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The Social Worker's Experience Regarding Social Isolation in Middle Schools

Jeanne Williams
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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Jeanne Williams

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University

2022

Abstract

The Social Worker's Experience Regarding Social Isolation in Middle Schools

by

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MS, Walden University, 2016

BS, Kaplan University, 2011

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Social Work

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Abstract

Middle school is a time when adolescents struggle with social challenges, self-identity, and self-esteem. Social workers are critical stakeholders to support families in schools; these professionals serve in a unique capacity to assist with attendance, provide medical and behavioral support and connect families with resources to mitigate barriers to students' success. Little is known, however, about the role social workers play in preventing and addressing the social isolation of middle school students. The purpose of this project was to explore the role of the social worker as it relates to preventing and addressing the social isolation of middle school students. Self-determination theory and relationship motivation theory were used as the conceptual frameworks to support the research. A generic qualitative methodology included semi structured interviews with five middle school social workers from Metro Atlanta school districts. Data were collected, transcribed, coded, and analyzed for themes. Although social workers felt they were equipped to do their jobs (i.e., through professional learning training and with the necessary resources and tools), they were clear that students had unmet needs regarding social isolation, such as consistency, discipline, meaningful relationships, being able to manage the influences of social media in a healthy way, and so forth. This study can be used for positive social change by highlighting gaps in current social work practice and the types of professional development needed by social workers, and other educational stakeholders (i.e., teachers, administrators, district personnel, etc.) to positively impact the social isolation middle school students experience.

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Dedication

I dedicated this thesis project to my husband, Shelton, my daughter Ashley, and my son Spencer who has been a constant source of support and encouragement during the challenges of graduate school and life. I am very grateful to have you in my life. This work is also dedicated to my mother Roberta Overstreet, and my family, who have always loved me unconditionally and whose good examples have taught me to work hard for the things that I aspire to achieve.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

Introduction

The social, emotional, and cognitive needs of students have changed over time. A sense of belonging during a person's developmental stages of adolescence correlates strongly with both physical and mental wellbeing (Schall et al., 2016). In Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs, this theorist highlighted that belonging is essential to a person's self-efficacy. Lanoil (2012) suggested that learning in isolated environments, such as virtual learning, does not transfer effectively to a larger community; this author also posited that the presence of role models facilitates growth and development. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with current poverty rates, lack of parental involvement, and diminished self-esteem (Doi et al., 2019) heightens the need for additional support for students. School-based social workers support the success of the whole school and child.

Through this qualitative study, I explored the perceptions and experiences of social workers regarding the prevention and mitigation of social isolationism among adolescents. A generic qualitative design using semi structured interviews was selected to collect data. This study was particularly timely and relevant due to the nationwide efforts at distance learning due to COVID-19 at the time of the study, as these environments hinder the development of social relationships and may exacerbate feelings of isolation among students (Maliotaki, 2019). Although previous scholars have explored the topic of student relationship-building and isolationism in the distance learning environment, they have primarily focused on teachers' roles in addressing this problem (Zelihic, 2015).

However, relationships are critical to all students' success, but especially those already experiencing difficulties.

Section 1 begins with a brief introduction. It also entails the statement of the problem, the purpose, research questions that guided the project, an overview, the significance of the study, coupled with the theoretical and conceptual framework. Also provided is an overview of academic literature related to social workers' experiences and middle school students' social isolation, and the section concludes with a summary.

Problem Statement

“Social relationships are a fundamental component of human life” (Matthew et al., 2016, p. 339). Researchers have revealed that the social isolation of adolescents negatively impacts their connectedness, self-esteem, health, and cognitive development (Talmus, 2019). Students' motivation impacts their productivity, and there is a positive correlation between school connectedness and student achievement (Matthew et al., 2016). Positive social relationships provide a foundation of sustenance, purpose, and direction (Umberson & Montez, 2015). Social isolation can be described as perceptual beliefs of feeling alone (London & Ingram, 2018), which impacts a person's social, physical, and mental health. Isolation increases students' disengagement, which already declines as students' progress through school (Chipchase et al., 2017). The National Association of Independent Schools (2017) conducted a study revealing that 74% of students perceived challenging work as encouraging curiosity and producing engagement; similarly, 83% of students shared boredom as a reason for disengagement, with the highest indicators being materials and teaching methods not being interesting.

In the Metro Atlanta area, school social workers' roles have evolved, especially at the middle school level. These professionals are responsible for helping students cope and overcome the day-to-day challenges that impact their achievement (Fulton County Schools, 2019). Furthermore, the services that school social workers provide include but are not limited to individual and group counseling, parent training, and support groups, crisis interventions, dropout prevention, professional development, home visits, legal liaisons, and a referral hub for external support services (Fulton County Schools, 2019). The type and level of support that students need vary based on several factors; however, the focus of this study was the impact of social isolation on students' success and the manner in which social workers mitigated the issue. Despite the numerous studies focusing on student isolation through the perspectives of teachers, students, and administrators, few scholars have examined the experiences of social workers (Lubben et al., 2015).

This study was important because of the context of the current study, which was that many schools have shifted to virtual learning environments as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Virtual learning can result in social isolationism among students (Zelihic, 2015). Moreover, the lack of healthy relationships during adolescence can result in both immediate and long-term negative consequences, including anxiety disorders, depression, alcoholism and substance abuse, and obesity (Hanover Research, 2020).

Purpose Statement and Research Question

In this study I explored the experiences of the social worker concerning the prevention and mitigation of social isolationism of middle school students. To improve

the understanding of this phenomenon, I selected the qualitative methodology. I used interviews to develop an understanding of social workers' strategies to mitigate middle school students' isolation and positively impact their cognitive, social, physical, and mental development. The following terms were used frequently in this study.

School connectedness: This term refers to students' beliefs about the care adults and peers have regarding their learning and who they are as individuals (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009).

Social isolation: Isolation refers to the perceptual beliefs of feeling alone (London & Ingram, 2018).

Social workers: These are school personnel responsible for helping students and families mitigate barriers that impede students' success (Richardson et al., 2019).

The research question for this study was:

RQ: For social workers in the Metro Atlanta area, what themes emerge regarding their work to mitigate the social isolationism of middle school students?

Nature of the Doctoral Project

A generic qualitative approach best aligned with the purpose of this study (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I used qualitative research to fully comprehend a trend and describe a phenomenon (see Silverman, 2016). I also used the qualitative approach to provide a deeper understanding and to reflect active practitioners' current attitudes, opinions, and beliefs on factors that support and impede their work to mitigate the social isolation of middle school students.

I collected data using interviews with social workers who work in five Metro Atlanta school districts. I used semi structured interview questions to inquire about the specific duties, responsibilities, and roles of social workers. Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, I used secured virtual interviews to be able to be engaged and establish a rapport with participants (see Oltmann, 2016).

I conducted semi structured interviews to explore how social workers engaged with middle school students to prevent /or address social isolationism using a set of 10 researcher-developed questions. Through the initial interview, I probed the participants regarding social isolation, school connectedness, and their ability to impact this phenomenon. I also asked follow-up questions to clarify or expand participants' responses. Additionally, participants completed a nominal scale demographic questionnaire to report their background information (Appendix A). I initially set out to interview a minimum of five participants, with more potential participants possibly providing a greater opportunity for data saturation and triangulation to occur (see Jentoft & Olsen, 2009). However, in the end I achieved data saturation with 5 interviews. These interviews were intended to reflect active practitioners' current attitudes, opinions, and beliefs about the factors that support and impede their work to mitigate social isolation of middle school students.

