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Social Work Practice with Children Identified as Having Disabilities in Elementary School

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Walden University
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Abstract

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MSW, Barry University 2014

BHSA, Florida International University, 2013

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

School social workers provide services and resources for children with disabilities and protect their rights. The National Association of Social Work (NASW) Code of Ethics provides the school social workers' responsibilities to clients in the promotion of well-being. The present research involved identifying the school social workers' role in ensuring a conducive learning environment for students with disabilities. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory was used in this study to investigate the person-in-environment experiences of school social workers within an elementary class setting. Data consisted of six school social workers' responses to semi-structured questions obtained in one-on-one interviews conducted via the Zoom web-based video conferencing tool. Results of this study showed that the school social workers participated in a multidisciplinary team, involving educational systems, organizations, authorities, and health boards working collaboratively to provide services to the students. Additionally, the findings indicated that significant changes have occurred, such as the ones resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, which have prompted new ways for school social workers to provide students with what they need. Findings of the study may be used to promote social change by school social worker's practice with children with disabilities and by providing insight for school social workers about the effective services and resources that can help students with disabilities achieve academically and develop social skills needed in order for them to be successful in all their endeavors throughout their lives.

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Dedication

I dedicate this research to my son, Jeremy, daughter Zhuri for their continuous support throughout all my education, my grandmother, Immacula Pierre, my parents as immigrants who allowed me the opportunity to have a brighter future. To all my colleagues, friends, Tabernacle Church Family and family for the continued support. My grandmother passed away February 1, 2020. She was my rock and biggest supporter mentally, spiritually and financially. She encouraged me to keep pushing forward through my challenges with Jeremy as a premature child born at 24 weeks along with numerous of friends and church families that gave me moral support and advice.

Jeremy, thank you for teaching me patience and giving me the will power to advocate for you as a person, my son and with identified learning disabilities. You continue to teach me that being disabled is not the end. With you I have hope that all things are possible.

To my beloved grandmother, Immacula. I wish you could have been here to see me fulfill this journey. I thank you for the time spent, life teachings and patience with me. I love you and miss you, always. Last, but not least to my only daughter Zhuri, let this be an example that nothing is impossible with God on our side.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

Introduction

Children in classroom settings interact with their peers. Children with disabilities should interact equally with their nondisabled peers. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) allows children, regardless of their behaviors, characteristics, and cultural background, to equally interact within inclusive classrooms, which enables them to have a sense of belonging (Rosenkoetter et al., 2007). According to Rosenkoetter (2007), children with disabilities learn how to adapt to their classroom setting from their community, culture, and nondisabled peers. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory demonstrates how children with disabilities can interpret events in their surroundings and how these events relate to their thinking and behavior (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979; Rosenkoetter et al., 2007).

Social work practice includes helping children with disabilities obtain the tangible services needed to foster their learning within a classroom setting. The services that school social workers provide within an inclusive classroom for children with disabilities support their learning experience by increasing the students' social skills, and achievement of the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) goals (Burstein et al., 2004; Fitch, 2003). Social workers use the IEP to identify the students' areas for improvement (National Association of Social Workers, 2012).

In this study, I utilized the ecological theory and a qualitative methodology. The ecological perspective in social work practice allows for a holistic approach to addressing society's problems and providing services for those who need them the most (Ravitch &

Carl, 2016). I utilized a qualitative design to investigate the services and resources that school social workers provide students with disabilities within an inclusive elementary classroom setting.

Background of the Study

School social workers working with children with disabilities within an inclusive classroom setting provide advocacy in allowing the students to study and interact with their nondisabled peers (Burstein et al., 2004; Fitch, 2003). School social workers contribute to the children's education by helping families and communities obtain resources necessary for their academic achievement (Stanley, 2012).

An inclusive classroom is defined as an environment that allows children with disabilities to be among their nondisabled peers (Kwon et al., 2011; Odom et al., 2011). Children with disabilities in an inclusive classroom setting not receiving the support— i.e., classroom assistance and more time for testing—do not adapt successfully without the assistance of school social work practice (Lohman et al., 2018). School social workers in inclusive classrooms provide children with disabilities with interventions to barriers that impede their educational success (Sherman, 2016).

School social work practice is an integral part of serving children with disabilities to safeguard their privacy and maintain their confidentiality (Hunter et al., 2017; Sherman, 2016). Social work practice within the school includes working at individual education centers and alternative education centers, providing early interventions, diagnostic teams, specialized programs, and programs for children with emotional or behavioral disabilities (Avant, 2014; Malone et al., 2000). Additionally, assistance with

reading, language, grammar, or math, provides the professional support necessary for children with disabilities within an elementary school classroom (Kwon et al., 2011; Odom et al., 2011).

Children with disabilities who do not have the assistance of school social workers do not receive prevention or intervention services within their classroom setting, and this results in low academic achievement (Malone et al., 2000). Additionally, they do not have the resources to excel academically, which causes their classroom setting to become a barrier (Sherman, 2016). School social workers uphold the NASW standards to provide children with disabilities and nondisabled peers with an individualized intervention that addresses behaviors of concern (National Association of Social Workers, 2012).

Lohman et al. (2018) found that school social work practice incorporated within the children's environment had a positive impact on their educational outcomes. Library resources and after school tutoring are some of the assistance provided by school social workers to help children with disabilities learn. Additionally, school social workers work in the students' homes and provide person-in-environment services and support (Garrett, 2004; Hunter et al., 2017).

Statement of the Problem

The problem that I addressed in this study was that there is not adequate information about the effective services and resources that school social workers can provide to children with disabilities, which will help them achieve academically (Lohmann et al., 2018). This problem began with the incorporation of inclusive classes. Inclusive classrooms were created so that educators could teach both children with

disabilities and nondisabled children while adhering to the IEP of children with disabilities (Sherman, 2016). School social workers are responsible for the integration of specialized service that address the IEP. If the IEP is not sufficiently addressed, children with disabilities will be negatively affected. School social workers can prevent this from happening by providing the needed prevention and intervention services and resources each child requires (Lohmann et al., 2018; Sherman, 2016).

Some school educators lack the clinical and therapeutic approach to work with children with disabilities (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007). School social workers can provide the therapeutic approach needed to work with disabled children within an educational setting (Sherman, 2016; Stanley, 2012). Many educators believe children with disabilities can be assisted through support, training, and experience to help enhance their learning experience in inclusive classrooms (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007; Fitch, 2003). School social workers need to know which services and interventions are effective when working with children with disabilities. However, a review of literature indicated that there is a gap in research about school social workers who work with children with disabilities in elementary class environments in particular.

To address this problem regarding the need for information about effective services and resources that can be provided to children with disabilities, I utilized a qualitative approach to obtain the lived experiences of school social workers who work with these children in an elementary class environment. The information that I obtained from this study filled the gap in literature and can inform social workers about practices they can use to help students with disabilities achieve academically.

Purpose Statement

According to Hunter et al. (2017), children with disabilities often lack resources to learn adequately and are at risk academically. Gaps in services place children with disabilities at risk, causing unsuccessful academic achievement (Lohman et al., 2018). School social workers who work with children with disabilities need to be creative when motivating and encouraging them to achieve academically. Often educators and parents have used several methods to help these children but have been unsuccessful. The additional help of school social workers can have a positive impact on these students (Lohmann et al., 2018). However, if school social workers do not advocate for the children's best interest, they will not be successful in helping them. A social worker who does not provide the appropriate services and resources will ultimately do more harm than good. (Malone et al., 2000).

There is a gap in literature about effective school social work practices with children with disabilities in an inclusive elementary class setting. The purpose of this study was to obtain information from Miami and Broward, Florida school social workers about the services and resources they provide for children with disabilities, who are in inclusive elementary classrooms, which help them achieve their educational goals.

Research Question

I designed this qualitative study to obtain data from school social workers to answer the following question:

What are the lived experiences of school social workers who provide services and resources for students with disabilities in inclusive elementary classes in Miami and Broward, Florida?

Nature of the Study

I selected a qualitative design to investigate the live experiences of school social workers with children with disabilities in inclusive elementary classes. School social workers are on the interdisciplinary team to help connect the community, resources, family, and student assistance for children with disabilities through advocacy (Malone et al., 2000). Whether the impairment is behavioral or learning, children with disabilities should receive support to adapt to their educational setting and achieve their educational goals (Avant, 2014). When conducting this research, I utilized the Zoom web-based video conferencing tool to conduct a one-on-one interview. During the one-on-one interview, each school social worker separately answered semi structured questions about experiences providing services and interventions for students with disabilities within a Miami Dade or Broward County elementary inclusive classroom.

I performed data coding procedures to conduct a thematic analysis of the participants' responses. The six themes represent the experiences of the school social workers when providing services and resources for children with disabilities. Results of the study can inform school social workers about effective practices, which ensure children with disabilities in inclusive elementary school classrooms have a rewarding learning experience.

Definition of Key Terms

Key terms relating to this study are defined as follows:

Disabilities. Disabilities are identified as a "special need" within an IEP to address intellectual and/ or developmental abilities to comprehension and learning (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007; Stanley, 2012).

Elementary school. An elementary school is an educational institution usually from kindergarten through fifth grade (Han, O'Connor &McCormick, 2019).

Inclusive. Inclusive is a setting that allows all children to participate in school/ class activities (Fitch, 2003).

Individualized education plan (IEP). IEP is a written document developed for children identified for "special education" (IDEA, 2004).

Least restrictive environment. Least restrictive environment means children identified for "special education" should spend equal opportunities with their peers that do not receive "special education" (IDEA, 2004).

School social worker. A school social worker specializes in an educational setting for school age children and families. He or she advocates for resources and support student development (Sherman, 2016).

Social work practice. Social work practice is the enhancement of what best practices address communities, individuals, organizations and other social institutions that have a social problem (National Association of Social Workers, 2012).

Theoretical Framework

I used the ecological systems theory to investigate the experiences of school social workers who provide services and resources to children with disabilities in an inclusive elementary school environment. Psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner formulated the theory and who posited that human development unfolds through changes in the way individuals perceive, restructure, and cope with their environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). In turn, the environment influences individuals through a process of reciprocity between themselves and their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979; Teater, 2014). This process of human development occurs within a nested set of systems, which include social, cultural, psychological, and political components. Optimal human development can either be nurtured or stifled as a result of the interactions of these elements of the systems. For example, a particular program or policy can impact how any of these systems are shaped and developed and can either promote or be detrimental to a person's well-being (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994).

The ecological theory provides an insight into school issues attributed to family and school settings (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The ecological theory can be utilized to determine the preventions or interventions for children with disabilities regarding academic, psychological, social, and behavioral problems present (Thomas et al., 2011). The ecological theory may also be used to explore the physical and social influences, which are interconnected and influence the child's outcome within their education environment (Teater, 2014; Thomas et al., 2011). Utilizing this perspective allows social workers to understand the person's interaction in a specific cultural environment, such as

disabled children within their school environment (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Thus, school

social workers can use the ecological theory to examine the outcomes of disabled

children within their educational setting (Chen et al., 2017). In this study, I addressed

social work practice utilizing the ecological theory to identify the experiences of school

social workers in service for disabled children in their inclusive elementary school

settings.

Assumptions

I assumed that children with disabilities have the services and resources they need

to achieve academically in inclusive elementary school classrooms. I also assumed that

the social workers employed by Miami, or Broward County, Florida school system would

fully participate in the virtual one-on-one interview and provide accurate information. A

final assumption was that the participants would be knowledgeable about issues related to

children with disabilities in an inclusive elementary classroom environment and provide

sufficient information to answer the questions.

Limitations

One of the study's limitations was that participants were not paid, other than

receiving one-time gift card for $10. Therefore, there was the possibility that I would not

obtain the number of participants necessary to obtain substantive, in-depth data. Further,

this study was limited to social workers employed by the Miami, or Broward County,

Florida school system and results may not be generalized to all school social workers in

other environments. Additionally, the one-on-one interview was held virtually via the

Zoom web-based conferencing tool, and I was concerned that technological problems

might arise, which could have impeded my ability to obtain quality data. I addressed all of these limitations and none proved to be problematic during the research process and did not prevent me from achieving the study's goals.

Delimitations

One of this study's delimitations was that I only selected school social workers who provide services and resources to children with disabilities in an inclusive elementary classroom setting and were employed by the Miami, or Broward County, Florida school system to participate in the study. Social workers from other demographics did not meet the inclusion requirements. A further delimitation was that the participants provided data in an online Zoom one-on-one interview, rather than face-to-face, which some participants could have been uncomfortable with. Because the population was small, six participants, it was possible that enough data would not be obtained that would make this a robust study. However, regardless of the delimitations, I was able to obtain information-rich data.

Significance of the Study

A lack of effective support can limit educational opportunities and lead to poor outcomes for students, especially those who have disabilities (Dente & Coles, 2012; Hill & Koester, 2015). School social workers can assist students with disabilities by participating in the development of an IEP that is tailored to their educational needs and make recommendations about the best strategies educators and service providers can use to help them succeed academically (Sherman, 2016). Social workers' interventions are necessary for children with disabilities (Lohmann et al., 2018).

The significance of the study is that the investigation and results provided an insight into school social workers' experiences providing services and resources to children with disabilities, and the challenges faced within an inclusive elementary educational setting. This study has the potential to contribute to social change and affect school social work practice by informing school social workers about effective preventive and intervention methods, which ensure children with disabilities in inclusive elementary school classrooms have a positive learning experience.

Summary

Children with disabilities often have unmet emotional and physical needs that impede their ability to adapt to a classroom environment and succeed academically (Stanley, 2012). Research indicates that school social workers can help educators provide a classroom setting that offers opportunities for students with disabilities for the ability to attain confidence and academic competence. Additionally, school social workers can assist school systems in obtaining support from healthcare agencies to meet the needs of students with disabilities and their families (Castillo et al., 2016; Malone et al., 2000). The purpose of this study was to identify how social work practice is implemented for children with disabilities in an inclusive elementary classroom setting by obtaining the experiences of school social workers employed by the Miami and Broward County, Florida school system.

Section 2 contains a review of literature on children with disabilities in special education and inclusive programs. The section also includes a presentation of literature related to social work practice, in general, and school social workers, in particular.

Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

The purpose of this research was to investigate the experiences of school social workers with children with disabilities in an inclusive elementary educational setting in Miami, or Broward County, Florida. This qualitative study included a one-on-one interview using the Zoom web-based conferencing tool and semistructured questionnaire to obtain an answer to the research question: What are the lived experiences of school social workers who provide services and resources for students with disabilities in inclusive elementary classes in Miami and Broward County, Florida?

