behavior, out-of-school and in-school trauma, bullying, and disruptive behavior. Social workers rightly understand the connection between the psychological impact of these factors and safety for all students and school personnel. In addition, structural concerns include safe exits and entrances of buildings, and precautions such as cameras and checks on visitors.

School leadership planning team member...school closure issues, community safety, building healthy school environment, funding development, training parents on school engagement/advisory council.

I share professional knowledge and expertise, with the goal of improving the knowledge of ALL staff. I train staff on Child Abuse, Restorative Processes, parent communication, Suicide, Violence Risk Assessment, Trauma Informed Care and more. I also provide consultation with admin and other staff, to effectively illicit change.

Providing avenue to help students obtain leadership skills (Restorative Justice, Peer Mediation, Student Govt.

Leadership in mandated reporting, homelessness, mental health, safety

Anti- bullying programming; safety planning with students; emergency response planning/consulting.

Involved in threat/suicide assessment, provide input in disciplinary decisions, member of the team for safety drills, provide consultation and guidance for student behavioral concerns.

Mentoring Collaboration with community agency meetings. Facilitate many types of meetings. Facilitate action, safety, crisis, behavior, re-entry plans for students.

Lead member of the district crisis team, district safety team, advisor to several clubs and facilitator of the Instructional Support Team

Crisis intervention & Restraint and Seclusion

Leader of De-escalation and Restraint Program.

Beyond the Themes

It fair to say that almost all qualitative inquiries include respondents whose ideas do not fit into the majority and hence the themes. Instead of ignoring or marginalizing these responses, they are enumerated below. The data showed nine negative responses with regard to leadership roles in the schools. Although this is a small minority within a sample of 375, it is in many ways reflective of much of the literature that views school social work leadership roles in schools as limited (Alvarez et al., 2013; Bye et al., 2009; Teasely et al., 2012), and can represent the challenges faced by school social workers who work in today’ schools.

Five years ago I was a major contributor to the Leadership Team; currently opportunities for Leadership are focused on providing experiences to those with education degrees.

No opportunity.

I have an opportunity to provide leadership within my agency as a lead SSW, however, that is not seen as leadership by the agency’s management. And it has no impact on the schools we are assigned to.

Play some role in decisions about appropriate consequences for students.

Within my school I don’t know. I am the chairperson of my region association of school social workers and am the Treasurer for the State Association of School Social Workers.

Administration doesn’t care and won’t listen - so I don’t provide leadership in any way.

I live and practice in rural [place deleted]. School social work is not established here, and social work as a profession is not really recognized here.

I am relegated to PTST paperwork.

I feel my school Division is not ready for School Social Work leaders. I feel that I 'm a backstage leader which means I have to be extremely good but I don't get any recognition...

Discussion

As noted above, through this analysis process, three salient themes of leadership emerged: (1) increasing training and services; (2) focusing on school-community partnerships; and (3) advocating for policy and school structural changes that affect school safety. Social work leadership is an important policy concern for major social work organizations. It is becoming even more salient as schools increasingly face serious threats of violence on their campuses. In response to school shootings in 2018, the National Organization of Social Workers (NASW) released a statement declaring the need for a ratio of school social workers to students. The organization advocated ratios of social workers to students as 1:250 for general education students and 1:150 for students with intensive needs (National Organization of Social Workers, 2018a). The School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) has for several years supported social work leadership in the schools as a means of preventing school violence (School Social Work Association of America, 2014). Although social work organizations do participate in state and national lobbying activities, their actual political influence remains unclear.