Significance of the Study

Educators, including social workers, are responsible for ensuring students are in a safe environment that is conducive to their social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development (Bryant, 2018). Social workers play a critical role in working with students

who have or are facing challenging situations. Educational theorists have frequently assessed teachers' impact on students' efficacy, but few have included social workers' impact outside of discipline (Richardson et al., 2019). Social isolation, or the perceived absence of belonging, heightens during adolescence and has lasting effects on students; middle school is a time when youth tend to be sensitive to social challenges and self-esteem can be fragile (London & Ingram, 2018). Not exploring the role of social workers may leave students, teachers, leaders, and social workers in a more vulnerable state regarding middle school students' isolation with regard to their academic, social, emotional, mental, and physical well-being.

The role that social workers play in preventing and addressing the social isolation of middle school students is currently unknown. Through the current study, I aimed to highlight the experiences and perspectives of social workers as they work to address the social isolationism of middle school students. Insights from this study can help schools and external agencies to better support students' ability to mitigate loneliness and social isolationism. Social workers' ability to help students deal with loneliness and isolation frames their day-to-day work and positively impacts students' achievement (Kelly, 2020). More importantly, it can help educational leaders determine the appropriate professional learning needed for school social works along with what their specific duties and responsibilities, linked to social-emotional learning

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

To explore this issue, I used a subset of self-determination theory (SDT) known as relationships motivation theory (RMT). I also used the two theories as a lens to better

understand the experiences of the social workers as they seek to prevent social isolation among middle school students. Whether these actions go on to ensure student's cognitive, mental, and physical development while in middle school is beyond the purview of my study. I discuss both SDT and RMT, as well as their application to the proposed study, in the following sections.

Self-Determination Theory

SDT reflects the intersection between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, in conjunction with personality (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Autonomy, competence, and relatedness are all critical in a person's ability to experience success (Ryan & Deci, 2014). SDT encapsulates human motivation and personality. This macro theory of these variables addresses individuals' growth both mentally and intellectual, behavioral tendencies, and psychological needs (Freer & Evans, 2018). Legault (2017) highlighted the various types of motivation, along with the internalized continuum. This scholar theorized that there are three types of motivation: amotivation (non-self-determined), extrinsic motivation, and intrinsic motivation (most self-determined). Legault's model also included six regulatory styles: nonregulation, external, introjected, identified, integrated, and intrinsic. Under RMT, a person's locus of causality ranges from impersonal to internal. Finally, relevant regulatory processes include a range from nonintentional, nonvaluing, incompetence, and lack of control to interest, enjoyment, and inherent satisfaction. The RMT construct of motivation was particularly relevant to the current study, as social workers can work with students to identify the factors impeding or hindering their intrinsic motivation.

Deci and Ryan (2014) described autonomy, competence, and relatedness as necessary for an individual's motivation to grow. Competence is described as behaviors effectively enacted (e.g., "I've done a good job"). Autonomy includes controlling behaviors or actions (e.g., "I'm in control"). Lastly, relatedness involves the feeling connectedness to and from others (e.g., "I belong here, and they care about me"). Individuals are motivated intrinsically (i.e., innate human desire) and extrinsically (i.e., reward-seeking). There is a direct correlation between autonomy, competence, and relatedness and positive environmental (i.e., work, school, home) outcomes (Olafsen, 2016). Although students can thrive autonomously, this theory highlights or explains students' achievement when supported by stakeholders, such as social workers or teachers. The specific impact of such support also includes students' perceptions of self-determination and competence, increased achievement, and access to more positive relationships with peers.

Relationships Motivation Theory

SDT is a broad theory, whereas RMT is more specific to the impact of relationships on motivation. Relatedness or connectedness is heightened when discovering the individual and collective tenets of RMT. This mini theory within SDT focuses on the impact relationships have on a person's growth and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2014). Teachers are responsible for meeting the cognitive, emotional, and social needs of all students; however, there are external factors that increase the amount of support that students need, which highlights the significance of social workers in middle schools (Finigan-Carr&Shaia, 2018). The quality of relationships is enhanced when

stakeholders support the holistic needs of others; this theory refers to those factors as autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Migliorini et al., 2019).

RMT focuses on the need to develop and maintain close relationships and describes how optimal relationships are to help people satisfy their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Legault, 2017). Strong and meaningful relationships have the possibility of nurturing motivation and well-being. Deci and Ryan (2014) posited that an individual's psychological need for relatedness mobilizes relationship development and when positive, motivates a person to act. The positive outcomes based on this belief include trust, volitional reliance, wellness, mutuality of supports, and self-confidence.

Adolescents in the United States need more support now than ever before, and the role of social workers has evolved due to expanding needs of families (Richardson et al., 2019). Relationships are significant to children and adolescents; these relationships can assist with social development, emotional support, problem-solving, and identity development. Wentzel (2017) stated that "children who enjoy positive relationships with peers appear to experience levels of emotional well-being, beliefs about self, and values for prosocial forms of behavior and social interactions that are stronger and more adaptive, than children without positive peer relationships" (p. 588). In addition, positive peer relationships are also linked to academic success, social competence, and the ability to resolve conflict effectively.

The combined use of these theories provided a foundation to understanding the experiences of social workers in their plight to mitigate or prevent middle school

students' social isolation. SDT provides the foundational premise of the study, but the RMT explains the impact of social workers' roles and their influence on middle school students.

Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

This section includes a review of articles that highlight the significance of social workers, coupled with the impact social isolation can have on middle school students. I used academic databases such as Social Work Abstracts, Journal Storage (JSTOR), Google Scholar, Springer Link, and Walden University's Library to conduct this literature search. Many of the articles and literary works included in this study were published from 2015 to present. However, a few sources dated prior to 2015 were included to provide historical context for some of the embedded concepts, coupled with limited research on the variables being explored. Books and peer-reviewed journal articles were the primary sources used. Search keywords included *school connectedness*, *social isolation*, *social workers' significance*, *declining student achievement*, *social worker*, *isolation*, and *adolescence*.

Social Isolation in Middle Schools

Social isolation is occurring at higher rates throughout America's middle schools (London & Ingram, 2018). According to Wonget al. (2019), young people who encounter social isolation describe their experiences as having limited social interactions with others or being withdrawn from others for a long period of time. In this study, educational theorists analyzed the experiences of youth who isolated themselves at home or from others; they defined social withdrawal to include four components (time, place,

social relations, and social status), and how having qualified professionals work with youth positively help students reengage (Wong et al., 2019). The implications of social isolation include mental health effects, physical health effects, and academic effects.

Mental Effects

Issues involving children, in most cases, are identified in the schoolhouse first, especially mental health concerns (Eklund et al., 2020; Lyon & Bruns, 2019). Social workers are required to complete specialized training to meet the mental health needs of children (Eklund et al., 2020). Scholars have shown that social workers are the primary school personnel to provide clinical contact to students (Kelly et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2019). Furthermore, social workers reported that only 11% of their caseloads sought outside therapeutic or counseling support (Kelly et al., 2016). This statistic highlights the need for social workers in schools to receive appropriate and aligned professional development.