This section contains a synthesis and analysis of key research from the literature focusing on school social workers' role with children with disabilities in special education and inclusive classrooms. I present research about the social work practices, policies, and governmental initiatives that counter those acts of discrimination against children with disabilities, which prevents them from achieving academically. Also included is a discussion of the ecological systems theory to facilitate the understanding of the issues related to treatment of children with disabilities in a school environment. The review of literature ends with a summary of the section and preview of Section 3.

Literature Search Strategy

The key databases that I utilized were Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, SocINDEX, and PsychINFO. To obtain the most important publications about social workers and children with disabilities, I searched SocINDEX first, because it has a high specificity for sociology journals. The following journals were the ones that I primarily referenced: *School Social Work Journal, Journal of Evidence-Based Social work, Journal of*

Educational Psychology, and *International Journal of Early Childhood Special Education*.

The search terms relevant to the focus of this study were: *children with disabilities in school, school social worker and children, disabled children and classroom, school social worker role and disability, social workers and schools, social work practice, special education,* and *inclusive programs.* The search resulted in primarily peer-reviewed articles published between 2012–2019. However, some articles in the review of literature were published before these years and were important to include because they provided historical information, and seminal studies and theories that were pertinent to the study.

Theoretical Framework

I utilized the ecological systems theory to explore the school social work practices used for children with disabilities in an inclusive elementary school environment in Miami and Broward, Florida. Psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner developed the theory, to explain how human development is influenced by environmental systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979). Bronfenbrenner explained the influences of environmental factors on children and suggested that when conducting studies from a sociological perspective, researchers should investigate what is occurring with children within the different systems they exist. According to Bronfenbrenner, there are five systems in which children exist that impact upon their development: the mesosystem, microsystem, macrosystem, exosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979).

The microsystem includes factors within a child's immediate environment that interact directly with the child, such as family and teachers. The mesosystem consists of interconnections between the microsystems, such as the relationship between the teachers and family. The macrosystem consists of societal factors such as socioeconomic conditions and cultural values. The exosystem is comprised of factors beyond the child's immediate environment. The chronosystem involves the child environmental changes. For example, what happens at a child's parents' workplace can influence the home life and affect economic stability (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979).

To further explain these systems, Bronfenbrenner developed his concept of how children's characteristics interplay with context in a paper he coauthored with psychologist, Stephen J. Ceci, who is known as an expert in the development of memory and intelligence (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979). Expounding on the nature versus nurture debate within the field of child development, Bronfenbrenner and Ceci posited that a child's genetic traits interact with his or her environmental experiences to determine developmental outcomes (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Human development, therefore, involves the interplay of children's biological and psychological makeup and their environments. Thus, a child's social conditions influence his or her behavior, learning, and growth (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994).

Using the ecological approach when working with children with disabilities has proven to be successful (Dente & Coles, 2012). Hunter et al. (2017) connected children with disabilities with their environment including their families, peers, educators, and social workers using the ecology theory. Utilizing the ecology theory, Chen et al. (2017)

showed how the gaps in service for children with disabilities within a classroom setting can prove to be a challenge. Thomas et al. (2011) utilized the ecological theory to determine any barriers children with disabilities may face, and explored the influences that a child's teachers, families, communities and peers have on their development. Ravitch and Carl (2016) used the ecological theory to provide insight on how the perspectives of children with disabilities are influenced by their surroundings. Teater (2014) affirmed the ecological theory can be used to explain the environmental influences within the community, while factoring in the cultural perspectives. Social problems, therefore, tie in with the ecological system theory.

The ecological theory was relevant to the focus of this study because the role that school social workers have, from an ecological perspective, impacts clients through planning activities, policies, psychotherapy, and other types of microlevel approaches (Payne, 2005). Therefore, school social workers can combine direct and indirect intervention strategies into a nonconflicting practice approach when working with clients. School social work practice involving children with disabilities, in particular, includes a combination of individual education centers, alternative education centers, early interventions, diagnostic teams, and specialized programs (Avant, 2014; Malone et al., 2000). I used the ecological theory in this exploration of the lived experiences of school social workers employed within the inclusive elementary class environment of children with disabilities to determine their impact on helping them achieve their educational goals.

Historical Overview of Social Work Practice

The origins of social work as a profession began in the 19th century in the United States when the welfare state emerged (Ehrenreich, 1985). The end of feudalism resulted in poverty being viewed as a threat to the social status quo (Leiby, 1979). The Industrial Revolution had initiated high levels of scientific and technological and scientific advancements, leading to the factory system. The demand for a large number of employees spawned a significant migration to urban areas, which led to the increase of social problems (Ehrenreich, 1985). Some of the primary social problems that ensued were mass poverty, illiteracy, starvation, and mental illness. To respond to these problems, the Charities Organization Society, founded in 1869, and the Settlement House Movement, established in 1877, along with religious groups, charitable organizations, and local and state governments developed American social work practice to implement rational approaches to philanthropy and charity (Leiby, 1979).

The Charities Organization Society consisted of independent groups focusing on ameliorating the problems associated with poverty. Members of the society contended that unsupervised and unregulated relief was not the cure for poverty, rather, it was the cause. Consequently, the Society created a position termed a friendly visitor who processed relief applications, separated the applicants into deserving or undeserving classes categories, and then provided the clients with advice, referrals, and friendship (Tannenbaum & Reisch, 2001). The reason the Society took this approach was because of the belief that those in poverty needed upper-class role models to help in their moral uplift, rather than providing them with safe housing and decent wages (Soydan, 2012).

The Society's charity philosophy dominated social work practice until the 1930s

(Tannenbaum & Reisch, 2001).

The Settlement House Movement was responsible for the construction of houses

in the urban areas to form communities where the settlement house workers helped

residents (Tannenbaum & Reisch, 2001). Some of the ways that they helped the residents

was to solve problems by implementing initiatives such as creating a juvenile court,

enacting working protections, and upholding child labor laws. Social workers becoming

involved are impetus in policy practice and social action (Leiby, 1979).

After World War II, the number of social workers increased to provide services

for the military veterans. To organize and address the needs of the social workers, the

National Association of Social Workers (NASW) was founded in 1955. The mission of

the NASW was to increase educational opportunities in the field, advance social policies,

promote professional development, and maintain professional standards of practice.

NASW members provide services in a variety of settings such as schools, hospitals,

health care facilities, mental health centers, government, community, academia, and

private practice (National Association of Social Workers, 2012). NASW Practice

Standards & Guidelines contain best practices and benchmarks for social workers to use

when providing services to clients. Additionally, NASW social workers must adhere to

ethical principles, which include helping people in need and to addressing social

problems, elevating service to others above one's own self-interest, challenging social

injustice on behalf of people who are vulnerable and oppressed, respecting the dignity of

clients, and ensuring they have the resources and services they need (National Association of Social Workers, 2012).

From the first part of the 20th century through the 1960s, social work was influenced by Freud and psychoanalyses, and social workers began to adopt a psychodynamic practice (Brandell, 2004; Popple, 2018). Social workers incorporated psychoanalysis in their practice and created psychosocial and ego psychology treatment, creating a bond with the mental health movement and medical profession (Brandell, 2004). Although social workers used variants of psychoanalysis, casework was the primary practice method, and represents social work in its most individualistic form (National Association of Social Workers, 2012).

Beginning in the 1960s and lasting until the present, there were two significant changes in social work practice. One change was a disintegration of the psychodynamic practice in social work (Brandell, 2004; Ehrenreich, 1985). Although some social workers still utilize psychodynamic approaches, other phenomenological and behavioral approaches have emerged, such as task-centered practice (TCP), solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT), narrative approach, and reality therapy (Popple, 2018). These innovative approaches offer a variety of options for social workers to use in contrast to the profession's singular approach prior to 1960 (National Association of Social Workers, 2012).

Another change in social work practice was the development of community practice, which encompasses strategies, such as human service management, political organizing, social planning, policy analysis and advocacy, and community development

(Soydan, 2012). Community practice social workers enhance individuals' well-being by providing access to the basic needs such as food, shelter, and clothing, and basic necessities including sanitation, education, and healthcare. According to the National Association of Social Workers (2012), community social work practice aids people when they are faced with unforeseeable challenges and social injustice by providing preventative services, counseling, housing, and life-sustaining services.

The current trend in social work practice reflects the evolution of social work from implementing approaches to philanthropy and charity that did not value a person, to elevating human welfare through service that respects the dignity and worth of the person (NASW, 2017). In 2016, the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare initiated and set forth the Grand Challenges of Social Work for the upcoming decade (Williams, 2016). The challenges are calls to action to address the issues that affect the quality of life. The American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare (2015), provided twelve goals of these challenges:

1. Ensure healthy development for all youths

2. Lose the health gap

3. Stop family violence

4. Advance long and productive lives

5. Eradicate social isolation

6. End homelessness

7. Create social responses to a changing environment

8. Harness technology for social good

9. Promote smart decarceration

10. Reduce extreme economic inequality

11. Build financial capability for all

12. Achieve equal opportunity and justice

The NASW (2017) affirmed that when working toward achieving these goals, social workers are on the front line of social justice. They implement practices and initiatives that provide help and resources for individuals and communities in need.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

In the United States, more than seven million children with disabilities receive special education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). In 2004, the IDEA was enacted to address these students' educational needs. Children with disabilities, according to IDEA, should have access to fair interaction with nondisabled peers. Children with disabilities, regardless of their cultural background, behavior and/or identified disability, deserve the opportunity to engage in an interactive environment. To be eligible for IDEA services, a child has to meet eligibility criteria in one or more of the following disability categories: autism, specific learning disability, speech or language impairments, emotional disturbance, traumatic brain injury, visual impairment, hearing impairment, deafness, mental retardation, deaf-blindness, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, and other health impairments (IDEA: Public Law 108–446; Sec. 300.39 Special Education).

Children who receive services under IDEA have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) document. This document contains the special educational services the

child is entitled to receive, which include: the child's level of functional performance and academic achievement, how the child is currently performing, how the child is affected by his or her disability, and the supplementary services the child is receiving, such as support from social workers and tutoring programs. The IEP is to be amended and revised throughout each school year (IDEA: Public Law 108–446). However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were not required to amend IEPs. Schools were closed; therefore, local educational agencies (LEAs) provided courses through other options, such as online learning. Additionally, parents did not have to provide their required written consent for LEAs to provide services away from the child's school, such as those provided by social workers (The Department of Education, 2020).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

In 2001, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act was enacted, which impacted the existing IDEA act. The policy was framed in "high expectations" for student achievement. State school systems were required to give rigid tests annually that represented Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) benchmarks (Department of Education, 2003). Schools that did not test at least 95 percent of subgroups, such as students with disabilities or minorities, were subjected to penalties, such as dismissal of staff. This policy was particularly relevant for students with disabilities, because these students' test scores were compared with all their peers', and the results indicated how well or poorly students in special education performed or integrated into the mainstream classroom. Additionally, results from the tests were used to measure whether IDEA regulations and requirements were being implemented (Hess & Petrilli, 2006). NCLB determined

whether children with disabilities had access to the school's mainstream curricula and the support and learning resources they needed to achieve proficiency in course requirements. For those students who could not meet their grade's standards, NCLB had an assessment option that allowed schools to modify achievement standards, which varied depending on each course's content coverage (No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act Public Law 107–110, 2001).

A study conducted by the American Institutes for Research showed that the implementation of NCLB resulted in better academic achievement outcomes for students with disabilities (Harr-Robins et al., 2015). Most noteworthy, students who were in special-education programs transferred to mainstream classrooms at a higher rate than before the act was enacted. In schools that were accountable and those not accountable for performance of students with disabilities, always-accountable schools were more diligent in placing students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms (Hess & Petrilli, 2006). Students with disabilities spent more than 80 percent of the school day studying the school's regular curricula in a mainstream classroom (Harr-Robins et al., 2015).

In 2015, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) act replaced the NCLB act, and eliminated many of its controversial provisions. The main criticism of NCLB was that it relied primary on standardized assessments. Under the ESSA, students in grades 3 through 8 have to take reading and math tests once a year. Students with disabilities can still be provided with alternate accommodations (Hess & Petrilli, 2006). However, only 1 percent of all of the school's students can take alternate tests. School systems can determine their own academic proficiency targets, and do not have to meet any federal

criteria for raising students' test scores (Every Student Succeeds Act. Public Law No:

114-95, 2015). The ESSA allows for interim assessments throughout each year. Having

interim assessments provides a more accurate report of students' abilities on an on-going

basis. Course content can be adapted and aligned to provide students with reasonable

benchmarks. Previously, under the NCLB act, teachers did not know whether the students

grasped the course's contents until they received their test results of the end of the year

tests (Harr-Robins et al., 2015).

IDEA ensures inclusive educational rights, program modifications, and

individualized accommodation for children with disabilities. Achievement statistics from

2013 showed that 62 percent of students with disabilities obtained a regular high school

diploma. The dropout rates for these students were lower than before enactment of IDEA,

and more of them graduated by the age of 21. IDEA's success provides an opportunity

for children with disabilities to pursue a post-secondary education. In the 2011-2012

school year, 11% of college undergraduates and 5% of all graduate school students had

disabilities (Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report, 2017). Overall, IDEA

provides an opportunity for children with disabilities to obtain the education they need to

achieve their personal development and career goals.

Children with Disabilities in Special Education

Historical Overview

In the first part of the 20th century, parents advocated for having the education

needs of children with disabilities addressed (Harr-Robins et al., 2015). In 1961,

President John F. Kennedy responded to the concerns of parents and created the

President's Panel on Mental Retardation, which resulted in the federal aid providing

funds to the states for the education of children with disabilities (Paul, 2016). In 1965,

funding was expanded when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Elementary and

Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Public

Law 89-10-Apr. 11, 1965). The act mandated funds be allocated for instructional

materials, professional development, services and resources for educational programs,

and parental involvement activities (Paul, 2016; Elementary and Secondary Education

Act. Public Law 89-10-Apr. 11, 1965).

In 1975, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) guaranteed

children with disabilities the right to obtain an appropriate, free education delivered in the

least restrictive environment (IDEA: Sec. 300.39 Special Education). In 1997, IDEA

required that special education students have individual education plans (IEP) that

contain the services they need to achieve education requirements (Stanley, 2012). In 2001

and 2004, the NCLB provided provisions and loan programs to help schools obtain

technology and special education resources (Hess & Petrilli, 2006).