What is clear are the positions taken by these and others that social workers are needed to take leadership roles in school mental health trainings and services, as well as crisis, suicide prevention, and bullying programs (National Association of Social Workers, 2018b; School Social Work Association of America, 2009; American Council of School Social Work, 2018)

When evaluating the leadership theme of “increasing training and services,” the survey respondents indicated topics in which they felt they were acting as leaders within the larger school framework. These specific leadership topics included the following: mental health processes and programs; interventions and responding to bullying and trauma; social-emotional learning, suicide prevention, and anti-racist programming. These identified topics are very important in creating safe, caring, and nurturing environments for children that in turn lead to the development of positive school climate (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). Numerous research findings indicate that school climate is closely linked to perceptions of school

safety, which is also linked to lower levels of school violence, better school performance, and lower rates of peer victimization (American Educational Research Association, 2013; Astor, Guerra, & Van Acker, 2010; Cornell, Shukla, & Konold, 2015; Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010). School social workers are taking the lead in developing positive school climate through some of the respondents suggested practices.

One of the ways in which to develop these leadership skills for school social workers in leadership is to focus on training and professional development that will increase the exposure to leadership activities embedded into their graduate level educational programming. Institutions of higher education need to look at curriculum infusion as option for educating the next generation of school social work clinicians in best practices in training, facilitating professional development, and building future leaders. Curriculum infusion is defined as a strategic way to include specific content into the context of an already existing course. Typically, curriculum infusion is used to cover topics such as alcohol and drug prevention, crisis intervention, and suicide prevention in courses that do not typically cover such content, for example, a business courses or engineering class. Curriculum infusion can also refer to embedding specific academic learning outcomes, methods, or certificate material and processes into existing courses to enhance the level of understanding, education, and exposure that the student obtains while in school. Curriculum infusion is an easy way in which to expose and educate student learners in specific topics, prepare them for the field, assist them in their pursuit of certifications prior to graduation, and support their later roles in leadership. In the following paragraphs, suggested ways in which to increase leadership skills and specific educational activities aimed at building leadership skills in the field of school social work will be identified. The examples and suggestions provided will focus on curriculum infusion within graduate programs.

Mental Health Processes and Programs

The mental health processes and programming included respondents suggestions on training others, providing direct services, and developing and training on crisis prevention, intervention, and post-crisis procedures. Several school social work responses indicated training and supporting students, teachers, administrators, and community on mental health awareness. This process, not only aimed at increasing awareness about mental and behavioral health needs, is also helpful as a prevention measure for school-based practice. School social workers as leaders in this area ensure that evidence-based trainings are offered and that all personnel and families have access to these prevention and awareness programs. Instructing school personnel in evidence-based

practices was mentioned by a small number of respondents. Some examples of evidence-based trainings that promote awareness include but are not limited to Psychological First Aid (PFA), Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA), and Question Persuade and Refer (QPR). As mentioned earlier, curriculum infusion is a great way in which to train clinical practitioners on these models of practice while in school. This type of infusion goes beyond briefly reviewing the intervention within a course to truly preparing them to be leaders in their field by initiating the certification processes for each model of intervention. The school social worker is then equipped to educate the schools and community in mental health awareness, promotion, and support upon graduation. Train-the-trainer processes for PFA, YMHFA, and QPR can be easily embedded into MSW curriculum practice classes, clinical classes, and school social work courses so that they are prepared to support the training needs of the school upon graduation. If a school social worker was not exposed to these trainings and topics while in school, they can still obtain the training and certifications post graduation as a way to increase their leadership role within their school district. Web sites that list additional evidence-based behavioral health practices can be found on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Web page (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2018).

Others stated they were involved with site-based behavioral and mental health programming for students, school staff, families, and community. School social workers are capable of providing effective screening, assessment, diagnosis, and intervention for the multiple needs of students and families. Leadership related to direct practice includes ensuring effective development of school-based behavioral and mental health processes for the school district. It also includes training the new school social workers for similar work. When school social workers provide leadership in the wraparound model of service delivery, schools are the beneficiary (Hunter, Elswick, & Casey, 2017a; Hunter et al., 2017b). For purposes of preparing students to be well educated and updated on evidence-based best practices in the field of social work, again curriculum infusion at the graduate level can prove to be most effective. Ensuring that students are exposed to evidence-based best practices and intervention models while in the MSW programs, ensures that the students are prepared for the current needs of their communities and schools, and provides them the groundwork for future certification in those modalities. Enhancing the content provided in courses by going beyond the brief overviews typically provided on each model, to truly embedding training on interventions such as trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (TF-CBT), eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR), play therapy, infant mental health consultation, cognitive