Social isolation during adolescence has lasting effects (Talmus & Smith, 2015). These effects impact a person's ability to think clearly and perform various tasks. Potential negative mental health effects of social isolation include suicidal tendencies, depression, increased anxiety, lower self-esteem, and sleep disturbances, amongst others (Freer & Evans, 2018). Below are statistics that summarize the impact of social isolation.

Depression, Anxiety, and Lower Self-Esteem. Hall-Lande et al. (2007) and Richard et al. (2017) found that social isolation is significantly associated with higher depressive symptoms and lower self-esteem. The purpose of Hall-Lande et al. (2007) study was to investigate the relationship between social isolation, psychological health,

and protective factors in youth. Protective factors were defined as family connectedness, school connectedness, and academic success (Hall-Lande et al., 2007). Included in the Hall-Land's study were over 4,700 youth in middle and high schools; they responded to survey questions around peer relationships, psychological health, and the human motivation and personality variables. Findings revealed the correlation between social isolation and depressive symptoms, suicide attempts, and low self-esteem (Hall-Lande et al., 2007).

Unaddressed adverse childhood experiences negatively impact individuals' well-being (Matthews, 2019). *The impact of loneliness on self-rated health symptoms among victimized school children*, a study conducted by Lohre (2012) to explore the impact loneliness has on victimized adolescents. Over 400 students in elementary, middle, and high schools completed a linear evaluation to identify and analyze associations between loneliness and health symptoms. The four symptoms included were sadness, anxiety, stomachache, and headache. Lohre (2012) reported that loneliness is significantly associated with sadness and anxiety among children between the ages of 7 and 16 years. Furthermore, Lohre's study purported the positive association between loneliness, victimization, and all four health symptoms (2012).

Sleep Disturbances. Insomnia, sleep apnea, narcolepsy restless leg syndrome (RLS), and parasomnias are amongst the most common sleep disorders. Each of the aforementioned conditions affects the quality of each individual's sleep, timing, or duration of one's sleep (Harris et al., 2013). *Loneliness in the lives of Danish adolescents: Associations with Health and Sleep* was conducted to examine the

relationship between loneliness and health among with investigating the validity of measuring loneliness with a composite score. Researchers used Denmark's archival data, reflective of youth ages, 11-15, responses to the cross-national survey., Health Behavior in School-aged Children (HBSC). Eccles et al., (2020) found a correlation between loneliness and sleep disturbances, in those children with less social interaction took longer to fall asleep.

Suicidal Tendencies.Schinka et al. (2012) worked together to determine the association between loneliness and suicidality during adolescent years. Their study was to address gaps in previous research. Schinka et al. (2012) sought to determine the correlation between loneliness and suicide, via cross-sectional, longitudinal, or both, coupled with whether or not those same variables are influenced by gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Loneliness in middle childhood is associated with suicidal behaviors at age 15 (Schinka et al., 2012).

Social isolation has an increased risk of attempted suicide in adolescent-aged individuals (Hall-Lande et al., 2007). Students need to feel supported at home and school. Students must feel emotionally safe; this helps alleviate feelings of loneliness, especially during the adolescent stages. Secure friendships have the potential to serve as an emotional buffer against anxiety and stress (Hall-Lande et al., 2007). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009) reported suicide as the third leading cause of death among individuals aged 15 and 19 years.

Health Problems. Matthews et al. (2015) conducted a study to determine whether children who are socially isolated early in their schooling develop mental health problems

during their adolescence. Their method included a longitudinal evaluation of over 2,000 children, their mothers, and their teachers over a 12-year period. Mothers and teachers provided reports on their child's social isolation at ages 5 and 12 years, mental health symptoms (mothers and teachers), and students' self-reporting at age 12 years. The researchers also collected home environment data. Lastly, the researchers conducted regression analyses between early family factors, social isolation, and mental health difficulties.

Multiple findings resulted from the longitudinal cohort study (Matthews et al., 2015). At both levels, primary and secondary schools, mental health difficulties resulted from social isolation. Further, students who experienced behavioral problems at age 5 were more susceptible to becoming socially isolated at age 12 (Matthews et al., 2015). Social isolation and mental health concerns coexist in childhood and adolescent years. Although social isolation is not a predictor of declining mental health issues, children who display concerning behaviors early on struggle with addressing social challenges throughout their development.

Physical Effects

Social isolation also leads to challenges with physical health. These challenges include a higher risk of poor cardiovascular health, increased risk of substance abuse, headaches, stomach aches, obesity, higher cholesterol, higher blood pressure, and overall worse physical health (Ingram & London, 2018). Stickley et al. (2014) conducted a study of 4,000 American and Russian students between the ages of 13-15 years, revealing the correlation between loneliness and substance abuse. Likewise, Lohre (2012) conducted

surveys with Norwegian adolescents ranging in age from 7 to 16 years, concluding that loneliness was associated with somatic symptoms, such as stomach aches and headaches. Lastly, adolescent loneliness leads to greater risks for high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and obesity (Goosby et al., 2013; Richard et al., 2017).

Hamming (2019) recently conducted a study to explore health risks associated with social isolationism among young, middle, and old age individuals. The researcher's goal was to narrow the gap of such information in relation to adolescents in European and German speaking countries. The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between social isolation and health conditions in Switzerland. Over 2,000 individuals aged 15 years and older completed the Swiss Health Survey. Hamming's data analysis revealed the following: social isolation steadily increases with age, social isolation has a strong association with poor health conditions, and the socially isolated individuals are at a higher rate of behaving unhealthily. Overall, social isolation is less prevalent at younger ages, but younger children are more susceptible to poor health conditions and behaviors than their older counterparts.

Academic Effects

There are several negative academic effects associated with student perceptions of low school belonging or connectedness. Barriers to academic achievement are of grave concern to all educational stakeholders (Covington, 2016). Ingram and London's (2018) literary analysis of two studies exploring youth outcomes revealed that students who feel socially isolated tend to exhibit lower motivation, engagement, and effort, are less likely to graduate high school, and are more likely to perform poorly on standardized

assessments, have poor attendance, and express less academic satisfaction. Activating prior knowledge, vocabulary development, data analysis, and instructional strategies are all occurrences that take place within a school. Students are more successful when they have a sense of connectedness or belonging in their school.

Loukas et al. (2016) conducted a study on adolescents' internalizing and externalizing problems to explore their experiences of connectedness. The purpose of this study was to examine the time-invariant and time-varying roles of depressive symptoms and externalizing problems in trajectories of student perceived connectedness during middle school; close to 300 students participated in the study over a 3-year period. Overtime, school connectedness declined, coupled with declining student achievement for students with lower rates of connectedness (Loukas et al., 2016). Students become disconnected from school at higher rates during the middle school years.

The Role of the Social Worker

Social worker requirements vary by state, but there are some similarities regarding their training and qualifications. The national School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA, 2020) standards recommended all social workers have a master's degree. Shaffer and Fisher (2017) highlighted the need for social workers to participate in specialized training inclusive of strategies to identify community systems and ensure alignment with families' needs. Cultural diversity, systematic theories, social justice, program assessments and intervention, clinical intervention, and collaboration are among

the skills that social workers need to do their jobs (Gherard & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2018; Richard et al., 2019).