Special education, as defined by IDEA, is "…specially designed instruction…to

meet the unique needs of a child with a disability, including: (i) Instruction conducted in

the classroom, in the home, in hospitals and institutions, and in other settings; and (ii)

Instruction in physical education" (IDEA: Sec. 300.39 Special Education). The parents

are not required to pay for any of the special education services. IDEA requires that the

specially designed instruction be provided via an individualized educational program

(IEP). Additionally, the special education program should not be a separate part of the

curriculum. Instead, special education should be one segment of supportive programs and services that ensure children with disabilities have a classroom environment, which represents a responsive environment (Cagiltay et al., 2019). Special education is equipped with assistive technologies to increase the functional capabilities of children with disabilities. These assistive technologies, such as voice recognition programs, closed captioning, screen readers, automatic page turners, adapted pencil grips, book holders, and screen enlargement applications, provide children with disabilities the opportunity to be active participants within their classroom environment (Rosenkoetter et al., 2007).

Benefits of Special Education

Children with disabilities within school environments are identified as having special needs that are imperative to address for them to reach education requirements (Stanley, 2012). Lohmann et al. (2018) contended that children with disabilities within a school environment can produce a positive outcome academically with assistance. Han et al. (2019) acknowledged that children in pre-K require support to foster their academic achievement. Measuring learning outcomes support children with disabilities to access education within their school environment (Benjamin et al., 2017).

Children with disabilities have barriers to obtaining services needed for special education. Often services are inaccessible for them, which delays these students' opportunities for assistance (Stanley, 2012). Benjamin et al. (2017) affirmed children with disabilities have various hinderances that impede their effective participation within a class environment. Parents, guardians and fosters of children with disabilities are often unaware of the involvement needed to make educational decisions. Sometimes,

community resources and educational tools are not provided to children with disabilities within their school environment (Sullivan, 2011). Whether students have physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments, appropriate accommodations are needed within the school environment. Benjamin et al. contended that an individualized education plan was appropriate to accommodate children with disabilities to help them adapt to their school environment. Malone et al. (2000) affirmed the need for early intervention with children with disabilities to prevent low academic performance.

Both Malone et al. (2000) and Cagiltay et al. (2019) acknowledged children with disabilities usually perform within a low academic level. Therefore, intervention was necessary, and special education helps with children with disabilities who have short attention spans, low capacity memories, and difficulty with instructional activities (Weintraub, 2012). Additionally, special education allows children with disabilities to maintain their individual education plan in implementing their needs within the classroom environment. Children with disabilities are provided the services and equipment or materials they need to learn within their classrooms (Rosenkoetter et al., 2007).

According to Imaniah and Fitria (2018), children with disabilities within special education tend to experience some challenges in understanding social interactions, adapting, and ability to learn. Special education has a curriculum that accommodates each student within the classroom. However, teachers need to develop teaching strategies to address children with disabilities within special education. Teachers must be knowledgeable about children with disabilities to best teach them (Weintraub, 2012).

In addition to the background knowledge teachers have about children with disabilities, to ensure the needs of each student are addressed, teachers use the IEP to identify the children's learning styles, areas of improvement, and need for assistance. To be eligible for the IEP, the child has to be between the ages of 3 and 21, and have an identified disability, which impedes learning, and requires specialized instruction (Kwon et al., 2011). Through the related services provided within an IEP, children with disabilities are able to participate effectively within a special education classroom (Rosenkoetter et al., 2007).

Disadvantages of Special Education

Researchers have shown that there are some disadvantages of special education programs. Kwon et al. (2011) affirmed they are homogeneous and do not allow opportunities for children with disabilities to interact with their other peers who are in general education programs. Researchers have found that inclusive classrooms, rather than special education classroom, provide more opportunities for students to interact with their peers (Kwon et al., 2011; Odom et al., 2011). This factor is important because interacting with others reduces children's social isolation and helps them obtain academic, language, and social skills (Sullivan, 2011).

Another disadvantage of special education that researchers have found is that children with disabilities' level of academic achievement is better in inclusive classrooms (Boroson, 2017; Imaniah & Fitria, 2018). Phillips and Meloy (2012) reported that children with disabilities in inclusive programs increased their early literacy scores. Aligned with these results, Green et al. (2014) found that inclusive programs have a

positive impact on children with disabilities' literacy, language, print awareness, and oral language outcomes.

One of the most damaging disadvantages for students in special education is to be negatively labeled, which impacts their self-esteem. The use of derogatory labels that other students calls them, such as "slow learner," and "abnormal," results in them lowering their expectations of themselves (Odom et al., 2011). When students are in inclusive classrooms, and not in a homogenous environment labeled special education, it reduces the chance of them being singled out and identified as different from their peers (Kwon et al., 2011).

Overall, the National Council on Disability (2018) contended special education is specially designed to meet the educational standards that apply to all children. Although there are some disadvantages associated with special education, the advantages dominate (Kauffman & Hallahan, 2011). Hibel et al. (2010) affirmed that students with disabilities benefit from being in special programs despite any disadvantages of the program because they have an adaptable learning environment.

Children with Disabilities within Inclusive Classrooms

The history of inclusive education aligns with that of special education. Children with disabilities were already in mainstream classroom before the establishment of special education programs (Winter & O'Raw, 2010). The only change that occurred, beginning in the 1990s, was that the subsequent passages of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and the IDEA act ensured students with disabilities have educational opportunities that are "free, accessible, appropriate, timely, nondiscriminatory,

meaningful, measurable, and provided in the least-restrictive setting" (Boroson, 2017, p. 19). These acts were rooted in a civil rights perspective and a vision for the integration of children with disabilities in school and society. The premise was that children with disabilities' educational environment should be equal and not separate (Imaniah & Fitria, 2018; Sulaimani & Gut, 2019). In the school year of 2017, 95 percent of 6- to 21-year-old students with disabilities were in mainstream classrooms; 3 percent were in separate schools for students with disabilities; 1 percent were in regular private schools, and less than 1 percent were served in either a homebound, hospital, residential or correctional facilities (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

Establishment of inclusive programs for children with disabilities within the school system ensures their needs, expectations, goals, and supports are considered the same as those of other children and that the principles of access, participation, and support are adhered to. Providing access means that communicative-related barriers, and structural and physical must be removed (Winter & O'Raw, 2010). Participation also involves providing instructional strategies and resources that promote learning, and a sense of belonging. Support consists of the program/school-family partnerships and professional services (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2016).

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2016) recommends that teachers have a common knowledge base about children with disabilities, and be able to engage them in communicative interactions, promote social-emotional development, determine when students need additional services and address them, and mitigate inappropriate behaviors. Many teachers do not have specialized disability certifications.

Therefore, those who do not have them can deliver instruction in consultation with certified teachers, or professionals, such as behavioral specialists, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, or mobility and orientation specialists (Winter & O'Raw, 2010).

Advantages of Inclusive Programs

Research indicates there is overwhelming agreement that inclusive education has many advantages for students with disabilities. Garrett (2004), Burstein et al. (2004), and Downing and Peckham-Hardin (2007) found that children with disabilities within inclusive classrooms excel academically. Burstein et al. also confirmed children with disabilities within inclusive classrooms thrive academically versus in special education classrooms with only disabled peers. Nahmias et al. (2014) found children with disabilities who were in inclusive kindergartens had better cognitive outcomes when they entered elementary school, especially those children who had low social-emotional skills. An inclusive classroom allows children with disabilities to become engaged with nondisabled peers and participate in activities using appropriate social skills. Having an interpersonal connection with peers who are not disabled allows children with disabilities to have a sense of belonging and feel included within their environment (Lalvani, 2015; Winter & O'Raw, 2010). Additionally, Fitch (2003) and Lalvani (2015) reported that the students in inclusive classrooms have intervention services that address different learning styles, and interventions, such as remedial instruction, tutoring as needed, and guided notes. Fitch and Lalvani contended that the intervention services, the support of

educators, the children's families, and school social workers enable children with disabilities to achieve academically.

Allan (2011) found that children with disabilities liked being in inclusive programs and felt they needed "exposure to the diversity they are expected to live with as adults" (p. 246). In addition to helping students develop the social skills needed to interact with others, inclusive programs can increase their employability (OECD, 2010). Thus, inclusive education can break long standing cycles of disadvantage. Increasing the skills of children with disabilities via inclusive programs leads to their long-term economic viability (Kwon et al., 2011; Odom et al., 2011).

Children without disabilities also benefit from being in an inclusive classroom (Lalvani, 2015). They have been reported as showing positive attitudinal, developmental, and social outcomes from their experiences when interacting with children with disabilities (Rea et al., 2002; Winter & O'Raw, 2010). They have been able to demonstrate greater empathy and compassion for their peers who have disabilities (Imaniah & Fitria, 2018).

Disadvantages of Inclusive Programs

Although there is overwhelming evidence that inclusive education is advantageous, researchers have pointed out a few disadvantages. One of the disadvantages is that some teachers may not have enough knowledge about children with disabilities to help them with their needs and facilitate interaction between them and other children in the class (Lalvani, 2015). Buysse et al. (2003) and Lalvani, (2015) found that some teachers do not provide help, such as by providing students with a flexible

seating arrangement, fully articulating and repeating information, providing supplemental course materials, and accommodating their physical limitations.

Buysse et al. (2003) concluded that some inclusive programs have failed to provide the necessary educational opportunity for students with disabilities and that the goal of having truly inclusive classrooms is elusive. Despite disadvantages, some researchers, such as Sulaimani and Gut (2019), Imaniah and Fitria (2018), and Lalvani (2015) have affirmed that the purpose of an inclusive classroom is to limit the stereotypes of who is acceptable within a classroom involvement and prohibit segregation, and thus, an inclusive educational program can benefit students with disabilities.

School Social Workers and Children with Disabilities

Historical Milestones: 1965 to 1994

School social work practice with children of disabilities began in the 1960s, during the time when the federal government began providing support for the education of students with disabilities. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) was enacted to provide state funding of special education programs and special education teachers (Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Public Law 89-10-Apr. 11, 1965). In 1969, ESEA was amended to provide funding for support services, such as social work, school psychology, and counseling (Sullivan, 2011). At this time, school social workers focused on providing services for economically disadvantaged students (Bye & Alvarez, 2007). The school social worker's role was to help the students' parents participate in their children's education (Leiby, 1979). In 1975, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) was enacted as a result of advocacy campaigns of

children with disabilities' parents (Sullivan, 2011). Estimates were that one million children with disabilities were not provided opportunities to for public education or were only able to attend limited public-school programs (Harr-Robins et al., 2015). EHA ensured that they were able to be provided with appropriate, individual designed special education, and other services listed in an Individualized Education Program (IEP) (Sullivan, 2011). School social workers began to focus on the identification and mediation of the students' skill deficits that resulted from their disability (Ehrenreich, 1985). They used a battery approach to assess the students to determine whether they qualified to be in special education programs and delivery services to them. The battery approach, which became the standard means of assessment and delivery of services, consisted of describing the student's characteristics and comparing them with the specific disability categories (National Association of Social Workers, 2012). Although it was not stipulated as a requirement, school social workers included the factors of a student's cultural and environmental in the criteria for determining eligibility for special education and the types of services that the student would need (Clark & Thiede, 2007).

Paradigm Shift—Ecological Approach: 1994 to Present

In 1994, the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) was established. Their mission is: "Connecting, empowering, and equipping School Social Workers to provide evidence-informed services" (National Association of Social Workers, 2012). The Association's mission of providing evidence-informed services effected a paradigm shift in school social work practice with children with disabilities. An evidence-based, problem-solving approach was implemented, which focused on the

learning and behavioral needs of students based on behavioral theory and practice. Emphasis was on providing individualized interventions and frequent monitoring to assess whether the interventions were successful (Clark & Thiede, 2007). This evidence-based, problem-solving approach was fully implemented in 2002, when the Social Workers' Standards for School Social Work Services required the shift from the battery approach to a problem-solving functional approach using an ecological perspective (National Association of Social Workers, 2012). School social workers need to have a thorough knowledge of the ecological theory because it influences their practice. The use of this evidence-based knowledge enables them to perform their duties effectively (Bigby & Frawley, 2010).

The ecological approach consists of assessing and delivering services, focusing on the students' interaction in their home, school, and community environments. Providing services from an ecological perspective enables school social workers to look at each of the students' environments, and their interactions between each level of the environments and the students' individual characteristics, resulting in an accurate socioeconomic conceptualization, assessment, and provision of services for the student-in-the-environment (Popple, 2018). This evidence-based approach allowed the school social worker to consider any risk factors that are linked to children with disabilities. For example, chronic illness can cause children with disabilities to have low academic performances. The ecological approach allows the school social worker to advocate for children with disabilities and provide them with the resources they need to meet their academic requirements (Munford & Bennie, 2015).

School Social Workers' Services for Students with Disabilities

Although there are many school social workers providing services to students with disabilities, research indicated that these lack appropriate provisions and resources to learn adequately and are at risk academically. Not having the help and support children with disabilities need causes them to be at-risk, often resulting in unsuccessful academic achievement (Hunter et al., 2017; Lohman et al., 2018). School social work practice with students with disabilities is based on the premise that these students have the same rights to participate in educational activities as other students (Munford & Bennie, 2015).

School social workers primarily provide supportive services required to help students with disabilities in pre-kindergarten through 12th grade take advantage of educational opportunities and develop to their fullest potential (Lawrence et al., 2016). The levels of practice for school social workers are micro, mezzo, and macro. Most school social workers who work with children with disabilities work in the micro and mezzo level that provides direct contact with students, teachers, families, school districts, and local communities. Other school social workers who work at the macro level address the systemic issues related to education, poverty, social changes, policies, and more. Macro level school social workers are often activists or lobbyists (Clark & Thiede, 2007).

The National Council of Disability (2018) gave teachers, parents, and children with disabilities the right to a systemic engagement that enhances students' learning and social engagement within the school environment. The reason for having this systemic engagement is to strengthen family-school partnerships, which means providing an opportunity for the families of children with disabilities the opportunity to collaborate

with school systems' social workers, superintendents, principals, teachers, and school staff. The National Council of Disability (2018) reported that members of the school system and parents working together along with the school social worker promote normalcy through systemic engagement. The promotion of normalcy enables children with disabilities to function in their school, home, and community environments.

School Social Workers' Roles as Agents of Change

School social workers are the agents of change for children with disabilities (Popple, 2018). The school social worker acts as an advocate for students and parents to best support their rights (National Association of Social Workers, 2012). They work alongside the families and communities of children with disabilities to promote inclusion in community life. Incorporating inclusion allows children with disabilities to participate in the community, school events, and have a sense of belonging (Clark & Thiede, 2007). The NASW recognizes that school social workers advocate for students with disabilities and their families in various situations (National Association of Social Workers, 2012).