behavioral therapy (CBT), expressive arts programming, motivational interviewing, and cognitive behavioral interventions for trauma in schools (CBITS) would benefit the school social worker within the field. If embedded into the content correctly, the students will get exposure in the model, and complete some of the prerequisites required for later certification and specialty in these areas. For example, a clinical class can include the TF-CBT online modules be completed as a class assignment, participate in a 2-day training workshop, be trained in and use a standardized instrument to track progress, provide TF-CBT to a minimum of three clients, and participate in 1 year of supervision and complete a knowledge based certificate examination. Much of the TF-CBT certification process could be embedded into the course content increasing the student's future chances of being certified. Post graduates can also complete these certification processes after their MSW is completed, but starting the process while in school enhances their opportunities for success.

Additional suggestions under the topic of mental health included training on crisis preventions, interventions, and post-crisis situations for students, school staff, and community members. In addition to early identification of student and family needs, appropriate crisis planning for interventions and post-crisis programs are also needed. There are many models for pre- and post-crisis interventions, but very little research has been conducted on the effectiveness of many of these methods. One research and evidence-based crisis model is the Virginia Threat Assessment Model (Cornell & Sheras, 2006; Strong & Cornell, 2017). Information on this specific model can be found on the Web page of the Virginia Threat Assessment Guidelines (2018). Additionally, many schools across the nation utilize prescribed crisis intervention trainings for their school staff. One specific example is the Crisis Prevention Institute (CPI) model for crisis intervention in schools. CPI training can be embedded into the field education curriculum, which will assist all students with understanding how to verbally de-escalate a situation and how to appropriately intervene with a client or student in crisis. By embedding this content, training, and certification into the curriculum enhances the student's abilities to maintain a safe environment for their future clients, and prepares them for the field. With the CPI certification process embedded into the class, all students would graduate certified in CPI. To become a train the trainer in the model would be the next level that could be pursued by the school social work student after graduation as a way to increase their leadership footprint within their schools. The train-the-trainer process could easily be obtained through the school in which the social worker is employed, as it is a requirement that the school has a crisis support plan. The school social worker could then advocate to be the designated train the trainer for their school locations in their district, which

ensures their leadership in crisis support is well defined and established for the school social worker.

Interventions and Responding to Bullying and Trauma

Under the theme of increasing training and services, school social work respondents identified a topic of specialized programs for confronting bullying and trauma within their schools. Respondents noted their leadership in implementing anti-bullying programs; teaching students how to ask for help; and offering educational programs on trauma identification and reduction. These initiatives help to make the school a place where students feel comfortable to speak about their concerns about bullying, and violence. School social workers also mentioned working with families to engage their support for trauma and bullying concerns in their communities and schools. School social workers can assist in developing and identifying effective evidence-based programs for bully prevention. Some examples of evidence-based bully prevention and intervention programs can be found on the SAMHSA Web site (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2017). In addition, training around research and findings of the national survey known as Adverse Childhood Experiences Survey (ACES) assists educational practitioners in understanding the behavioral and psychological connections, and the impact these early adverse experiences have on brain architecture and development. States, such as Tennessee, have developed state-wide initiatives to combat the effects of adverse childhood experiences through increasing awareness, providing training, identifying and supporting evidence-based interventions, and conducting research. The Tennessee ACEs Building Stronger Brains initiative is aimed at increasing community awareness through a pyramid-training model across the state. Other states have additionally found ways in which to effectively embed these types of trainings into school and community systems. For more information about the state of Tennessee ACEs training model, see their Web site (Tennessee Department of Children's Services, 2018). Local universities have embedded the state-level ACEs content into their coursework. This curriculum infusion ensures each student is being trained in ACEs. Upon completion of the training, they are then identified as a "trauma informed" clinician and receive a certificate in ACEs at the conclusion of the training. Additionally, many school social workers across the state of Tennessee have taken on leadership roles and become certified trainers in the ACEs training to drive awareness within their schools and local communities. This is a great example of leadership within practice which was spearheaded through curriculum infusion during their graduate level training.