Adolescents, especially those in high-risk home settings, need more support than what teachers alone can provide (Borman et al., 2019). A social worker's overarching goal is to remove barriers to education for students (Covington, 2016). The rates at which students are being displaced impacts the home and school environment (SSWAA, 2020). Social workers serve as a home-school community liaison that advocates on behalf of the student to all stakeholders (i.e., teachers, leaders, organizations, families, etc.). Their goal is to "ensure that students remain in school and graduate, reach their fullest academic potential, and grow socially and emotionally" (Atlanta Public Schools, 2020, p. 1). The different services that social workers provide include advocacy, attendance, crisis response, educational support (i.e., deficits that serve as barriers to the child's cognitive development), mandated reporting, mentoring, homelessness, and medical support (where applicable and allowable; Education Commission of the States, 2020).

Social workers' roles involve bridging gaps between the home and school. Some children are victims of societal acts that impact how students perform academically (Richardson et al., 2019). These professionals must remain cognizant of what is occurring, not only with at-risk students but also those students who are borderline. Social workers not only support students, but also parents, school personnel, community partners, and the school district; the specific services provided to students, include but are not limited to crisis intervention, intervention strategies to increase academic support, conflict resolution and anger management, assistance with child development, and

assisting the child with understanding and accepting themselves and others (SSWAA, 2020).

Social workers are heavily focused on providing individualized supports to at-risk populations affected by poverty, healthcare deficiencies, and environmental violence (Kelly, 2020). Just as all students learn differently, students in challenging home environments need diverse supports. Shaffer and Fisher (2017) highlighted the need for school social workers with all educational stakeholders (e.g., teachers, administration, parents, and others) to provide targeted interventions that have the potential to keep students in school with intentions of successful completion. Social workers support the cognitive development of students, as well as their mental health needs.

The current COVID-19 pandemic coupled with social unrest has led to an increase in mental health concerns (Xiong et al., 2020). Students' needs have heightened as a result of the pandemic. School social workers can assist with bridging the gap with mental health needs of students. *Designing the Future of Children's Mental Health Services* (Lyon et al, 2020) described how human-centered design aligns product development with the needs of the people to use them. When focusing on adolescents' mental health needs, how such products could be used to enhance the services youth receive, inclusive of but not limited to accessibility, effectiveness, and equity (Lyon et al., 2020). Lyon and Bruns (2019) reported that over 18% of students have mental health issues that can lead to major life impairments. In a separate study, it was revealed one in five receive the needed mental health services (Eklund et al., 2020). Additionally, researchers have found that minority and low-income students are at a greater risk of

mental health challenges but receive support at lower rates (Massat et al., 2016; Teasley et al., 2017).

Eklund et al. (2020) provided an overview of the evolution of school mental health needs with support from community providers. Highlighted were the various mental health professionals, such as social workers, psychologists, and counselors. Eklund et al. found only one in five receive the needed mental health services. “Service delivery models that emphasize teaming and collaboration across school, community, and family stakeholders within the system of a multi-tiered public health continuum of promotion, prevention, early intervention, and treatment are increasingly showing positive outcomes for children in need” (Eklund et al., 2020, abstract).

Few researchers have addressed the significance of social workers. Heinrich (2017) completed an evaluation of the impact of social work services in rural school districts with the purpose of evaluating the impact of a pilot program for students whose challenges include one or more of the following: poor school attendance (Bauer et al., 2018), behavior referrals (Borman et al., 2019), or crisis situations (Geary, 2018). Previous researchers have shown that each of these variables negatively impacts student achievement. The results of the 23 student participants revealed students who received social worker interventions had significantly fewer behavior referrals, improved responses during times of crises, and attendance improved (Heinrich, 2017). It is clear that social workers are an asset to assist children with barriers during their middle school years.

Summary

This project's central phenomenon was social workers in the Metro Atlanta area and how they mitigate the social isolationism of middle school students. The purpose of the study was to explore social workers' experiences related to the prevention and mitigation of social isolation of middle school students. Social workers participated in individual interviews to share their views. The academic research available regarding middle school students' social isolation is primarily quantitative; this study was meaningful in the fact that it was qualitative. Section 2 includes the methodology that outlines the design, describes how data was analyzed, and present ethical procedures taken to ensure trustworthiness of data.

Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

Social isolation of adolescents negatively impacts their connectedness, esteem, health, and cognitive development (Talmus, 2019). School is critical to the mental development of children, second only to the family (Lyon et al., 2020). There is a positive correlation between school connectedness and student motivation and achievement (Matthew et al., 2016). As the needs of adolescents evolve, so does the role of social workers. The focus of this project is how social workers can mitigate the impact of social isolation on students' success. In this section, I describe the study's problem, research design, methodology, data analysis, and ethical procedures.

Research Design

Nassaji (2015) explained that the goal of descriptive research is to describe a phenomenon and its characteristics in a naturalistic way. Through this project, I sought to reveal the various tenets of a social worker's role in mitigating barriers to students' success as a result of social isolation. I designed this project with the intent to describe variables without any causality (see Aggarwal & Ranganathan, 2019). Interviews served as the instrument to collect data from a sample of social workers recruited from each of the five major school districts in the Metro Atlanta area. In these different districts, social workers are assigned to one to four schools at a time in their appointed county.

I collected data related to social workers' experiences during the 2020-2021 school year and administered a demographic questionnaire to gather background information for each participant (Appendix A). Participants' open-ended responses to the

interviews revealed their experiences related to the study topic (Appendix B). Open-ended questions allow for a greater variance in responses from participants.

Methodology

Qualitative researchers seek to answer a question, collect evidence, and produce findings that can be influenced further discovery (Hammarberg et al., 2016). I collected qualitative data by conducting semistructured individual interviews. The transcripts of the interviews were subjected to thematic analysis.

Participants

Using Sauro's (2015) framework, I determined that a minimum of five interviews, but no more than 25, served as a sufficient dataset to develop emerging themes. I used purposeful and criterion sampling to identify participants. All participants completed an informed consent and were currently employed as a social worker in a Metro Atlanta area middle school. Each social worker's email address was retrieved from the middle schools' websites and the district's listserve. This information was publicly available in the State of Georgia. After receipt of Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, all participants received an email inclusive of the informed consent form with the expectation for individuals to confirm or reject participation. These sampling procedures aligned with the intent of the project allowing me to select social workers based on when they submitted their informed consent and shared their intent to participate. I sought a minimum of one social worker per participating district.

Instrumentation

During the one-on-one interviews, the respondents were asked to provide background information on their experience as social workers, as well as their role in mitigating the social isolation of middle school students. The interview allowed the participating social workers to share their perspectives and experiences based on several variables, (i.e., the students, teachers, school district, families, etc.). Interview responses reflected the social workers' experiences and perceptions of student social isolation, success, physical and mental health, attendance, and behavior. The initial interview questions served as foundational inquiries, with the potential for follow-up questions to acquire more information.