Many parents are unaware of the services available for children with disabilities. With the school social workers' assistance, parents can achieve a better understanding of ways to ensure a successful outcome for their children with disabilities (Clark & Thiede, 2007). Some school social workers are trained to use mediation and conflict-resolution strategies in promotion of productive relationships among faculty and students. When providing services, the school social worker considers the relationship and interplay between the students' achievement and the influences of their family, psychosocial development, culture, and community. They assist in resolving any conflicts that occur

regarding adherence to the school's policies, and the student or his or her parents (Popple, 2018).

Although school social workers are to provide services that enable students with disabilities to adapt to the classroom environment and achieve academically, they have been found to spend the majority of their time on problems that students have. Kelly et al. (2010) conducted a national study of school social workers and the results showed that some school social workers spend 59% of their time on addressing students' problems, and 28% on prevention and intervention services. Kelly et al. also found that school social workers are schools' primary mental health professionals because many of the students do not have therapeutic or counseling services from any agencies. These findings indicate that some school social workers who work with children with disabilities may be providing services using a clinical casework approach to assisting these students.

School social workers bring together academia, and therapeutic connections to best address challenges children with disabilities face physically, socially, academically, and emotionally (Odom et al., 2004). Almqvist and Lassinantti (2018) affirmed children with disabilities are assured their unique needs are met. Burton (2020) and Child (2018) confirmed school social workers help families get services they need or connect families to other community agencies; consult with teachers, parents, and other adults in the children's lives; and provide counseling and resources that address students with disabilities' needs and issues, such as behavior problems, grief, emotional issues, and substance abuse. Additionally, they collaborate with the school's administration and

teachers when a student has a concern and set realistic goals and expectations for addressing the students' needs.

The school social workers' position allows children with disabilities to be supported by comprehensive intervention plans to suit their needs. These social workers must possess the ability to provide adequate services to the interdisciplinary team to design assessments useful for children with disabilities (National Association of Social Workers, 2012). Early assessment is an integral part of intervention services. The use of the ecological perspective in social practice allows school social workers to consider the student's family and neighborhood (Payne, 2005). Including the ecological perspective allows the school social worker to incorporate the strengths perspective. The use of strength perspective helps the family, community, and children with disabilities obtain services and achieve their goals (Clark & Thiede, 2007). Children with disabilities have onset problems that are often underlined with mental health (Eriksson, Ghazinour, & Hammarstrom, 2018). School social workers help children with disabilities learn to manage their behaviors. Eriksson et al. asserted the use of the ecological theory assists parents and teachers learn coping skills needed to help manage students' mental health challenges.

School social workers, depending on the district, also provide outside intervention in the students' homes. Their services are intended to help the family care for the student with disabilities to prevent out-of-home placement. Additionally, they intervene when problems arise, such as violence, suicide threats or behavior problems (Clark & Thiede, 2007). They provide families with counseling services and referrals to health and mental

health services Lalvani (2015) concluded that school social workers are expected to promote a safe and healthy home and school environment for students with disabilities.

School Social Workers' Services During COVID-19

The majority of states and local districts closed physical school buildings during the COVID-19 pandemic. School Social Work Association of America provided limited counseling services and supporting resources available on their website to help students with disabilities cope. They referred students to the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) document, "Questions and Answers on Providing Services to Children with Disabilities During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Outbreak," which stated special education services are to be provided to the students by only those schools that remained open. The school social workers provided services through online videoconference technology delivery mechanisms, such as Zoom or Skype. Students with disabilities who receive Medicaid could receive services from clinical school social workers through the telemental health method (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Telemental health is provided via online video or over the phone and is particularly beneficial for students who have an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or anxiety disorders (Langarizadeh, 2017). Students who have ASD usually find it easier to interact with others over the phone, rather than face-to-face because there are not as many signals, such facial pressions and body language for them to decipher. Students who have severe anxiety can obtain care without having to sit in the office around people that can make them uncomfortable, panicky or anxious (Rolffs, 2019). Addressing students with disabilities' psychosocial and mental health conditions using telemental health helps prevent the risk of these students having repercussions that

affect their wellbeing and ability to cope with adversity. Research shows that telemental health services are usually as effective as on-site care (Hilty et al., 2015).

Overall, school social workers are vital to children with disabilities help them reach their academic goals and career goals by ensuring they have the educational training and employment services they require. They care for and protect them by advocating for, and improving their well-being, and alleviate any form of social injustice that may affect them. They are responsible for identifying any signs of violence on students and notifying the proper authorities for legal protection (Clark & Thiede, 2007). School social workers are also responsible for combating social isolation, meaning they ensure children with disabilities are given equal opportunities to participate in educational and social activities at their own level of ability. They provide children with disabilities with health services so they will not be mentally or physically impeded from participating in activities at their ability level (National Association of Social Workers, 2012).

Summary

The focus of this review of literature was school social work practice with children with disabilities. Although there is a gap in research on this focus, a significant body of literature exists related to school social work practice, in general. Many of the studies of social workers, and school social workers mention the roles of school social workers who work with children with disabilities (Kelly et al., 2010; Sherman, 2016; Teater, 2014). The premise that undergirded the majority of literature about children with disabilities is that they deserve equal educational opportunities. The Individuals with

Disabilities Education Act (2004) was created to provide a least restrictive environment (LRE), which ensures children with disabilities receive equal educational opportunities and the services they need. Also, the National Council on Disability (2018) mandates that children with disabilities have the right to attend free and appropriate public education with the provision of special educational needs.

Children with disabilities require accommodation to meet their needs academically and special education and inclusive programs enhance their learning experiences. Special education programs provide intensive, systematic instruction that includes skills students need to compensate for their disability (Odom et al., 2004; Rea, et al., 2002). Special education occurs in a homogenous environment and students with disabilities are not learning alongside other students in regular educational programs (Kwon et al., 2011; Odom et al., 2004). In contrast, to special education programs, in inclusive programs all students participate within a learning environment regardless of their diversity (Kauffman& Hallahan, 2011). The curriculum utilized within the inclusive classroom consists of the social practice of involving cultural and knowledge to help children with disabilities adapt to their learning environment (Lalvani, 2015). The inclusive classroom curriculum addresses their cognitive, emotional, social and creative development (Rea et al., 2002; Sulaimani & Gut, 2019)

Research indicates that school social workers provide leadership in forming school discipline policies, mental health intervention, crisis management, and support services for children with disabilities (Hunter et al., 2017; Popple, 2018). School social workers are part of the interdisciplinary team to help students succeed. Their services

include consulting with teachers, parents, and other adults in the children's lives; and providing counseling and resources that address students with disabilities' needs and issues, such as behavior problems, grief, emotional issues, and substance abuse (Bigby & Frawley, 2010; Hunter et al., 2017; Lawrence et al., 2016; Lohman et al., 2018). Additionally, they collaborate with the school's administration and teachers when a student has a concern and set realistic goals and expectations for addressing the students' needs (Clark & Thiede, 2007).

This study was designed to fill the gap in literature and provide insight into the experiences of school social workers working with children with disabilities, and the challenges they face. Results of this study can add to the body of literature on social work practice by informing school social workers about the ways they can provide services and resources that ensure children with disabilities have a rewarding learning experience.

Section 3 consists of the qualitative research design. It includes the methodology, data analysis, and ethical procedures of the interview with school social workers employed by Miami and Broward County, Florida school system.

Section 3: Presentations of the Findings

The purpose of this qualitative research using an ecological approach was to investigate school social workers' live experiences providing services and resources to children with disabilities within inclusive elementary classrooms in Miami-Dade and Broward, County, Florida. I utilized one-on-one interviews with school social workers to obtain the participants' role in ensuring that the needs of students with disabilities are met according to the NASW guidelines. The study consisted of a qualitative research design to answer the following research question from an ecological approach: What are the lived experiences of school social workers who provide services and resources for students with disabilities in inclusive elementary classes in Miami and Broward County, Florida?

The study's results filled the gap in research about school social work practice with children with disabilities and provide effective insight on practices utilized by school social workers to help children achieve academically. Additionally, the study can be used by school social workers because it contains participants' best practices that have enabled them to provide effective services and resources for students with disabilities.

This section contains a description and explanation of the research design, including participants for the one-on-one interview, sample size, data collection and analysis procedures, informed consent document, avoiding researcher bias, and ethical procedures. Also included are this study's contributions to social change.

Qualitative Research Design

I used a qualitative design for this study to create an in-depth analysis of the participants regarding a particular phenomenon. A study's participants provide the description of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative methods of obtaining data include one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and open-ended questions. Using a qualitative design allows the researcher to determine whether the study's results are up-to-date and relevant (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Additionally, I was able to search for the answer to the research question by analyzing the data obtained from the participants to identify patterns or codes and themes. The qualitative research method also supports the gathering of data conducted in a one-on-one interview. It allows a small sample size that enables the researcher to obtain a substantive depth of information via a personable environment (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

The ecological system theory undergirded this study because it enables an examination on school social workers' practices within an educational environment and within the interdisciplinary team, consisting of children with disabilities and their teachers, families, school administrators, and communities (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979; Teater, 2014). The ecological approach can be utilized to identify school social workers' preventions or interventions for children with disabilities regarding academic, psychological, social, environment, and behavioral factors that have an impact on the children's ability to achieve academically (Thomas et al., 2011).

The one-on-one interview aligns well with the focus of this study because it provides a platform for various opinions and views about a phenomenon (Creswell,

2013). A one-on-one interview conducted via ZOOM virtual conferencing tool was used in this research and was valuable because data could be obtained more readily from participants who share similar characteristics, such as the same jobs and places of employment. During each interview, I was in control and asked questions one at a time. The open-ended questions were asked to each participant and my role was a moderator. Rather than having a center-stage role, I had a peripheral role in the discussion, which helped me uncover participants' lived experiences and perceptions.

A quantitative design was not chosen for this study because it did not allow for an in-depth investigation of participants who would provide their lived experiences. The data that were necessary to examine participants' experiences and perceptions are not able to be quantified. A quantitative study involves collecting measurable data and then formulating facts to reveal patterns. Conversely, a qualitative approach involves utilizing a small sample to obtain substantive, in-depth data, which are not bound by facts and statistics (Creswell, 2013).

The components of qualitative methodology aligned with the one-on-one interview of this study, which involved investigating selected school social workers' lived experiences working with children with disabilities via one-on-one interviews, using semistructured, open-ended questions. However, the study's results cannot be transferable to all fields, demographics, and environments. Rather, they represent the study's results and conclusions at a specific place and time relevant to school social workers in the Miami Dade and Broward County, Florida public school system.

Population

The target population consisted of inclusive elementary school social workers who work for Miami Dade and Broward County Public Schools in Florida. The participants qualified if they were:

1. A school social worker with a Master of Social Work (MSW) degree or a Certified School Social Work Specialist (C-SSWS).

2. 2 are more years of experience advocating for and providing services and resources to children with disabilities in inclusive elementary classrooms.

3. 2 or more years of experiencing working within interdisciplinary teams consisting of the children and their teachers, families, school administrators and communities.

4. 2 or more years of experience intervening in crisis situations, and consulting with education, mental health, and government agencies.

The selected population were engaged in one-on-one interviews and answer semistructured open- ended questions to express their experiences providing services and resources to children with disabilities. Participation in the study was on a volunteer basis; the participants did not receive money but did receive a one-time gift card for $10.

Source of Population

The Miami Dade and Broward County public school system were the sources of the study's population. I am familiar with both school systems and lives in Miami, Florida and works in Broward, Florida. However, I do not have a personal or professional relationship with any of the participants that were chosen for the study.

The Miami Dade public school system consists of 467 schools. It is the largest school district in Florida and the fourth largest school district in the United States. The district consists of 171 elementary schools, 50 middle schools, 48 K–8 centers, 37 high schools, 54 charter schools, 23 vocational schools, five magnet schools, 18 alternative schools, and five special education centers. The special education centers are for students who have extreme learning or mental disabilities that prevent them from being enrolled in the regular classes. The district has a student enrollment of approximately 356,086 students (Florida Department of Education, 2018-2019). During the 2018–2019 school year, the school system had 164 school social workers. The schools provide special education programs, but primarily inclusive programs and related services, such as school social workers, transportation, physical therapy, occupational therapy, therapeutic recreation, sign language interpreter, music therapy, visually impaired itinerant services, and assistive technology (Miami Dade Public Schools Statistical Highlights, 2018–2019). The percentage of students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms was 50% in both 2015–16 and 2017–2018. In the 2016–17 school year, Miami Dade schools' graduation rate for students with disabilities was 70.3%, and in 2017–2018, it increased to 79.7%, which was higher than the state of Florida's target of 62.3%. The standard diploma rate for these students in 2016–2017 was 63.6 %, and in 2017–18, it increased to 69.2 %. The incidents of restraints for students with disabilities in 2016–17 were 126 incidents, and in 2017–18, decreased to 111 incidents (Florida Department of Education, 2018–2019).

Broward County Public School System is known as the sixth-largest school district in the nation and the second largest in the state of Florida (Florida Department of

Education, 2018–2019). It is Florida's first fully accredited school system since 1962. The district has 241 schools, centers, and technical colleges, and 92 charter schools. The system serves a student of diverse population and represent over 170 different countries and 147 different languages. It employs school social workers who are mental health professionals embedded as support staff to help all students and families. School social workers assist families, and students who encounter barriers academically, emotionally, and social development. The social workers advocate for students to succeed by linking home, school, and community. The Broward school social work department support services include mental health counseling, crisis support, and intervention. School social workers address truancy, psychosocial evaluations, and consultations.

Purposive Sampling

To obtain participants for the study, I posted an invitation to participate on the Facebook pages of the Miami Dade Association of Black Social Workers and National Association of Social Workers, Miami-Dade Unit and Broward Unit. Sampling consisted of selecting the number of participants for the study. A qualitative approach does not require a large number of participants be chosen for the study. School social workers were selected in this homogeneous purposive sample who fit the study's specific criteria. The results obtained from homogeneous, purposive sampling do not have to be statistically representative of all the population of the field of school social work (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). However, to understand the experiences of school social workers who work with students with disabilities, the selection of participants had to represent the

homogeneity of the broader social worker population. From the initial number of

potential participants received, I chose six school social workers to be in the study.

Ethical Procedures

I obtained permission to conduct the study from Walden University's Institutional

Review Board (IRB), which ensured the study adhered to the ethical principles and

federal regulations that protect the participants. The research was approved and provided

with an approval number 08-06-20-0728228.