Conflict Resolution, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), Stress Reduction, and Anti-Racist Programs

Under the theme of increasing training and services, school social work respondents identified conflict resolution, social and emotional learning, stress reduction, and anti-racist programs as part of their work. Respondents noted as their roles, providing conflict resolution and social and emotional learning programs (SEL) for the entire school; mandating stress reduction training for teachers, teaching assistants, bus drivers, monitors, and administrators; implementing training in conflict resolution and supervision for principals; offering peer mediation services to students; providing anti-racist training to help students who need it the most; and offering the Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS) Program recommended by the US Department of Education. The research surrounding SEL programming in schools as a positive approach is evident within the literature (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Brackett, Rivers, & Salovey, 2011). School social workers understand and value the use of SEL programming and should be leaders in driving the implementation of these processes in schools. Evidence-based SEL programs can be viewed on the SAMHSA Web site (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2016). Similarly, the use of tier-based supports, such as PBIS, is equally effective and necessary for improving school climate and ultimately student outcomes (Bradshaw, Koth, Thornton, & Leaf, 2009). School social workers are primed for this form of work and leadership in the schools. Large system-wide programs, such as PBIS, need support and fidelity monitoring that can be provided under the leadership of a school social worker. Due to the ecological lens and framework in which school social workers provide service, the concept of district-wide supports that include students, families, staff, teachers, and community is very familiar.

Looking at the second theme, "focusing on school and community partnerships," the survey respondents wanted to see the schools become a more central part of the community. Additionally, they indicated within the survey that collaboration with community partners on decreasing and ending community violence, domestic violence, and decreasing racism within the community at large were integral to improving school safety. Benbenishty and Astor (2005) reviewed and described extant literature indicating that focusing on school and community processes can be beneficial for the school climate and educational outcomes. The authors identified the link between school and community violence, an important consideration when addressing school climate and safety. Interactions with community agencies were noted by several respondents as part of their leadership commitment. Community, governmental, and public entities have valuable resources that can assist the

school district in supplying supportive services to children, families, and community members in need. Additionally, reciprocal relationships between the school and community professional staff can be helpful in supporting school initiatives by contributing valuable information related to community and school safety and needs. For example, violent crime GIS mapping, conducted by local law enforcement, can assist school leaders and school social workers to understand the areas within the community that may be impacting school climate and student academic outcome (Ruiz, 2016). To expose students to the processes of GIS mapping, classroom-based activities where they must develop a topic and need and complete a GIS map about the need could be included in school social work syllabi and curriculum. Many universities offer cross-disciplinary collaborations and training, and school social workers can even take courses in GIS mapping while in their graduate programs. Being able to map the needs of a region or community, assists stakeholders with quickly identifying level of needs and gaps in services within a specific location will enhance the school social workers credibility and ability to serve as a leader in practice. School social work leadership skills within an interdisciplinary context are evident within a community collaboration process (Elswick et al., 2018; Hunter et al., 2017a).