Ten researcher-developed questions (see Appendix B) were designed based on the criterion summarized in *Designing Instruments for Data Collection* (Creswell, 2012). During the development of the questions, I included major response options, eliminated excessive words, and minimized the use of technical jargon that may be difficult to understand. I initially developed the questions in the fall of 2019 and revised them in Spring 2020. Items were both open- and close-ended, and the scope included both attitudinal and behavioral questions; these items were developed with the intent to acquire specific information regarding social isolation. The social worker questionnaire (Appendix A) is a nominal scale generated to gather specific demographic information on the social worker (i.e., major in undergrad, highest degree completed, and years of experience). A panel of two college professors, three public school administrators, and four social workers—none of whom participated in the actual study—reviewed the

interview questions and provided minor suggestions for improvement. The rationale for semistructured interviews was that they provide two-way communication between the researcher and the participant, allowed for probing questions based on provided responses, offered the space for participants to share sensitive information, and allowed comparative analyses with current, past, and future data (Rabionet, 2011).

Data Analysis

All social workers who participated completed the informed consent form. Both data collection tools can be viewed in the appendices. Participating social workers received the questionnaire via email with a request to schedule their virtual one-on-one interview. The platform was Zoom and Microsoft Teams and was based on social worker's accessibility; both platforms are password-protected. Social workers were given 10 business days from submission of their informed consent to submit their completed questionnaire and schedule their interview.

I developed a script for starting and concluding the interview process. Each participating social worker provided permission for their interview to be recorded. The recordings were only reviewed by me for transcription and in-depth understanding of the content shared. I conducted data analyses to distill the social workers' responses into major themes using the following steps.

- I transcribed each interview personally.
- I read each interview protocol and transcript.
- I categorized responses as positive, negative, or neutral.
- I reread the transcription to develop themes.

- I cross-referenced themes to interview questions.
- I asked participants to review transcriptions for accuracy and trustworthiness and confirmed themes.
- I finalized themes.

The themes were grouped by participant and by the interview question that they answered. Direct quotations were used to highlight the diverse perspectives shared.

Ethical Procedures

I strived to collect all data in an ethical manner. Each social worker's identity was protected, and their opinions, beliefs, and perspectives were respected. Before the project began, all written approvals were received from the IRB. I protected participants' confidentiality using assigned identity codes based on their district and date of interview completion (i.e., CC1120 Clayton County, November 2020). The privacy of the participants was of importance to me; thus, all data remained confidential. No identifying information was shared with other participants or individuals outside of the study. The data are stored in a password-protected file stored on my personal computer in my home office. Additionally, any hard copies containing study materials will remain in a locked file cabinet and securely discarded 5 years after the completion of this study.

Summary

The purpose of this project was to explore the role of social workers in preventing and addressing the social isolation of middle school students. This study's population included five social workers employed in one of five Metro Atlanta school districts during the 2020-2021 school year. I collected data from participating social workers

using two tools: (a) a demographic questionnaire, and (b) a one-on-one interview. In

Section 3, I present and discuss the findings.

Section3: Presentation of the Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study (IRB number05-07-21-0395235) was to explore the role of the social worker as it relates to preventing and addressing the social isolation of middle school students. Data were collected from the information on the participants (Appendix A). I used an interview protocol (Appendix B) to reveal social workers' perspectives regarding their role in the mitigation of social isolationism in middle schools. Interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed for thematization.

RMT),which I used in this study, focuses on the impact relationships have on motivation. The premise is that an individual's growth is positively influenced when there are meaningful relationships present. When exploring the social worker's role in the advancement of at-risk youth, it is imperative they receive added layers of support for individuals that they are serving to a sure the youth have functional relationships.Social isolationism at the middle school level is proliferating in the pandemic, thus the need for this study. Identifying factors that contribute to the phenomenon is important for understanding a social worker's role in mitigating this phenomenon.

The following research question guided this study:

RQ: For social workers in the Metro Atlanta area, what themes emerge regarding their work to mitigate the social isolationism of middle school students

Findings are arranged in five sections. The first section provides descriptive statistics of the social workers' demographics.

Participant Demographics

Five middle school social workers participated in the study. Of the participants, 40% ($n=2$) majored in social work as an undergraduate, whereas 3 (60%) did not. A majority ($n=3$, 60%) of respondents had been working in an educational setting as a social worker for 0 to 3 years, 20% ($n=1$) for 4–7 years, and the other individual for 12–15 years. The same was true for their tenure at their current school: 60% ($n=3$) were there for 0–3 years, 20% ($n=1$) for 4–7 years, and 20% ($n=1$) 12–15 years. The participants' education was reported as 100% ($n=5$) having a master's degree.

Data Analysis Techniques

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of the social worker as it relates to preventing and addressing the social isolationism of middle school students. Little was known about the role social workers play in preventing and addressing the social isolation of middle school students. I used a qualitative research design to answer the primary research question by collecting data from current practitioners that produced findings highlighting the significance of social workers in addressing social isolationism at the middle school level. The findings also highlighted critical factors for elementary and high school students as well. In this section I explain the process and summarize the findings.

Eight school social workers were invited to participate in the study via email. Their emails were available via the school or district websites. Because the information was in the public record, no permissions were needed. Five of the eight social workers agreed to participate as evidenced by their completion and submission of the informed

consent form. The other three social workers did not respond. Due to the minimal requirement being met, they were not contacted again.

I scheduled the individual interviews based on the availability the social workers provided. Thirty days after the invited five social workers were recruited, they were interviewed to obtain their perceptions regarding their work in the mitigation of middle school student social isolationism. The interviews lasted 1 hour with each participant. To allow the social workers to respond to the critical components of their work (i.e., common issues with social isolation, the mental, physical, and academic impacts, safeguards that are in place to address the issues, the social worker's professional development, and the resources available to them), I asked the initial questions and provided the participants the opportunity to elaborate and share information they found pertinent to their work. Each interview was transcribed, analyzed, and coded using the assistance of MAXQDA software to identify themes in the responses (see Creswell & Ryan, 2018).

Each interview was conducted individually, transcribed, and analyzed separately and collectively. I replayed each interview multiple times; the first time was to guarantee all information was properly transcribed, the second time was to ensure understanding of each participant's perspective, and the third was to start developing themes. The themes were developed based on Braun and Clarke (2014) 6-step thematic analysis. I used inductive analysis with this 6-step approach. I developed codes and themes based on participants' responses. I used subcodes when a code had enough variation in data from

participant responses to provide a clearer depiction by breaking the idea down into smaller components (see Braun & Clarke, 2019).

The overall finding was that participants felt equipped to address student needs despite there being unmet student needs regarding social isolation. In the examination of each interview question, participants' responses were thematized into six overall themes: students' concerns, unaddressed needs of students, mental health concerns, mitigation of social isolation, the social worker's role, and social workers' efficacy (see Creswell & Ryan, 2018). Students' concerns included common issues among middle schoolers and how schools and districts respond. The second theme highlighted missed opportunities in the school system and if social workers were equipped to address them. The third theme addressed the impact social isolationism has on adolescents. Social workers' mitigation of social isolation was the next theme. The role and efficacy of social workers were the last two themes.

Findings

Though there were 10 interview questions; based on the content of the responses, the questions were separated into six themes.