Avoiding Researcher's Bias

My educational background, my professional experience as a social worker along

with my experiences as a mother to a disabled child have allowed me to be more in tuned

with different social workers' roles. This includes school social workers involvement

with children with disabilities. I am a public guardian for Barry University School of

Social Work in Broward County, Florida and did not choose any participants who I knew

personally or professionally. Creswell (2013) addressed the utilized epoché or bracketing

in which I put aside any preconceived knowledge, biases, or assumptions about the

experiences of school social workers and their practice. This process ensured that I

remained no-judgmental during the process of conducting this study, and had an open-

minded, objective view of the participants' responses to the questions.

Protection of Participants

Participants signed an informed consent form, which provided them with

information regarding their rights during and after the study about privacy, anonymity,

confidentiality, and protection against harm. An aliases was given that allowed them to

have anonymity, which protect their privacy (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). There was no foreseeable risk of harm that resulted for the participants. I collected data through a virtual platform in Zoom within the comfort of the participants' environments and this allowed each participant to not experience any distress during the one-on-one interview.

Although members of the Miami Dade County Public School and Broward County Public School system and other social workers can view the study's results, no information that impinges upon the privacy and rights of the participants was made known to them. All data were stored on my in-home, password protected computer and then transferred to a password protected USB drive and put in a locked file cabinet. I am the only one who has access to this data, which will be destroyed 5 years after completion of the study.

<div align="center">

Data Collection

</div>

Questionnaire

I asked the following semistructured, open-ended questions during the one-on-one interview to obtain an answer to the study's research question:

1. What is your role when working with students with disabilities in an inclusive or special education classroom? If you have worked in both environments, are there any different experiences that you have had working in special education programs than you have had in inclusive programs?

   Rationale: The answer to this question provided an overview of the participant's function as a school social worker in one or both school environments.

2. What types of services do you provide for children with disabilities that enable them to achieve academically?

   Rationale: The answer to this question provided information about best practices that enable the school social worker to effectively help students with disabilities.

3. What types of resources do you provide for children with disabilities that enable them to achieve academically?

   Rationale: The answer to this question provided information about the best support resources that enabled the school social worker to address the needs of students with disabilities.

4. How are you able to adhere to the standards of school social work practice and maintain professional ethics as you work with students with disabilities?

   Rationale: The answer to this question provided ways in which school social workers performed their duties by adhering to the NASW ethical and professional practices.

5. Have any of the experiences you have had working with children with disabilities changed over the years you have been working with them?

   Rationale: This question allowed the participant to elaborate on the varying types of experiences over a span of time, rather than at a specific time.

6. What are the types of support that you receive when working with children with disabilities?

   Rationale: The answer to this question informed whether the participant receives adequate support, and if so, in what forms.

7. Are there any special challenges that you have when working with children with disabilities?

   Rationale: The answer to this question provided insight into any challenges that may impede the school social worker's practice.

8. Based on your experience, what changes, if any, would you make that will increase your ability to effectively provide the necessary services and resources students with disabilities need to achieve academically?

   Rationale: The answer to this question provided suggestions for ways to make it easier for school social workers to perform their duties when working with children with disabilities.

9. Is there any information you have provided that you would like to elaborate on or change?

   Rationale: This question ensured the participants were satisfied with their responses because they were given an opportunity to reconsider anything they have said.

10. Is there anything you would like to ask or add to the discussion?

    Rationale: This question allowed participants to provide any information they deem relevant to bring up before the end of the interview.

The participants had the questionnaire before the one-on-one interview so they could review the questions and consider their responses to ensure they understood what was being asked of them, and could ask for clarification, if needed.

One-on-One Interview Forum

The data was collected within the one-on-one interview though Zoom, a collaborative, cloud-based videoconferencing service. Zoom is used for group messaging services, online meetings, and a secure recording of all types of sessions (*Zoom user guide*, 2020). One advantage of using ZOOM is that participants can communicate with researcher at the same time, in real time, using their computers, tablets, or mobile devices. Another advantage is that the meetings can be recorded securely and stored without the need for third-party software. This feature is especially important when conducting research that includes sensitive data (Archibald et al., 2019).

The participants were informed that the one-on-one interview was scheduled to last for one hour. They were provided with the date and time of the one-on-one interview and provided with access information to the Zoom site. The participants had the option of having themselves viewed via webcams or have only audio presence using their computer's microphone or their phones.

One-on-One Interview Procedures

The first step in the data collection process was to email the participants an invitation and an informed consent form to be sent back, "I Consent." The informed consent form described the research, the participants' role, and anonymity, and confidentiality procedures. The consent received ensured the participants were aware they could opt-out of the study at any time, and that their involvement in the study and any information they provided would remain confidential (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). After the participants' informed consent forms were returned to me, they were sent the

questions to review, which allowed them to have time to understand what they would be asked and consider their responses. Next, an invitation to access Zoom conferencing was sent to them.

On the day and time of the one-on-one interview, after the participant arrived in the zoom meeting room, the participant and I introduced ourselves, which allowed an atmosphere of familiarity and comfort. During the one-on-one interview, I utilized an inquiry-based conversational approach. This approach ensured that the discussions with the participants were polite and cordial so they could feel comfortable and at ease. The benefit of having an inquiry-based conversation is to allow participants to respond to questions in their own words, and in their own way (Rosenthal, 2016).

During the questioning, I asked follow-up questions to give the participants ample opportunities to elaborate and expand on the initial responses they provided. This technique promoted two-way communication; both the participant and I asked questions, which resulted in a comprehensive discussion of the participant's experiences and perspectives (Rosenthal, 2016). After the one-on-one interview ended, I thanked the participation and informed then when they would be contacted to do member checking and receive their complimentary gift cards.

Data Analysis

To avoid researcher's bias, *epoché* or bracketing was utilized, which means the researcher avoids injecting any preconceived biases, beliefs or knowledge about school social workers (Creswell, 2013). I coded and analyzed the data collected from the one-on-one interview. The participants' responses were transcribed, and analyzed to identify

codes, themes, and similarities in the data. During the first step of this process, emerging keywords that participants frequently used were identified. In the second step, focused coding was conducted in which the codes that emerged from the key words were divided into categories that represented themes. After these steps, six themes were identified as the ones that best represented the participants' lived experiences.

After the six themes were chosen, member checking was performed to allow the participants to review their own transcript and change or edit anything they deemed did not accurately represent what they meant or said during the interview. This step ensured that the data were accurate and valid (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). After the participants reviewed their transcripts, I developed a rich description, which represents the lived experiences of school social workers who provide services and resources for children with disabilities in inclusive classrooms.

Summary

This section contains a discussion of the qualitative procedures to collect and analyze data that addressed the research question. The components of the research include the recruitment of the participants by posting invitations on social work associations' Facebook pages, and the participant selection process using purposive sampling. The one-on-one interview procedures using the Zoom conferencing tool were explained, and the semistructured, open-ended questions the participants were asked were provided. Codes and 6 themes from the participants' transcriptions emanated the results that contained information-rich data.

Section 4 contains the study's results that emanated from the responses the

participants gave to the semistructured questions. Excerpts from the participants'

transcripts are provided that addressed and answered the study's research question.

Section 4: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change

The provision of services for children with disabilities is a complex area involving various educational systems, organizations, authorities, and health boards, which are supported by private and voluntary sectors. Social workers who provide services to these children are not operating in isolation, and therefore, take into account the wider society in which they work, such as the constantly evolving policy environment. Consequently, service delivery models can change, and indeed, there have been significant changes in which services are delivered, and for some services, the way and level of which they are being provided.

I investigated the current state of social work practice with children with disabilities, how school social workers provide services and resources for students with disabilities within inclusive elementary classrooms, the challenges they encounter, what support works best, and how they incorporated other service providers, such as parents, to help the children achieve academically. I utilized the ecological systems theory provided to understand and analyze the interrelationships between the social workers and other constituents involved in the lives of the students.

Research Question

The research question for this study was: What are the lived experiences of school social workers who provide services and resources for students with disabilities in inclusive elementary classes in Miami and Broward, Florida?

Participants' Demographics

The results of this qualitative study are based on one-on-one interviews of six

school social workers from the Miami and Broward County school systems in Florida.

The participants were from different school districts and provided their lived experiences

and perspectives about their roles as school social workers for children with disabilities. I

solicited participants through social networking outlets, such as Facebook and Linked In.

Based on the responses from the initial solicitating, I asked those who satisfied the

study's requirements to participate in the study.   All participants had either an MSW

degree or were certified school social work specialists (C-SSWS). Additionally, they had

over 2 years of experience working in inclusive elementary school programs. Of the six

participants, three of the participants work in a K–8 school. The other three work solely

in elementary schools with Grades K–5. All of the participants faced some challenges

when providing services and resources to children with disabilities within the school.

They all provided insight on what could be better to best ensure students, teachers and

services can obtain the goals set forth with the help of parental involvement.

Interview Questions

The following are the semistructured questions:

1. What is your role when working with students with disabilities in an inclusive or

    special education classroom? If you have worked in both environments, are there

    any different experiences that you have had working in special education

    programs than you have had in inclusive programs?

2. What types of services do you provide for children with disabilities that enable them to achieve academically?

3. What types of resources do you provide for children with disabilities that enable them to achieve academically?

4. How are you able to adhere to the standards of school social work practice and maintain professional ethics as you work with students with disabilities?

5. Have any of the experiences you have had working with children with disabilities changed over the years you have been working with them?

6. What are the types of support that you receive when working with children with disabilities?

7. Are there any special challenges that you have when working with children with disabilities?

8. Based on your experience, what changes, if any, would you make that will increase your ability to effectively provide the necessary services and resources students with disabilities need to achieve academically?

9. Is there any information you have provided that you would like to elaborate on or change?

10. Is there anything you would like to ask or add to the discussion?

Research Results

I conducted interviews during September and December 2020. Participants had access to their interview transcripts so they could change, and/or verify their comments. I

also took field notes during each interview to verify and cross check the responses. The

six themes that emerged from the data analysis and coding are:

1. School social workers' role in an inclusive or special education classroom

2. Differences between working in a special education program and an inclusive

   program

3. Services and resources for children with disabilities

4. Adherence to standards of school social work practice and professional ethics

5. Challenges when working with children with disabilities

6. Changes in school social work practice with children with disabilities

Theme 1: School Social Workers' Role in an Inclusive or Special Education

Classroom

Theme 1 is related to the following question: What is your role when working

with students with disabilities in an inclusive or special education classroom?

The consensus of the participants was that they were trained professionals whose

role is to provide critically important services and support directly to students with

disabilities and indirectly to teachers and parents. Further, they agreed that their

knowledge and skills made them well-suited to help the students achieve academically.

Participant NL125020 identified her role as being an advocate:

I sit with the guidance counselor. I sit with the family support counselor, in the

actual district. Family counselor. We sit and we discuss, whatever the child's needs are.

And then, as a social worker. I'm the one that advocates for the family. So, I will be

mainly the one to call the family to discuss whatever. The results are, along with the ESE specialist to support both the family and the team.

Some participants identified their roles as being related to the wide range of services they provided, and echoed the description provided by Participant NL125020, who stated her role to be "basically the broker that links them to services." The participants reported that since they possess a wide range of skills, they do more than just work with the students. They mentioned some other duties, such as helping teachers identify and respond to students who are experiencing trauma, accompanying teachers on home visits, and helping to identify any gaps in the school's programming that may require additional resources being sought.

Participant KS091220 perceived her role to be distinguishable from other social workers, because she serves a particular population whose needs are associated with their physical and/or mental characteristics. She explained that she brings to her role an understanding of the diverse challenges the students face, and therefore, asserted that her primary concern was "being able to address the overall needs of the child."

A reoccurring word the participants used when describing their role was "supporter," which they indicated means providing services to students on an individual level of by means of group work. They indicated that this role promotes the students' overall well-being and empowers them with the skills they need to cope with the demands of academia. Although the word "counselor" was mentioned several times, it was in the context of the various duties that they performed and was not pointed out as a singular role that they played.

Theme 2: Differences between Working in a Special Education Program and an Inclusive Program

Theme 2 is related to the following question: If you have worked in both environments, are there any different experiences that you have had working in special education programs than you have had in inclusive programs?

The majority of the participants had worked in both special education and inclusive programs. Some of the reoccurring words the participants used to describe inclusive programs were "general education" and "mainstream" and the term frequently used to describe special education programs was "restrictive."

Participant PL121420 did not find the distinction between services provided to special education and general education students and expressed that in each program what is most important is, the support that she provides on the social or the emotional level. She did point out that in both programs, if the school has,

> …an ABA therapist, a speech pathologist, or if they have an occupational
> therapist, then our additional goal is to align with those providers. This is done to
> just make sure that whatever is being transferred from the educational setting
> works alongside with what's going on outside of school, making sure that all the
> stakeholders are on the same page.

Similar to other participants, Participant PL121420 expressed that the difference between the two programs is the approach.

> The only distinct difference between the special education and the inclusive is the
> approach. So, in special education, it's more direct, and it's specifically geared

towards just dealing with helping them cope with their disability. But when you're looking at inclusive. It encompasses everything. Students in a mainstream setting are given the same attention and have the same requirements of all the other students. They are not treated differently, in general, and are provided with more opportunities that help them develop social skills and coping skills. The special education environment is more restrictive in these aspects.

Even though all the participants felt the inclusive programs were advantageous, they pointed out that sometimes a student may not adjust and be able to cope in a mainstream classroom. The program may not have all the necessary services the student needs so it is necessary to transfer him or her to a special education program where they could be served appropriately. Regarding these types of students, Participant AS120520 mentioned that,

> A lot of times what hinders them is their physical or mental challenges. So, you have to kind of focus on that first for them to succeed academically. We refer those students out so they can get the necessary help they need, which will then in turn, help them succeed academically.

Participant NH120220, who had a lot of experience working in a special education program, noted that there was a school counselor who frequents the classroom to help the students, and more focus on the students' disability rather than "looking at them holistically." In an inclusive program, she was able to do more. She was able to address specific areas that the student may be having problems with, which may not be

addressed by a social worker in a special education program. For example, she revealed that,

> In an inclusive program, the principal may want me to focus more on truancy and getting those students with special needs to come into school more consistently. Whereas, in the special education program, this may be dealt with by only the teacher and school counselor.

Participant PL121420 contended that there was a difference in the special education programs regarding class size and, like Participant NH120220 mentioned, who was in the classroom to assist the students.

> Sometimes those students are definitely in a smaller class setting, and they have a paraprofessional in those classrooms to support the teacher. There's always someone overseeing these children so the teacher may be in the back and paraprofessional (non- instructional staff) in the front. Just making sure that these kids have access to them at all times.