The final theme, “advocating for school policy and structural changes that would affect school safety,” revealed school social work tasks around numerous programs related to student safety such as crises, suicide risk, violence, and disruptive behavior. Research conducted on students perceptions of school safety, climate, and employed safety measures revealed that many students did not feel that increased security measures benefited them and actually increased their feeling of annoyance and fear within the school (Tochterman, 2002). School social work leaders are in a position to assist in developing and implementing school policies that encourage nonthreatening safe practices in schools. Research has indicated that many social workers across the fields of practice tend to focus more in direct and individual client needs, and less on the macro-level advocacy that would benefit the larger population (D’Aprix, Dunlap, Abel & Edwards, 2004). This lack of macro-level advocacy and practice is even more frequent within the specialty practice of school social work. It is encouraging that the data from this study showed that school social workers are increasingly recognizing the importance of macro-practices. The results of this current survey also indicated that school social workers feel that there are standards of practice that are structural in nature, such as planning for emergencies and keeping intruders out while allowing for quick exits.

Social work contributions on school committees for safety from fires, violence, and natural catastrophes are likely to have an important impact on school safety and climate. It

has been shown that even small changes such as eliminating physical obstacles in the way of emergency exits, reducing potential chaos by having regular emergency drills, and increasing the use of cameras and checks on visitors who enter the building are structural safety measures that increase school safety. These suggested structural changes and improvements lead to safer schools and environments for all (International Finance Corporation, 2016). One way in which to enhance school social workers level of comfort in leadership roles as it relates to advocacy, is to encourage school social work educators to embed advocacy activities and assignments into their courses. Social Work Day on the Hill is an interactive process in which most universities already participate; however, the courses that typically participate in this advocacy process are social work policy classes. The school social work courses should also include activities for presenting at Social Work Day on the Hill. For example, school social work students could identify a need in public education, and present on the need and advocate for changes in the current policy during the Social Work Day on the Hill event. Students would have the ability to talk directly to legislatures and representative about the needs and issues as it directly relates to school social work and school-based practices. Practicing advocacy during their MSW education will assist them with being more comfortable in this leadership role after graduation.

In “beyond the themes” section, responses from nine school social workers illustrated their disappointment in lack of leadership roles in the schools, which highlight potential challenges for school social workers in today’s schools. Additionally with a response rate of approximately 54.6%, there is no indication of why so many school social workers failed to address their school social work leadership roles in the open-ended question. Further research can delve deeper into school social worker leadership tasks and roles, projects that may encourage higher levels of responsiveness and inclusivity.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations are important to note when considering this study’s findings. This study is exploratory in nature, and thus, an untested survey was developed and used for this purpose of this research. While this study is a starting point, qualitative and quantitative researchers should take steps toward operationalizing social work leadership in school. One of the greatest limitations of this study is that it is not inherently qualitative which has implications for how the findings can be interpreted. Finally, non-probability sampling was used to collect these data. Results suggest that this sample is similar to previous surveys of these professionals; however, sample representation cannot be guaranteed.

In sum, findings 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. 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 and mental health practice in the US schools.

Conclusion

In conclusion, leadership in school social work is a needed skill that appears to be developing without much fanfare. School social workers are being called on to perform numerous leadership-type tasks and are increasingly being viewed as fitting into the leadership role in schools. Evident in this study, the field of school social work is following a path toward defining, developing, and implementing effective leadership practices for future school social workers to follow. Next step in enhancing leadership within the field of school social work is a priority by ensuring that school social workers are able to develop these skills during their educational journey prior to graduation. Ensuring that the school social workers are exposed to these models of practice, levels of training, and at least completing the initial phases of being competent and certified in needed areas of practice prior to graduation will increase chances for success within the profession. Institutions of Higher Education need to look at curriculum infusion as a model of practice that better prepares students for employment, clinical practice, and leadership roles within their field. With these identified areas of leadership, social work education programs may consider developing more programs focusing on competency and skill development in the areas of training and service delivery, school–community partnerships, and advocacy and policy development specifically within school social work practice.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest Susan E. Elswick declares that she has no conflict of interest. Matthew J. Cuellar declares that he has no conflict of interest. Susan E. Mason declares that she has no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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