Table 1*Overall Themes Related to Interview Questions*

Theme	Interview questions
Student concerns	1, 2, 3
Unaddressed needs of students	4
Mental health concerns	5, 6
Mitigating social isolationism	7
Social worker's role	8, 9
Social worker's efficacy	10

Table 2 illustrates a summation of the participants' responses. Included are the following: theme, code, and subcode. Their responses highlight connection, learning loss, social-emotional learning, and trauma, along with the lack of coping skills. According to the participants, community engagement, consistency, discipline, social interaction, and trauma-informed care are needs currently not being addressed. Regarding the mental health of middle school students, educational stability, homelessness, lack of resources, learning, due to the factmental problems delay students' academic performance and social interaction were identified as contributory factors. There was a myriad of factors shared in regard to the school and district responses to mitigation strategies, a lack of resources, individualized strategies, consistent check-ins, graduation rate, and support from the school and districts. Lastly, the social workers felt confident in their ability to seek needed resources, do their best daily, and attend meaningful professional development.

Table 2*Data Analysis Summary*

Research Question Overall Finding Theme Codes	<i>n</i> of participants contributing	<i>n</i> of transcript excerpts included
RQ social workers' role in the mitigation of social isolation	5*	64*
social workers feel equipped despite unmet student needs regarding social isolation	5*	64*
feeling equipped as a social worker	5*	11*
<i>adept at seeking resources</i>	4	4
<i>doing the best, we can</i>	3	3
<i>PD accessible and useful</i>	4	4
largest areas of concern	5*	7*
<i>connection</i>	2	2
<i>learning loss-virtual education</i>	2	2
<i>social-emotional learning</i>	2	2
<i>trauma and lack of coping skills</i>	1	1
mitigating social isolation is a shared effort	5*	26*
<i>district-school addressing social isolation</i>	5	9
<i>district boosting access to resources for students</i>	1	1
<i>implementing social-emotional learning</i>	2	2
<i>no mitigation strategies</i>	1	1
<i>regular check-ins at school level</i>	1	1
<i>school rather than district-wide mitigation</i>	3	3
<i>school recognition-graduation caravans</i>	1	1
<i>personal role</i>	5*	17*
<i>advocate establishing relationships-enhancing community</i>	3	4
<i>finding-using new strategies</i>	3	3
<i>practical needs of students</i>	2	2

Research Question Overall Finding Theme Codes	<i>n</i> of participants contributing	<i>n</i> of transcript excerpts included
<i>practicing self-care</i>	1	1
<i>social and emotional needs</i>	4	7
most common concern for student mental health	5*	8*
<i>educational stability</i>	1	1
<i>homelessness</i>	1	1
<i>lack of resources</i>	1	1
<i>mental health impacts learning and social interaction</i>	4	5
student needs not being addressed	5*	12*
<i>community engagement-exposure</i>	2	3
<i>consistency and discipline</i>	1	1
<i>current needs have been addressed</i>	1	1
<i>social interaction</i>	2	3
<i>Trauma informed care</i>	2	4

Note. * Indicates aggregated totals

In the next section, I discuss the themes and illustrate them through direct quotes from participants. Some of the quotes have been edited for clarity.

Theme 1: Student Concerns

Five social workers provided details that illuminate their largest concerns for the middle school students they service. The social worker's ability to identify areas of concerns for students is critical. The participants emphasized the importance of understanding the concerns of students and how the concerns impact students as a whole. Social Worker 3 stated,

I would say the biggest concern I have in my middle school is connection... It's kind of hard to connect with certain kids, building trusting relationships, and connecting with them so I can better serve them. So, these kids seem like it's harder to figure out what's going on with them. They don't have the relationship with the staff to be able to tell you what they need.

Social Worker 4 reflected on the impact attendance has on student engagement and distance learning. This led to an increase of suicide ideation as well.

Social Worker 5 stated,

My biggest area of concern, for middle school students, are making sure that we can identify who they are, and ensure they develop appropriately. We must provide them with social emotional learning and life skills that they are going to need as they move to the next level, that they are able to practice the resilience that we say children have and that they are able to address their issues independently. Helping them to work with their feelings and understanding developing coping skills.

Social workers are clear on the explicit and implicit needs of middle schoolstudents. Connectedness, with the environment (while at school), with themselves (self-awareness and emotional intelligence) and engagement with all stakeholders are grave concerns for social workers. The research question aligned to student concerns, revealed common factors that heightened with the pandemic. Students struggling with building meaningful relationships, interacting with themselves and others negatively impact their ability to develop cognitively (Wascher et al., 2018). This has the potential

to impact the quality of services social workers provide if students are unable to connect with others. The impact social media has on children is alarming and creates additional challenges for all stakeholders.

Theme 2: Unaddressed Needs of Student

The second theme came about because I wanted to gain a greater understanding of the need's students had that were not being addressed. According to the participants, understanding and knowing what the students' needs are is important in their ability to mitigate the social isolationism that occurs in middle schools. Four out of five participants agreed that there were unaddressed needs of students with one participant reporting there were no existing unaddressed needs for the students she services.

Social Worker 2 stated, "Consistency and Discipline. Teaching values, real life consequences." Social Worker 3 stated, "I would probably say, like social outlet. Like I said whether its students being moved around and that is an issue in or out of the pandemic." Lastly, Social Worker 4 stated, "The biggest need in Henry County, is social interaction. They don't have a lot of resources, they've been working on opening the Boys and Girls Club down here for two years, still not open."

One commonality between the three social workers' responses in the manner which middle school students interact socially. Middle school students start determining who they are at the middle school level, and that is guided through appropriate discipline and character education. Students with limited outlets struggle with the appropriate methods in handling issues, resolving conflicts, handling problems, and asking for help. Though there are commonalities among most of the responses provided, if this is

reflective of most social workers, the concern would then be their efficacy in assisting middle school students with mitigating social isolationism.

Furthermore, the unaddressed needs of the student vary depending on the school district. There are concerns and a need for teachers to be equipped to provide trauma informed care due to the fact many of the students are dealing with traumatic issues without support. Additional concerns related to exclusionary discipline, the school to prison pipeline, as well as the absence of restorative practices are evident. During the adolescent phase, it is imperative students see the same consequence for the same offense, regardless of race, academic ability, and economic status (Brent, 2017). Though parents are ultimately responsible for their children's development, schools must bridge the gap and embed life lessons into their day-to-day teaching and learning experiences.

Theme 3: Mental Health Concerns

This third theme emerged as participants shed light on the mental health effects students experience because of isolation. When the individual interviews were facilitated, I asked each participant about the mental health concerns of their students. Four of the five participants agreed about the presence of mental health concerns with one participant expressing not having any issues with social isolation.

Social Worker 2 stated, "Students become depressed because of external and internal factors. Mental health problems cause a myriad of concerns (i.e., delay academic performance, headaches, somatic symptoms, and sleeping issues)." Social Worker 4 stated,

In our district, some kids wake up alone and depressed. When they're placed in a social situation, they immediately become anxious. They are not experienced or equipped to handle situations. Physically, it can look like hyperactivity, which can easily lead to classroom disruptions

Social Worker 5 stated, "A lot of kids have anxiety or suffer from depression. Quite a few of the students I support suffer from mental anguish or displaced anger.

The mental, physical, and academic effects revealed were consistent throughout each response. Being withdrawn was another indicator of concerns. What was interesting in each social worker's dialogue, was the importance of asking and understanding the "why" behind students' actions or the lack thereof. It appeared that social workers were more in tune to what students were not saying and how that impacted their cognitive performance.