Participant PL121420 also expressed that when she first started working, her role in the special education program was not as significant as compared to inclusive programs because each was under different authorities:

> The special education program was basically on its own, and they had their own direction. They had their distinct support. We were basically operating as an extension of the school system. But since then, as the school system worked towards being more inclusive, everything now is under the same umbrella. So now, everyone is on the same page with the same access. There has been an

improvement, and inclusiveness is important. I think there is a better

understanding of the needs of the students. Just because students may have

disabilities does not mean that they have to be excluded from everything that

other students have at their disposal that can help them achieve academically.

Overall, reoccurring comments affirmed that the majority of the participants

favored working in an inclusive program because it provided a "less restrictive

environment," and "access to mainstream education," which results in opportunities for

students to "interact with diverse students."

Theme 3: Services and Resources for Children with Disabilities

Theme 3 is related to the following questions: What types of services do you

provide for children with disabilities that enable them to achieve academically? What

types of resources do you provide for children with disabilities that enable them to

achieve academically? What are the types of support that you receive when working with

children with disabilities?

School social workers provide a variety of services and resources, as their roles

continue to evolve. To help them provide the services, all participants mentioned that

they received support from others who are part of a "multidisciplinary team," which

consists of teachers, school principals and other administrators, parents, educational

specialists, educational psychologists, and other crisis intervention and emotional support

that students need. Participant NH120220 pointed out that there is a "collaboration with

the teachers, outside providers, therapists and other entities." All of the participants

agreed that collaboration was necessary and working on a team provided them with the support they need to succeed when providing services and resources to the students.

Participant MJ120320 explained the meanings of some of the acronyms the participants used when discussing the services and resources they provide.

IEP is an individual educational plan provided for each student, which contains an evaluation of them, and the services and support that they need. CPS stands for the collaborative problem-solving approach, which is effective when working with children who have a range of emotional, social, and behavioral challenges. RTI is response to intervention, which involves a multi-tier approach to identifying and supporting students who have learning or behavioral problems.

The participants agreed on some primary services and resources that they all provide as part of their regular duties, such as preparing a developmental or social history for each child, working with parents and others involved with the child, providing school and health care resources by way of referral, and providing individual or group counseling, as needed.

Although the services and resources were available to all students, Participant KS021220 explained that which ones, and to what extent they are provided,

…depends on the student. A lot of kids that are in that program have therapy outside of school. So, that ensures that the families have the resources that they need at home. Along with the counseling that I do in the schools, they're also referrals given, and also communicating with the parents to see if there's anything additional needed than just the individual counseling. For example, a child may

need ABA services, or the family may need assistance finding different resources

in the community, such as help applying for Medicaid. Sometimes a child may be

misbehaving and not achieving academically. So, referring them to the school

psychologist and a tutor or mentoring service is the best approach in this situation.

Several participants mentioned that there are many students with autism, which

means that they have to provide particular services and resources for them that other

students may not need. Some participants used the term autistic, and others used the term

"spectrum" because instead of doctors diagnosing the children with different types of

autism, they just indicate they are on the autism spectrum. Participant NL125020 pointed

out that decisions about what to do with students who are having issues are made with

teachers and school counselors.

If a child is struggling in a certain area, we as a team come together and we decide

what should we do further in an IEP meeting. If we see that the child is on a

spectrum, for example, we'll refer them to Card Services. It's a program that helps

with children who are on a spectrum. They receive an evaluation. Then they

receive ABA services. And if they have any other learning disabilities, we refer

them to the school psychologist.

Participant AS120520 agreed that when students have issues, "we will refer them

out, whether it be for counseling, or physical therapy, so we try to find referrals, or

different organizations that we have a connection with the school." Determining whether

to refer students out is not decided by just the social workers. According to Participant

MJ120320, "I sit on different multidisciplinary teams. We follow procedures according to

the IEP, RTI, and CPST, and determine what's in the best interest of the child to meet their academic social and emotional needs."

One of the most important services the social workers provide is helping the students' families establish and maintain a stable home environment. The participants mentioned that often students' progress in school is impeded by issues in their homes that cause them stress and anxiety. In these cases, Participant MJ120320 explained that,

One of the things that I do is the psychosocial assessment, which gives the social and the developmental history of that student. I work with the child and the parents to make sure that I'm meeting the student's needs because a lot of times I have to provide either direct or indirect services for the family, to make sure that the physical and emotional needs of the child are being met in order for them to have academic success. So, it really just depends on what the situation is and what services or assistance I can provide. I also try to alleviate any kind of stressors within the home like problems with their finances, housing or ability to buy food. I just to make sure that the child is okay and the family unit is alright. Once the family is well, the child will be able to perform better or at least the barriers won't be there as a concern.

Regarding helping the parents when the students are having academic problems, in particular, Participant NH12020 stated that she "connects parents with services they can use that will come to their house so that students will have help in the home environment instead of just the school."

The participants provided students with help through individual and group counseling. Participant KS091220 explained that, determining whether to provide individual or group counseling,

> …all depends on the child's needs and what their IEP specifies. So, if their IEP says that they are to have counseling once a week for 20 minutes, then I have them once a week for 20 minutes to give them individual counseling. And in that counseling, I address the issues that they're having within the classroom. So, the IEP has specified what exactly that child needs like if there's a child that needs help with organization, then during that week, I'm helping them with organizational skills. If a child that needs assistance with regulating emotions, then I'm focusing on that and determining what additional help and resources they may need.

An important finding that resulted from this theme was all the participants agreed that the implementation of services within the school, outside resources, and parental involvement results in a marked improvement in the children's academic performance.

Theme 4: Adherence to Standard of School Social Work Practice and Professional Ethics

Theme 4 is related to the following question: How are you able to adhere to the standards of school social work practice and maintain professional ethics as you work with students with disabilities?

The National Association of Social Work (NASW) Standards for Professional Practice and the Code of Ethics provide school social workers with the principles that

guide their performance and the ethics they should uphold. Adhering to these standards, according to the participants, helps them stay faithful to the mission of the social work profession as they provide services and resources in educational settings. PL121420 explained that, according to the NASW Code of Ethics, "there's no specific distinction between students. There is no favoritism. It's all about delivering the same quality of service and support services to these students, and also making sure that we're working in compliance with ADA requirements." Participant KS091220, felt that some of the standards overlapped.

There are some requirements that overlap. Yes, the social work practice is maintained with the professional ethics, everything is the same across the board. There're just different requirements that the school board and each different entity that we work with have, but the basic standards are the same.

Participant MJ120320 echoed Participant PL121420's remarks that referred to the standards not being only for one group of students. Participant MJ120320 did not see any difference in the way she was supposed to treat students with disabilities and the other students in the classes.

Well, honestly, I think it's pretty much the same for everyone because ethics are ethics, so you're going to still treat everyone the same. I don't see the difference between Gen Ed, inclusive, or cluster kids with or without a disability. They're the same.

Several reoccurring phrases mentioned during the interviews indicated that all of the participants agreed that because the social work practice is "informed by evidence-

based practice," they are required to "attend regular professional development meetings" in order to maintain their license. So, they are always "updating their knowledge" about what is expected of them and how they are to provide services and resources to the students.

Theme 5: Challenges When Working with Children with Disabilities

Theme 5 is related to the following question: Are there any special challenges that you have when working with children with disabilities?

Participants discussed several barriers and challenges related to the parents, in particular. Only one participant mentioned a challenge with children with disabilities receiving services within the school. An interesting finding is that the participants did not point out any other challenges that presented barriers when performing their duties other than the ones about parents and the one about children.

Participant PL121420 pointed out that the social workers need to involve the parents in the addressing the needs of the students. However, it is not easy to deal with them when they are in denial about their children's disability and their need for special services. She affirmed that,

> The challenges come from everywhere so sometimes the challenges may come from working with parents, who don't necessarily understand the extent of the student's disability and may not be as receptive to services that the school is providing. But lots of time it just really depends on whether the parent is having a hard time understanding or accepting that the child is different, that the support that we're providing is necessary and we are not singling out the child. Rather, we

are ensuring that this child is getting any and everything that they need to achieve

and maintain academic success and social emotional wellness.

Participant NL125020 also mentioned the problem that occurs when parents are in

denial and resistant to those who are trying to help.

I've seen numerous challenges. We'll have one of those meetings where we are

discussing placing a student who has an emotional behavioral disorder. And we'll

talk to the parent about getting the child transferred to the appropriate school that

will be able to help the child and their emotional needs, and we'll see some

parents get upset about that. They'll be resistant to us. So, it's hard because when

you see that the child is in need, they're not only going through a learning

disability but they're also going through emotional disturbance. Sometimes the

parents don't want to have the child get the necessary help that they need because

they're still in denial about the situation. So, it's hard to get them to understand

that this is for the best, this would be a best place. So, I've run across those type of

challenges before where either the parent will say no and move on, or they'll fight

with us and then, some of them will eventually listen and say okay.

Participant KS091220 pointed out a problem with just getting some parents to

even be involved in helping them with their children.

Sometimes my challenge is getting parents involved. In the front end, you know,

I've had times where it took me months to get a parent to come out to the school

to do the actual biopsychosocial in order to start the process, because in order to

place a child in the appropriate setting, that's a part of the whole evaluation

process. And, if I cannot get the parent in, then we can't complete the process. So, parent involvement has been always been a big challenge.

Participant NH120220 mentioned the importance of having a good relationship with the parents. Doing this ensures that social workers are able to get them to help and avoid any difficulties in communication and cooperation.

The greatest challenge to overcome is trying to build a rapport with the parents or guardians. There should be more of an effort to encourage the parents to be involved and assure them that they can be a vital part of their children's development of skills that will improve their well-being. Once this is accomplished, we can work with them in the process of helping the children to achieve academically and cope with their disabilities.

The only comment about the challenges regarding the students came from Participant MJ120320 who expressed the issue involved with students who had problems communicating.

The ones that have speech-language disorders and difficulties are a little more challenging than other students because you have to try to figure out why they're upset or what they're trying to tell you, without them being able to verbally express themselves effectively.

Theme 6: Changes in School Social Work Practice with Children with Disabilities

Theme 6 is related to the following questions: Have any of the experiences you have had working with children with disabilities changed over the years you have been working with them? Based on your experience, what changes, if any, would you make

that will increase your ability to effectively provide the necessary services and resources

students with disabilities need to achieve academically?

Participants experienced several changes over the years, and for the most part, felt

that the changes were positive. Participants pointed out changes in the ways people

perceive people with disabilities and felt that this resulted in more acceptance and better

treatment of them. They agreed that these attitudes help bring about more changes in the

types of programs that are available for the students and more proliferation of inclusive

programs that help them adapt to, and cope in, mainstream environments. Participant

MJ12032 noted that,

> I see the difference in the way people treat individuals with disabilities. I believe
>
> people are more understanding and accepting of them, and they realize that just
>
> because some children have disabilities doesn't mean that they cannot perform or
>
> can't learn. Whereas, before these children were kind of pushed to the side a little
>
> bit. But now you see that they're challenging them and trying to get them to do
>
> different things academically and socially. So, I would say that the mindset of
>
> people has changed.

Participant KS091220 mentioned that there has been a change in what to do when

a child needs a service that is not provided by the program he or she is currently in.

Previously, these children would have to remain in the program even though the service

they needed was not available.

> What I have learned over the past two and half years is that if a child goes through
>
> the evaluation process, and it is deemed that they need a service, and let's say that

the school doesn't have that service, the student's parents now have the option to transfer the child to the nearest school to them. All schools do not have all of the necessary services that a child may need. For example, if a child has speech issues, but the school doesn't have a speech therapist that comes in, then there is an option for the parents to transfer their child to the school that would give them the service that they need.

The most significant changes that the social workers have experienced are those that have been made to adjust to providing services during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants mentioned that during the pandemic, they did not have to amend IEPs, which are usually done throughout the school year. Also, because schools were closed, the local educational agencies provided courses through online learning, which meant that the school social workers did not have face-to-face contact with the students, teachers, school administers, or the parents. Participant NH120220 noted drastic changes for both students and those that provide help for them.

> What's going on now is a drastic change, but you know they were used to coming into school daily, the parents have handled that too. So, dealing with this pandemic and them being online is a drastic change for the students, teachers, school administrators, parents, teachers, and other entities that provide services for the students at this time. Now, we have to determine what kinds of services we can implement and still adhere to the protective restrictions that been enacted to prevent the spread of the virus.

Participant MJ120320 explained how she provided help for a parent who had been impacted by the closing of schools. She has had to help parents more because their children are at home more than usual. Many parents are stressed as a result of not being able to cope well with this situation.

So, when COVID occurred, some of the changes affected the parents significantly. For example, a parent reached out because she has two children that are autistic, and she was having a hard time with the children at home. So, I reached out to one of the autism programs in the area and they were able to get someone to come to her home to help with the children.

Overall, the participants agreed that what would increase their ability to provide the necessary services and resources to students with disabilities is more parent involvement. Parental involvement was addressed as a vital key for students to succeed academically, and the consensus of the participants was that this issue is the one they would change for the better.

Participant MJ120320 pointed out that school social workers should make more of an effort to connect with the parents and provide them with more opportunities to see face-to-face what is going on in the classroom. She acknowledged that this type of interaction is not possible during COVID but suggested that when things get back to "normal," this would be an effective way of getting parents more involved. She stated,

I was thinking one of my things that I think we don't do too well is include the parents, at the school level. I think we should invite the parents to come into the classroom and observe what the teachers are doing. They can take what they see

as a model for how to handle their children and will know more about how to help them cope with their disability.

According to Participant AS120520, the parents are the primary source of information about their children. She stated that, "I really need to get a lot of information from the parents or guardians, especially during the psychosocial assessment. Speaking only to the child is not enough." She and other participants acknowledged that not having their full input impedes their ability to properly assess the children and determine which services and resources they need.

In addition to making changes regarding parental involvement, participants also mentioned changes that could be made within academia regarding the social work curriculum and suggestions for ongoing training. Participant NH120220 summarized the other participants' suggestion, which is, "to have more specialization within graduate school for school social workers working with children with disabilities. This will best provide knowledge to provide adequate resources and services with the identified disability." The participants agreed with Participant MJ120320, who advised that there should be an increase "in professional training and continuing education focusing on the evolving policies and programs designed for students with disabilities." The participants pointed out the ease in which school social workers can take advantage of ongoing educational opportunities because many of them can be taken online. This means, for them, that they no longer have difficulty balancing full-time employment or family and completing continuing education units. They mentioned that the advantages of the online

programs are that they allow for "unlimited review of the course material," and "virtual student forums and discussion groups."

Summary

This section contains the results of the six participants' responses to the interview questions, which resulted in 6 themes that addressed the services and resources that they provide for students with disabilities within inclusive elementary classrooms, the challenges they face, the support that is provided, and the collaboration efforts that involve teachers, school administrators, parents, healthcare personnel, and other entities that are necessary to help the students. The participants identified their roles as being advocates, supporters, and brokers who work on a multidisciplinary team to help teachers and school administrators identify evidence-based practices for providing students with disabilities a positive learning environment. It was revealed through the participant's responses that they are primarily responsible for performing many of the traditional school social worker duties, including evaluator and assessor of students, family, and community resource provider, advocacy, and intervention. The participants reported they have a supportive role to play that includes support to the students on an individual level and through group work. Individual counselling helps students understand their disability and cope with any challenges they face. The group work can involve teachers and parents collaborating to ensure that all aspects of the students' well-being and academic performance are addressed.

Regarding the parents, the school social workers affirmed that their involvement was necessary because without them, they are not able to effectively provide the

necessary help for the students that they need. The level of student assessment is comprehensive and includes a range of methods, obtained from several sources across various. Without the parents' involvement, they explained, it is not possible to effectively determine whether the child has a special need, assess the child's strengths and weaknesses, and identify the services and resources that meet the child's needs. The participants indicated that they do all they can to help parents reduce any stressors they may have in an effort to improve the family's outcomes and well-being.

The participants favored inclusive programs versus special education ones. They emphasized that the students' success in achieving academically is dependent on their placement in the appropriate program. Their experience has been that students have better outcomes, in general, when they are in mainstream classrooms. Some of them did concede, however, that some students may not do well in inclusive classrooms and need the more specialized help they can receive in a special education classroom. The participants emphasized that the main drawback of a special education program is that students do not learn and interact with a wide range of students.

The major change in practice that the participants have experienced has occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a climate of heightened societal changes that has resulted from the effects of the pandemic, the participants have had to find new ways to provide their services and resources. The social workers are aware of the many current challenges the educational system faces and are committed to upholding the standards and ethics set forth by the NASW to ensure that students' needs are addressed during this crisis.

Section 5 contains a discussion of the study's results, limitations, delimitations, and implications for professional practice. Also included is the study's impact on social change, followed by recommendations for future research involving school social workers who provide services and resources to children with disabilities.

Section 5: Results

Children with disabilities have emotional and physical challenges that may interfere with their ability to succeed academically (Stanley, 2012). Research shows that school social workers can be beneficial in helping educators provide them with an environmental setting in which they can develop and maintain the social and academic skills necessary to be competent in their future endeavors (Castillo et al., 2016; Malone et al., 2000). The problem I addressed in this qualitative study are the lack of effective services and resources for children with disabilities to become academically successful in academia. This gap in service places children with disabilities at risk for being unsuccessful academically (Lohmann et al., 2018). My review of the literature showed a gap in research about school social workers who work with children with disabilities in inclusive elementary class environments (Lohmann et al., 2018; Sherman, 2016). To help fill this gap, I addressed this research question, which guided the study: What are the lived experiences of school social workers who provide services and resources for students with disabilities in inclusive elementary classes in Miami and Broward, Florida?

This section consists of an elaboration of the study's results, and the limitations and delimitations that I addressed during the research. Also included are the study's implications for professional practice and impact on social change, followed by recommendations for future research.

Participants

I conducted purposive sampling to obtain the six female participants from two school systems, the Miami Dade public school system, which is the largest school district

in Florida, and Broward County public school system, the second largest school district in the state. All participants had an MSW degree or are C-SSWS and have 2 or more years of experience working in an inclusive elementary school program.

Research Design

I utilized Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory to investigate the services and resources that school social workers provide students with disabilities within an inclusive elementary classroom setting. The ecological theory was appropriate for this study because it can be utilized to investigate and examine the outcomes of disabled children with social work intervention within an educational setting (Chen et al., 2017). Using a qualitative approach was appropriate for this study, because it allowed me to find an answer to the research question by obtaining the participants' lived experiences, which were up-to-date and relevant (Denenzin & Lincoln, 2011). Additionally, this approach supports obtaining data conducted in a one-on-one interview from a small sample size (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

The interview protocol consisted of data collection from participants' responses to semistructured questions in one-on-one interviews though Zoom cloud-based videoconferencing. The benefit of using Zoom was to have an inquiry-based conversation with the participants to provide ample opportunities for the participants to respond to questions in their own way without being pressured.

I transcribed the transcripts containing the participants' responses, and analyzed them, identifying codes, themes, and similarities in the data. The six themes that emerged from the data analysis were:

1. School social workers' role in an inclusive or special education classroom

2. Differences between working in a special education program and an inclusive program

3. Services and resources for children with disabilities

4. Adherence to standards of school social work practice and professional ethics

5. Challenges when working with children with disabilities

6. Changes in school social work practice with children with disabilities

Discussion of Results

Theme 1: School Social Workers' Role in an Inclusive or Special Education Classroom

The participants described themselves as trained professionals whose roles are advocates, supporters, and brokers, serving as consultants and collaborators to address the psychosocial, academic, and psychological needs of students with disabilities. The participants roles were designed to address the needs of the school system and follow its policies, procedures, and regulations, which aligns with the school social workers' roles that have been identified in prior research (Kwon et al., 2011; Odom et al., 2011).

What distinguishes school social workers from other social workers, according to the participants and the review of the literature, is that they are trained to provide services and resources to marginalized and oppressed populations (Burstein et al., 2004; Fitch, 2003). In contrast to other social workers, the participants work with students in the micro- and mezzolevels of practice, which involves having direct contact with them to improve their academic, emotional, and social wellbeing. Additionally, they interact with

resources outside the school settings, make home visits to evaluate students' home environments, and work with teachers, parents, school administrators, and the entire school district to provide students with what they need. This finding indicates that the participants adhere to the responsibilities and tasks that the NASW requires, and thus, they represent one of the best sources of help for the students they serve. School social workers qualifications and expertise provided evidence of what is needed to effect change because according to Lalvani (2015), school social workers help promote and provide safe and healthy home and school environments for students with disabilities by adhering to the NASW evidence-informed multitier model. This model includes duties involving prevention and intervention that encourages students' positive behaviors, promotes their social and emotional development, and ensures a classroom environment that enhances their academic achievement.

Theme 2: Differences between Working in a Special Education Program and an Inclusive Program

According to the review of literature, the 1975 IDEA Act mandated that children be able to receive appropriate education whether or not they have a disability. Additionally, IDEA stated that students with disabilities need to receive education along with students who do not have disabilities. IDEA only suggested that the students need to be in inclusive settings, but the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) mandated that they be in the Least Restrictive Program (LRE) as possible along with students without disabilities. In 2001, the NCLB act was enacted to help students with disabilities excel academically. Since that time, many school districts have switched

from having only special education programs for students with disabilities to inclusive

programs (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics,

2019).

According to the participants, the special education programs are restrictive

because the emphasis is primarily on helping the students cope with their disability and

helping them develop decision-making and problem-solving skills. The school social

worker is more of a liaison, as the special education program usually has its own

specialists set up who provide the individual attention the student needs; the social

worker is just available as an ancillary resource. In contrast, in the inclusive programs,

the school social workers are more involved in addressing students' emotional health,

development of social skills, and problems with attendance, behavior, academics,

underachievement, bullying, substance abuse, and other issues that arise that may impede

the students' ability to achieve academically. These findings are in accordance with other

research that shows school social workers in inclusive programs have a wider range of

opportunities in which they can help students with disabilities with the goal being for

them to be able to fully participate in school and extracurricular activities (Nahmias et al.,

2014; Harr-Robins et al., 2015).

Participants reported that they favor an inclusive program over a special education

program because it affords students with disabilities more benefits. Research supports the

participants' unanimous opinion about the advantages of inclusive programs over special

education ones (Allan 2011; Nahmias et al., 2014; Harr-Robins et al., 2015). The

participants emphasized that the inclusive program provides students with the absolute

right to be educated the same as other students. They are not excluded from the same educational opportunities the other students have. Not only do they benefit, so do their nondisabled peers, who learn to accept, respect, and interact with those who may be different from themselves.

The participants' perspectives were that students with disabilities do better academically and socially in an inclusive program than those in special education programs. This perspective aligns with research that shows the inclusive program provides an environment in which students with disabilities have more opportunity to learn and make progress academically because they have the advantage of a richer curriculum than the one in a special education program (Imaniah & Fitria, 2018; Winter & O'Raw, 2010). One of the reasons for this is that special education teachers may stray away from the usual curriculum because they feel the students with disabilities may not be able to grasp the concepts and master the course material (Lalvani, 2015; Winter & O'Raw, 2010). Boroson (2017), Imaniah and Fitria, (2018), and Phillips and Meloy (2012) found that that children with disabilities' literacy scores increased when in inclusive programs. Green et al. (2014) found that students with disabilities had better literacy, language, print awareness, and oral language outcomes in inclusive programs.

Although participants affirmed that an inclusive program affords students more benefits than a special education program, they did contend that some of the students are not able to adapt to and thrive in an inclusive classroom. Therefore, the social worker in association with the teachers, school counselors, and parents, transfer the student to a

special education program or another type of facility that better addresses the student's needs.

Based on their experiences, the participants noted that special education programs have some benefits. Special education teachers can better provide more individualized attention for students who need it because of their specialized training in working with students with disabilities. Cagiltay et al. (2019) asserted that special education teachers provide students with up-to-date course content that is adapted to their learning styles. They provide resources and aids that can help them learn, such as assistive technology, and special accommodations, such as sitting closer to the teacher, and modified assignments according to the students' abilities. Additionally, as the review of literature indicated, in special education classes, more focus is on building the students' confidence and developing their prosocial behaviors. They are academically tracked and their progress is assessed through tests and various experiments more often (Hibel et al., 2010; Kauffman & Hallahan, 2011). According to the participants and my review of the literature, the best interest of the children is primary when making decisions about what is best advised for improving their ability to achieve academically and develop needed social skills (Lawrence et al., 2016; Weintraub, 2012).

Theme 3: Services and Resources for Children with Disabilities

In collaboration with a multidisciplinary team, consisting of teachers, school administrators, school psychologists, and parents, the participants provide services and resources that remove any of the barriers and challenges the students face. They also

address any issues that adversely affects the well-being of the students, in and outside of their school environment.

The types of services and resources the participants provide for their students align with the findings of prior research. Other researchers as well as the NASW have identified the same services and resources in their studies and affirmed that these are the best practices in social work practice (Garrett, 2004; Hunter et al., 2018; Kelly et al., 2010; National Association of Social Workers, 2012).

The participants explained that they are involved in the students' entire journey in the educational system as part of their case management activities. They emphasized that their ability to help their students is enhanced by their participation in a multidisciplinary team consisting of teachers, parents, school administrators, school administrators, school counselors and psychologists, and other entities involved in the students' care and well-being. They participate in IEP meetings and assess the students to ensure that their needs are adequately met. As part of this assessment process, they create a psychosocial history that contains the psychological, biological, and social aspects that influence the student's life. The school social workers provide help for their students regarding self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and anger and stress management. When they feel a student is not doing well in the class academically, they provide them tutoring services and supplementary aids before suggesting, if needed, that they be transferred to a special education program or other facility that can better serve them.

The participants counsel the students individually and in groups to discuss their educational goals and progress, interactions with peers, behavior problems, stressors they

may have, and any other concerns that need to be addressed to ensure the students are adjusting and coping with the educational environment and achieving academically. Problems that occur in the children's family and home life often carries over to the classroom, which can result in students exhibiting heightened behaviors. In this case, the participants prefer individual counseling for the student, which presents a private, one-on-one environment for the student. Many students, such as those with autism, are unable to effectively express their feelings verbally. The school social workers can assist them in determining their problem and subsequently providing the necessary help that they need. Additionally, school social workers involve family members and relevant professionals in counseling sessions with the students to address identified needs, and provide referrals to appropriate resources, such as psychological services, audio and speech-language pathology services, interpreting services, physical and occupational therapy, social work and rehabilitation counseling.

The consensus of the participants was that the children's parents need a lot of support, and often emotional support because of the stressors they have dealing with their children. According to Dente and Coles (2012), parents may become stressed and frustrated because they are having difficulty accepting that the child has a disability and understanding the diagnosis. Parents who believed, initially, that they had a child who had typical characteristics and was developing normal, then see that the child is regressing, can feel they are to blame for the disability (Hill & Koester, 2015). Additionally, they often are unable to cope with their family members' and outsiders' reactions to their children (Nahmias et al., 2014). The participants help alleviate some of

the issues and challenges the parents face by counseling them and referring them to support groups, in-home services, respite care, and other resources that validate their journey in the process of providing educational opportunities for their children. Benjamin et al. (2017) and Child (2018) found that providing parents with adaptive coping strategies, social support and counseling that helps them feel confident about the efficacy of the intervention results in the having lower levels of stress and pessimism about their children's outcomes.

A significant finding associated with this theme is that all of the participants experienced their students improving their academic performance as a result of the services and resources that they provide. Indeed, research supports this accomplishment. Munford and Bennie (2015), Popple (2018), and Williams (2016) affirmed that school social workers have a significant influence and impact on the academic outcomes of children with disabilities and provide students with disabilities services and resources that enable them to have a positive learning experience and achieve academically. When an inevitable crisis or problem erupts, the school social workers' training and professionalism helps them address the situation and regroup everyone involved around the imperative to ensure that nothing impedes the students from obtaining an education. Clark and Thiede (2007) acknowledged that school social workers are considered to be essential to helping students with disabilities manage the emotional burdens and vicarious traumas that they may experience so they can take advantage of all the educational opportunities that other students have.

Theme 4: Adherence to Standard of School Social Work Practice and Professional Ethics

The participants' responses to this theme show that they adhere to the standard of social work practice and professional ethics, policies, laws, procedures, and maintain confidentiality. Participants have experienced no problems demonstrating "core values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence" (National Association of Social Workers 2012, Standard 1, Ethics and Values). They not only treat students with disabilities with respect, but also the other students. They make no distinction between students and "respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person" while performing their duties in a trustworthy and ethnical manner (NASW, 2017). The American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare initiated challenges that called for action to achieve equal opportunity and justice for all students (Williams, 2016).

According to the participants, they provide equal opportunities for children with disabilities by ensuring there is no discrimination in the classrooms. They make an effort to understand and accept all aspects of the student, such as their language, gender, ethnicity, race, culture, and religion, which impacts their development and personality. They assist school personnel in selecting course materials and developing activities that counteract negative stereotypes, and instead, incorporate positive information about all types of people. Prior research supports these findings about the critical role school social workers play in addressing and alleviating discrimination and the negative labeling of

children with disabilities and affirm that what they do helps students significantly

(Almqvist & Lassinantti, 2018; Bigby & Frawley, 2010; Hunter, 2017).