Theme 4: Mitigating Social Isolationism

The fourth theme emerged as the participants provided an understanding to what safeguards they felt should be put into place by the school or district to prevent or mitigate the social isolationism of middle school students. The following direct quotes expanded on the participants experiences. Social Worker 5 stated,

Well like I said before informing, the teachers about this trauma informed practice is something needed. Piggybacking again, raising awareness about social isolation will help them to understand how to deal with the kids in the classroom. In our district, we had a training yesterday called *Connections Matter*, it's a new program they recently adopted called *Handle with Care, Henry*. This will help us

notate which kids have experienced. Though we won't know what trauma they've experienced, we will know to handle them with care. I think this is a good preventative method to alleviate some of our many experiences of social isolation.

Social Worker 1 stated,

I can't really speak on the district, but at my school, I would say the counseling department as well as myself. Our school nurse also serves as a support team member to better serve the student. One intricate component of my school, that operates as a wraparound service, is that some of the schools in our district (DeKalb) have counseling services that come to the school. This provides an opportunity for them to meet with students.

Social Worker 4 stated,

Oh, I have social work groups, with our social emotional learning groups. The weekly groups with them, individual services where they need one on one time with me to just process feelings and discuss different things, but I don't go too deep, though, they want to talk about the trauma issues they've experienced. We do different events at the school every six weeks to keep them engaged.

Evidenced in each participant's response in the lack of knowledge regarding social isolationism and trauma informed practices. Though there are some safeguards in place, the needs of students are only being addressed, at large on the surface. Teachers and leaders, alike, need professional development to ensure they are meeting the social and emotional needs of students. According to the participant's responses, preventing and mitigating social isolation of middle school students are parts of their daily tasks. Social

workers can work with students to bridge the social isolation concerns, but it will require the work of all stakeholders. There is an increase of programs being developed to address trauma, empathy, social isolationism, etc.; however, schools must include the appropriate professional learning and garner input from students.

Theme 5: Social Worker's Role

The fifth theme emerged as the participants provided details and shed light on their roles and responsibilities in mitigation of the social isolation of middle school students. Social worker 1 stated,

I try to provide a very warm environment for students as well as the staff, because sometimes it is staff members that need a break from things. It's a program called *Donors Choose* that allows individuals to support your request through a grant-like structure, without all the paperwork. 2 years ago, I requested a sofa. It is currently in my office with pillows with positive quotes on them. Children, and adults like to do things with their hands to calm them down. I've incorporated stress balls to help alleviate stress that can help with stressors. I have two storage bins for uniforms, that outside agencies provide, as some of our children need the necessities to even attempt to come to school. Not having what they need can be a contributing factor to isolating themselves from others.

Social Worker 3 stated the significance of building relationships with students so they can be honest and engage in authentic dialogue. Social Worker 5 stated,

We do a lot of mentoring activities and sit in circles to allow them to converse with one another. We try to encourage them to engage with each other. When they

get in circles, that's when they start to blossom in group settings, as they engage with different champions. In our check-ins, we reflect on the social emotional learning tasks they participate in. SEL is now a part of our curriculum.

Though social workers have very specific roles, evidenced in their responses was their flexibility in meeting the diverse needs of the students they serve. On the job training is a non-negotiable as a social worker. Other educational stakeholders may not be aware of the significance in their role and the need for specificity in their approach. What was also clear, based on their responses, was the need to bridge the home-school gap, on behalf of their students. Whether it was inclusive of identifying services to assist the parent with homelessness, or providing transportation support, the social workers had the mentality of getting it done for their students. Social workers also enjoyed being able to interact with their students, outside of the classroom environment, but preferred small group settings.

Theme 6: Social Worker's Efficacy

The final theme resulted from understanding the impact of social worker's efficacy. Additional resources are needed as resources are limited. Social workers provide support services, to students, through resources provided by colleagues, former employers, community members and other existing relationships.

Social worker 2 stated,

As social workers, we are creative in locating services. We make connections and keep them with our colleagues and other professionals, to ensure that we meet the needs of our students. We pride ourselves on having community connections and

linking our students with service providers to meet the needs of our students, while ensuring their needs are not overlooked or neglected.

Social Worker 1 stated,

Yes, like I mentioned before the homeless liaison, they do have some funds, like when the children need school supplies and book bags, hygiene kits, is grant funded which is how something that they are purchasing be able to have access to.

Social Worker 3 stated, one of the wraparound services provided is addressing homelessness. The homeless liaison receives funds to purchase students' school supplies and hygiene kits. Social Worker 4, stated,

I work well with the resources I have. I think I have an advantage because as a Clayton County employee that's placed in Henry County, I use those resources. I call my Clayton County social workers, other colleagues in the education field, along with my colleagues in the medical field since that is also a part of my work. As a result, I have access to a multiplicity of resources. The best things about being a social worker is that not only are we advocates, but we are also very resourceful. I'm going to always find a way to get the resources I need to serve children well. Building meaningful relationships, with community partners, is critical. They know I'm friendly and personable, so when I need something, they don't have an issue with helping me or referring me to the right direction to get what I need.

It is clear the impact relationships have on the mitigation of social isolation in middle schools. Focusing on RMT, Desi and Ryan (2014) identified autonomy and need satisfaction in close relationships is a necessity or positive relationship outcomes.

Meaningful relationships or relationship autonomy assists in individuals decreasing their defenses and ego. This helps students open up, coupled with allowing social workers the opportunity to have critical conversations. Relationship autonomy also contributes to one's motivation, growth, self-discovery, and exploration.

The participating social workers made it very clear, throughout their responses, the importance of relationships to students' development. High quality or high value relationships must not only exist with social workers, but all stakeholders (i.e., teachers, administration, parents, community members, etc.). Based on their responses, for students to feel connected, they must experience self-determination, support provision, and relationship autonomy and support provision (Hadden et al., 2015) within their relationships.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of the social worker, as they relate to preventing and addressing the social isolationism of middle school students. The overarching finding revealed that although the needs of students, regarding social isolation, are unmet, social workers have the necessary training and support to bridge students' gaps. Though the needs of students have expanded, social workers described their impact in addressing and mitigating social isolationism. They identify resources, work with stakeholders to nurture the home-school connection, advocate for children, and participate in differentiated professional learning. Section 4 will summarize the study with an introduction, application to professional ethics in social work, practice recommendations, and implications for social change.

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

In Section 4, I address the application of the findings to professional ethics in social work practice, recommendations for research and practical application, and implications for social change. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore social workers' experiences in the mitigation of the social isolationism of middle school students. The RMT was used as the foundational theory to highlight the impact relationships have on a person's motivation to curtail social isolation. This study is significant due to the possibility of highlighting not only the importance of school social workers, but also the identification of the unmet needs of middle students experiencing social isolation. It is not known the role social workers play in preventing and addressing the social isolation of middle school students. The need for this study became increasingly evident throughout the exploration, as did the increasing needs of adolescents in dealing with social isolationism. Overall, the findings support the belief that social workers feel equipped to help student despite the unmet needs of middle school students' social isolation.