For the participants, one of the main benefits as member of the NASW is that they

have the support of the organization and can use them as a resource when they need help

themselves. There are hotlines available that they can access when they experience

problems, such as ethical dilemmas. They are able to discuss issues and problems

confidentially, without disclosing their clients' personal information and obtain

professional advice about how to address the situation. For them, this source enables

them to avoid transgressing any of the standards of social work practice and professional

ethics.

Avant (2014) and Kelly (2010) agreed that consulting a neutral party, such as the

NASW, is the best way for school social workers to get assistance considering concerns,

issues, and problems from a new and different perspective.

Theme 5: Challenges When Working with Children with Disabilities

While working in school systems, school social workers face many challenges

and barriers that may prevent them from effectively performing their duties. Although

providing services and resources for students is a daunting task, the participants in this

study did not report that they had major challenges that were problematic for them, which

significantly impeded their ability to help their students. All of the participants, except

one, pointed out the lack of parental involvement as a challenge. The other participant

expressed that communicating with children who have speech-language disorders and

difficulties can be challenging. These results are contrary to the majority of other

research, which shows evidence of varied challenges that present problems for school social workers who work with children with disabilities. Hartley et al. (2012) found that the varied disabilities the students have with associated side effects and disorders increases the job's difficulty for many school social workers and caused them to be ineffective.

The participants noted that, although a significant benefit for students with disabilities to achieve academically is through parental involvement, many parents are not involved. They were aware of the many reasons for the lack of parental involvement and believed that by helping parents address them will make the parents more involved. Some of the participants pointed out the many parents are in denial about their child having a disability and refuse to accept it. They noted that, in this case, they have the parents speak with medical professionals who work with the schools to explain to the parents what they need to know to learn more about their child's disability. Sometimes the parents do not want to hear about this information from their child's pediatrician. Research shows when a diagnosis is explained to parents, the manner in which it is delivered and from whom, can have a profound effect on their attitude toward the child, and a prolonged effect on their attitude toward those who are trying to help the child (Hunter, 2017; Lohmann, 2018). Participants emphasized that referring parents to as many resources as needed to learn more about their children's disabilities helps parents accept it and then move on to becoming more involved in working with others to help their children.

Another reason for parents' lack of involvement is the decrease in social support, which is a major part of being able to cope with the stress of having a child with disabilities. According to Benjamin et al. (2017), this lack of social support can be challenging, and parents may lose friends they need because they have limited time available for them as a result of having to take more time attending to the needs of their child. The participants mentioned how this gap in support can be filled by referring the parents to support groups and counseling centers in the community that can provide ongoing assistance.

As a consequence of lack of social support, many parents experience an increase in marital problems. The participants affirmed that marital conflict often results in divorce, which can prompt children's behavior problems. Hartley et al. (2012) found that the parents' emotions fluctuate along the same levels as their child's behavior, so when the child misbehaves, this causes more stress to be added to that which the parents already have. The participants address this problem by referring parents to marital counselors and, additionally providing counseling for the child to help him or her cope with the problem and improve his behavior.

Overall, all of the challenges the parents face, such as financial problems that result from limited resources to cover medical expenses and supplemental aids their children may need, and the stressors they have, such as anxiety, depression, anger, grief, and guilt, affect their children and the people with whom they interact and receive help from in the educational environment. The participants agreed that making a special effort

to relieve some of the burdens the parents have can result in the children being better able to reach their full potential inside and outside the classroom.

The participant who mentioned a challenge with students who have communication problems pointed out that this occurs mostly with children who have autism. She noted that over the years, there has been an increase in autistic children in the classrooms. To help with communication problems, she often has a paraprofessional or the child's parents assist her when she works with the student. Also, forming a rapport with the student makes him or her comfortable and more forthcoming. Research shows that being able to address a child's various weaknesses is a viable asset for school social workers to have (Castillo, 2016; Garrett, 2004). Evidence from the participants' responses affirmed that they are equipped with the necessary skills to cope with all types of disabilities the children may have.

Theme 6: Changes in School Social Work Practice with Children with Disabilities

The participants expressed that they understand change in their profession is constant; therefore, they actively investigate and consider new ways in which they can provide services to ensure their students' emotional, psychological, social, and academic success. One of the changes the participants pointed out about people with disabilities, is they are more accepted and not negatively labeled as they once were. Many in society used to perceive people with disabilities as being unhealthy, deviant or defective. The participant mentioned that since the change in legislative policies that advocate for people with disabilities and societal attitudes as a result in an increase in people with various disabilities, those who have disabilities have access to more opportunities that can afford

them a fulfilling life. This finding aligns with research that shows the changes in the treatment and attitudes of society about those with disabilities. Lohmann et al. (2018) and Stanley (2012) found that societal attitudes toward people with disabilities are determinants of social inclusive. The increase in the positive attitudes towards them have been effective increasing their ability to fully participate in economic and social life.

Participants discussed changes they would like to see made in the social work curriculum. They felt there should be more specialized courses, such as evidence-based and evidence-informed courses that have content in such topics as new findings in neuroscience, new directions in prevention and early intervention. They noted that this concern is being addressed by the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) Commission on Educational Policy (COEP), which encourages excellence in educational programs. They solicit feedback from social workers about the curriculum and other aspects of the social work degree program and make changes accordingly. Research shows that school social workers benefit from having specialized courses that cover the current advances in the provision of services for children with disabilities and the integration of behavioral health care services and primary care (Almqvist, 2018; Soydan, 2012).

Participants expressed that their ability to take continuing education classes has changed. The reason given for having difficulty when taking classes was that they did not have time to study and take full advantage of the courses because of having to balance a full-time job with family responsibilities. Now, they can take continuing education courses online and still interact with their peers and course facilitators while taking them.

Some of the courses that are available that they take are: Anxiety Certification Training Course, Play Therapy Interventions for Dysregulated Clients, Custom Treatment Techniques for Anxious and Depressed Clients, 2-Day Advanced Course, and Executive Functioning Skills for Children & Adolescents. The NASW encourages social workers to take these types of courses, and to ensure that they keep up with new information and refresh their knowledge and skills, they require social workers to complete 48 hours of continuing education every two years (National Association of Social Workers, 2012).

The most significant changes the participants have experienced are those resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants discussed how the measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19 have restricted their responsibilities and services, resulting in new needs and demands that the students have. The closure of some schools, local advice agencies, domestic abuse refuges, family support centers, and respite care services limit the resources available for families, however, the demands for these services have been exacerbated.

It has been difficult for the participants to stay in contact with their clients because of lockdowns, and some are fearful of conducting home visits. They affirmed the difficulty of communicating by phone and staying in touch with those who may delay returning their calls. They can use virtual platforms, which enables them to see their clients. For their students who receive Medicaid, they can meet with them through the telemental health method (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). However, they emphasized that the bond they have with their clients is difficult to maintain when they have to participate in virtual case conferences through platforms, such telemental, Zoom

or Skype, and it is heart breaking when they have to discuss the sickness or death of a family member virtually with them. It is equally difficult for them to assess the family's home conditions in this way, and therefore, they cannot adequately ascertain the state of well-being the family is in during the pandemic. Besides what the social workers have done to help students, there have been other various measures enacted to help them. For example, to help students cope, the School Social Work Association of America provided limited counseling services and supporting resources on their website.

Participants agreed that there is not one right answer about the course of action to take when there is a dilemma. During the pandemic, new dilemma situations are frequent and a quick response to them may be required. This factor means that they have to draw upon their experience combined with acquiring more information about what to do from the NASW and other agencies. Although many participants mentioned the challenges during Covid-19, others discussed the lessons they have learned and what implications these are for social work practice in the future. Overall, the pandemic has highlighted the critical and valuable role that school social workers play in helping students cope with the impact of the virus.

Implications for School Social Work Practice

The primary implication of this study was that it serves as a reminder to school social workers who provide services to children with disabilities that the child is the primary client. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, school social workers have increased their need for best practices. The evolving changes in policies and health care advances have resulted in the necessity for them to adapt, adopt, and deliver best

practices. Results of this study contain the ways in which the participants have successfully provided services and resources to their students and helped them achieve academically.

To place this study in context, I used the ecological model theoretical framework. The implication of this model for school social workers is that it serves as a lens because it provides the means for them to clarify the relationship between people, their environment, and all of the transactions that occur between the two. The perspective from an ecological lens identifies effective practices as the various interventions that occur within the microsystems, mesosystems and macrosystems levels. In the ecological perspective, stress occurs when there is a mismatch between person and environment and the ability to cope and adapt to life challenges. This happens when children with disabilities are unable to adapt and cope with their disorder and the educational environment. Social workers can assist these children by giving them coping strategies, educational aids, and referring them to resources that provide them with additional help and support.

Another implication is that involving parents is necessary, and their lack of involvement can adversely affect their children. School social workers need to provide opportunities for the parents to learn more about their child's disability and the ways in which they can cope with it. To relieve the stressors parents experience, the school social worker can refer them to resources, such as marital stress, and family therapy support groups.

Findings from this study show that an interdisciplinary collaborative approach to helping students is vital, and it is well-suited to ecologically informed school social work practice. Interdisciplinary meetings with teachers, parents, school administrators, counselors, and psychologists are of major importance to productive ecological school social work because this type of collaboration enhances the schools relational and organizational resources. Additionally, trust and respect are fostered, and the influence and impact of the school social workers services results in more staff being enlisted to help them with interventions and programs for the students, which ensure that they achieve academically.

Limitations

Several limitations occurred during the research process that were not present initially. This study was limited only to school social workers within the Miami Dade public school system in Florida originally. I hoped to obtain six to eight participants. However, recruitment efforts did not result in much response from the pool of school social workers which were sent information about participating in the study. Therefore, I sent requests to school social workers in the Broward County school system also. After purposive sampling, I overcame this limitation, and was able to select six participants who met the study's qualifications for participation.

Initially, I planned to hold face-to-face interviews. However, as a result of the restrictions because of the COVID-19 pandemic, I used the Zoom web-based conferencing tool to conduct virtual interviews. Some technological issues arose within the interview process with poor internet connection, noise level, and no chiming of

participant in the waiting room, causing some delay and interruption during the interview process. However, these limitations did not significantly impede the interview protocol and I was able to obtain information-rich data from the participants.

Delimitations

One of the study's delimitation was that only school social workers employed by the Miami and Broward County, FL school system who provide services and resources to children with disabilities in an inclusive elementary classroom setting would be chosen to participate. School social workers who worked exclusively in special education programs did not meet the inclusion requirements. Also, the school social workers had to have two or more years of experience working in this environment. These factors caused the study's results not to generalizable to all demographics of school social workers and all types of educational programs that students with disabilities are in. However, the majority of the information in the findings can be beneficial to most school social workers because the primary focus of their practice is the same, which is to provide essential services and resources to help students achieve socially and academically, while making an effort to reduce or eliminate any discriminatory or social barriers the students may face.

Contribution to Positive Social Change

The plight of people with disabilities has evolved and improved since the times when they did not receive humane treatment. School social workers, like the participants in this study work to change how children with disabilities are treated and how they are perceived. They advocate for the destigmatization of disabilities. Their services have

helped their students live productive lives. They benefit society by addressing social issues, forming relationships with organizations and agencies across sectors, and integrating support and resources for innovative approaches to helping students with disabilities succeed in an educational environment.

In their roles as advocates, brokers, supporters, organizers, counselors, and facilitators, the participants showed they have a significant voice in helping their local communities overcome barriers that impede children with disabilities from obtaining an education and having a fulfilling life. They empower their students with the knowledge and resources they need self-govern and self-direct their lives and the environments they are in. For the participants, a core ethical requirement for them is to work to effect social justice. The Social Work Code of Ethics Social exhorts them to, "… strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice" (NASW, 2017).

Recommendations for Future Research

One of the main limitations for this study was the small number of participants from only two school districts. A recommendation for future research would be to explore school social workers perspectives about working with children with disability with a larger number of participants from a larger number of different school systems. Comparisons can be made about the participants perspectives that reflect their particular demographics. The findings from this type of research would be more generalizable than the findings from this study.

The participants' students with disabilities in inclusive elementary school programs may advance onto middle school and high school. It is assumed that they

should be prepared academically to do so. Future researchers could explore whether working with school social workers prepared students for the next educational levels.

Conclusion

I investigated the perspectives and lived experiences of school social workers in Miami and Broward, FL school districts about the services and resources they provide for children with disabilities, who are in inclusive elementary classrooms, which help them achieve their educational goals. Results show that participants' best practices benefit the students by enabling them to achieve academically. By utilizing their skills, knowledge, and standards that are fundamental to social work practice, they deliver services, which are culturally sensitive, and family focused. They advocate for quality resources and programs that ensure their needs are met. They utilize evidence-based practices to develop and maintain an effective and safe learning environment, without using coercive disciplinary measure. They are the bridge between teachers, parents, and the local community and forge relationships with supportive services that meet their students' needs.

Participants stressed the importance of interdisciplinary teams that foster a positive collaboration between the teachers, students, and the school. The results of this study are congruent with the those in the reviewed literature. The results reveal the positive outcomes that can occur when school social workers use the information about the participants' best practices when working with children with disabilities. Participants in the study have proven that school social workers advocating for the resources and services for the students' educational achievement makes a difference in their success.

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Appendix A: Invitation Letter

One-on-one interview study seeks School Social Workers in Elementary School

working with Children with Disabilities in Miami Dade or Broward County Public

Schools

This study is called *"Social Work Practice with Children identified with Disabilities in Elementary School"* that could help address the needs of children with disabilities and protect their rights. For this study, you are invited to describe your experiences working with students with disabilities and the services received to help them achieve academically.

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Tamara Pierre, a DSW student at Walden University. One-on-one interviews will take place via Zoom.

About the study:

- One 30-60-minute one-on-one interview that will be audio recorded

- You will receive a $10 gift card as a thank you

- To protect your privacy, the published study will be anonymous and you will be not identified, fake names will be used.

<u>Volunteers must meet these requirements:</u>

- A school social worker with an MSW degree or a certified school social work specialist (C-SSWS).

- Two are more years of experience advocating for, and providing services and resources to children with disabilities in inclusive classrooms.

- Two or more years of experiencing working within interdisciplinary teams consisting of the children and their teachers, families, school administrators and communities.

- Two or more years of experience intervening in crisis situations, and consulting with education, mental health, and government agencies

> **To confidentially volunteer, contact the researcher:**