Application to the Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice

Social workers are bound by ethical principles as credentialed and licensed professionals. As mandated reporters, it is their duty to share the needs of the most at-risk students and advocate for addressing their unmet needs. The social worker's commitment to general and cultural competence in best serving their clients are critical. This study can be used to highlight gaps in current social work practice, as well as the types of professional development needed by social workers and, possibly, other educational

stakeholders (i.e., teachers, administrators, district personnel, etc.) to positively impact the social isolation middle school students experience.

Social workers and their supervisors could also use this study to identify alternative approaches to current issues of students. The physical, mental, academic, and social-emotional needs of students should be addressed from the lens of cultural responsiveness. This requires social workers to have challenging dialogues with teachers, administrators, counselors, parents, and/or district officials. Social isolation, or the heightened belief of being alone, negatively impacts adolescents' growth in all facets (e.g., academically, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally).

Recommendations for Social Work Practice

The impact social isolationism has on middle school students is considerable (Hämmig, 2019). The role social workers play in addressing this phenomenon can help improve the quality of life for at-risk students. The focus of this study was to identify perspectives, experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of social workers in the field of education. Based on the findings of this descriptive exploration, the recommendations for social work practice include the following.

Replicate the Study Using Elementary and High School Social Workers

Focusing solely on middle school social workers prevented me from exploring components of the impact pre- and secondary educational structures have. Also excluded was how the roles of social workers vary based on the age of students. The quality of the educational setting can be enhanced through use of social workers at the elementary level. Taking this approach may minimize the level of educational reform at the middle

school level. While identifying the perennial needs of high school students can increase students' post-secondary options (Finigan-Carr&Shaia, 2018). Addressing the social isolationism of children has the potential to change the trajectory of their life after they graduate. Evaluating the role of social workers in the mitigation of social isolation at all levels has the potential to increase students' overall productivity along with illuminating social workers' significance in their work with at-risk students (Kelly, 2020). This recommendation would also allow for comparative analysis per grade band.

Include Schools with Various Social-Emotional Learning Models in Place

Students learning in an environment they deem is safe is conducive to their achievement (Kibriya& Jones, 2021). The *Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning* (CASEL) developed a framework to highlight self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness as components of the model (CASEL, 2021). Social workers can serve as an added value to assist students with meeting the expectations of this model. Programs with social-emotional learning at the core assist with supporting children to understand who they are and what their needs are. Embracing students' individuality while celebrating their uniqueness supports their overall growth (Kibriya& Jones, 2021).

Include Schools with Diverse Professional Development Offerings for Social Workers

Professional learning or on the job training to increase productivity is necessary (Minzhanov et al., 2016). Though social workers felt equipped to handle concerns of middle school students, it is possible that their efficacy can improve with more

meaningful and job-specific training. Social isolationism has increased during the pandemic, so it is possible that social workers have not experienced all the variables of or result from social isolationism. The professional development models selected should be inclusive of social workers at all educational levels (i.e., elementary, middle, and high schools).

Include Social Workers That Work in Diverse Settings (i.e., Rural, Urban, Suburban)

Just as the needs of students change based on experiences, the same is true with social workers. Roles vary based on demographics, surroundings, and an array of other variables. Social isolation may look different in diverse settings, which would change the needs of social workers to address issues of students (Walters et al., 2019). Widening the scope of the study will avail the field of social work to information not otherwise available. I intend to provide a copy of the study to the district office whose social workers participated, as well as submit proposals to present at some upcoming national conferences for social workers. Social isolation will not recede in the near term, but it is my hope that this study sparks a targeted focus for social workers on the mitigation of social isolationism with middle school students.

Implications for Social Change

Social workers are responsible for assisting schools with transforming culture. Social workers have multiple roles; however, one of their primary duties includes bridging the gap between the home and school. Collaboration is the opposite of social isolationism.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model highlights how individuals operate with the systems surrounding them and the impact of those systems on their growth (Guy-Evans, 2020). Aligning this model with the three practices of social work highlight the micro, mezzo, and macro:

- Micro, working directly with the social workers whose students struggle with social isolationism. This could include the students, their families, and /or their teachers in regard to social services available for behavioral needs, or emotional disorders.
- Mezzo (or meso), including social workers hosting seminars for the community at large or schoolwide professional learning sessions for stakeholders identifying issues not being addressed by the school and/or nonprofits.
- Macro, using this study as a foundation to bring awareness to the significance of and need for social workers in every school and their impact on school improvement and the graduation rate. Policies can be crafted to include social workers at every level, coupled with funding of trauma-informed training for all.

The phenomenon of social isolation is evolving, but it is clear that unaddressed it can have a lasting effect on anyone. Students who do not have an outlet for self-expression and creativity or do not feel they have anyone in their corner tend to act out, which may have other implications; social workers who are not equipped or properly trained to address the needs of students may fail to positively intervene (Kibriya & Jones,

2021). Social isolation of middle school students is increasing while the number of social workers in schools is declining.

Summary

Social workers' abilities to address the social isolation of middle school students have lasting impacts. Social workers positively impact the human interactions of adolescents while mitigating the effects of social isolation. The most effective way to ensure social workers address the social isolationism of middle school students is to equip them with the necessary tools and training to support adolescents. Not only is social isolation one of the critical challenges for social work, but it is directly aligned to youth development, social responses to changing environment, and access to long and productive lives (Hämmig, 2019).

The findings of the study resulted from data garnered through completion of semi structured interviews (Appendix B). This data provided support for future research on the various educational levels of students and roles of social workers based on demographics what is in place in schools (e.g., social-emotional learning), and professional development opportunities. Though the social workers in this study felt equipped to address social isolation, they were clear that students had unmet needs in that area. The results suggest that regardless of the various roles of social workers, they support students as best they can with what they have. Furthermore, additional studies need to be conducted to further explore the extent to which social workers' roles impact the social isolation of middle school students.

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Appendix A: Social Work Questionnaire

1. Did you major in social work while completing your undergraduate studies?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

2. How long have you been a social worker, in the educational setting?
 - a. 0 – 3 years
 - b. 4 – 7 years
 - c. 8 – 11 years
 - d. 12 – 15 years
 - e. Over 15 years

3. How long have you been at your current middle school?
 - a. 0 – 3 years
 - b. 4 – 7 years
 - c. 8 – 11 years
 - d. 12 – 15 years
 - e. Over 15 years

4. What is your highest level of education completed?
 - a. Baccalaureate
 - b. Masters
 - c. Specialist
 - d. Doctorate

Appendix B: Social Worker Interview Questions

Social Worker Interview Questions

1. What are the most common issues you have to address as a social worker?
2. What is your biggest area of concern for the middle school students you serve?
3. How does your school or district address social isolation in middle schools?
4. What is the biggest need that you have noticed that your students require, but is not being addressed? Are you equipped to handle these concerns, as a social worker?
5. What mental, physical, and academic effects do you notice, as a result of social isolation?
6. Based on the mental, physical, and academic effects observed, what do you need to prevent the continuation of social isolationism?
7. What safeguards need to be put into place, at your school, or in your district to prevent social isolation?
8. What do you currently do, in your role, as social worker, to prevent or mitigate social isolationism?
9. Are there opportunities for professional development based on the services you need to provide to students on your caseload?
10. Are there resources available based on what you need to best serve your students?