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A phenomenological study of workplace empowerment and self-efficacy of school social workers

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Walden University
2014

Abstract

A Phenomenological Study of Workplace

Empowerment and Self-Efficacy of School Social Workers

by

Kathy J. Minnich

MSW, Temple University, 1998

BA, Shippensburg University, 1993

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Educational Psychology

Walden University

February 2014

Abstract

 The divergent goals of educational institutions versus those of school social workers can

lead to school social workers feeling disenfranchised. A major premise in the profession

of social work is empowerment; yet, practitioners of school social work report feeling

marginalized, misunderstood, underappreciated, and at-risk for elimination, common

expressions of a lack of empowerment and self-efficacy. The experiences of school social

workers with empowerment and self-efficacy within the workplace have been overlooked

as a potential factor in the ability of these workers to empower and serve their clients.

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived and share experience of this

population. The conceptual framework for the study was based on the theories of self-

efficacy and empowerment. A qualitative method of phenomenological inquiry was used

to gain insight into the meaning ascribed to the empowerment and self-efficacy

experiences of this population, as well as the resulting thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and

implications. Interviews, observation, reflective journaling, and thematic content

analysis were incorporated with a purposeful, criterion-based sample of 12 school

social workers located within the state of Pennsylvania. Data were analyzed using

Moustakas's method of content analysis and the study produced 6 themes and 3

subthemes. The findings indicate that school social workers can become more

empowered and efficacious through communication with stakeholders and advocacy

efforts. Social change implications of this study may include informing pupil-services

professionals with a better understanding of these characteristics, thereby enhancing their

contribution to public schools, as well as their service delivery to children and families.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my parents, Thomas and Mary (Myers) Brungard for instilling in me an attitude of perseverance and an incredible work ethic. I love and honor you both and appreciated sincerely the drive and determination that you displayed for me throughout life.

Acknowledgements

This section is bittersweet to write. There are many individuals that come to my mind as I attempt to express my gratitude to those who inspired me.

The first are the incredibly talented, passionate, and intelligent school social workers who allowed me into their worlds. I became enthralled with each and every one of you and realized that we are a smart, creative, dedicated, and dynamic group of people. You are impacting the world daily by those you serve. Thank you for the work you do!

Mya and Max, my children, you bless me daily in more ways than I deserve. It is a pure joy being your mommy and I pray to be as good to you as you are to me. As a family, we have made sacrifices so that I could achieve this goal and I know you, like I, will be pleased to never hear the word dissertation again.

Shawn, my husband, I appreciate the support that you gave me during this process.

Dr. Jay Greiner, my gifted and kind chairperson. I am so grateful that our paths crossed. You are direct, supportive, sincere, and strategic with your advice and guidance. This process was made as painless as possible because of you.

My committee members, Dr. Robin Friedman and Dr.Sreeroopa Sarkar. Your expertise and guidance was so appreciated.

To my sideline cheerleaders who were there for my goal and no personal gain, my friends!

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

School social workers have provided services removing barriers impeding the ability of children to access and benefit from traditional education for over a century (Frey et al., 2012) The profession of school social work is commonly recognized as a subspecialty of the larger field of general social work (Kelly, 2008). More than 37,000 school social workers currently practice within the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, 2010); internationally, more than 50,000 (Huxtable, 2006) serve schools within 40 countries. School social workers are highly trained and skilled professionals, similar to school counselors and school psychologists; however, when operating within schools, they are in a host setting where the primary goal is the education of children.

School social workers are unique in that they provide human services and mental-health services within an environment where the primary goals include the teaching of reading, critical-thinking skills, and functioning within a global marketplace. These professionals serve as mental-health practitioners within school systems estimating that up to 20% of all children would benefit from some form of mental-health intervention; 70% of these students never receive this needed support (O'Brien et al., 2011; Raines & Dibble, 2011). School reform and various related mandates have placed enormous stress on schools who have gradually become the default providers of mental-health services for children (Altshuler & Reid-Webb, 2009). Such legislation has forced educators to recognize the importance of emotion, motivation, and parental attitudes on student

achievement (Bye & Alvarez, 2007). In many instances, the only contact children and their families experience with a mental-health professional is through the school system (O'Brien et al., 2011).

Social workers assist children with many challenges, both internal and external to the school, often increasing academic success for the children they serve (Openshaw, 2008). School social workers also often work with the families of students to connect them to vital school and community resources. As the struggles encountered by children, youth, and families intensify and increase in number, the vital role these professionals play in their lives concurrently increases proportionately (Frey et al., 2012; Yamano, 2011). It is evident through research and media that U.S. society introduces increasingly complex challenges on an ongoing basis.

School social workers are charged with meeting the mental-health, physical, and emotional needs of students. The interventions they administer are designed to enable students to optimize their academic success (O'Brien et al., 2011) and to remove barriers to learning (Frey et al., 2012). However, such services can only be provided at a professional cost to these workers due to the host setting, wherein they must take direction from individuals external to the field of social work and who frequently possess no understanding of the practice (Openshaw, 2008). Despite the increase in school social workers and literature recognizing the need for these professionals within public schools (Frey et al., 2012; No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB], 2001; Yamano, 2011), school social workers can be particularly vulnerable to being underappreciated and misunderstood (Altshuler & Reid-Webb, 2009).

The divergent goals of educational institutions versus those of school social workers can lead to professional tension and dissonance among these social workers, frequently impinging upon their work (Link, 1991; Openshaw, 2008). Attempting to meet the competing needs, school social workers are often left feeling disenfranchised. These workers commonly express concerns that amplify their lack of empowerment within the workplace (Agresta, 2004; Altshuler & Reid-Webb, 2009; Bye, Shepard, Partridge, & Alvarez, 2009; Garrett, 2004), which in turn, presents a lack of self-efficacy (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010). Positive social change can result through an in-depth understanding of these deficiencies. Information toward this end could also inform the future practice of school social workers and other service professionals within the realm of education, ultimately empowering these workers and enhancing their overall position within the public-school setting and their service delivery to children and their families.

Background of the Problem

Child development manifests primarily through the interaction and experiences within the home and school settings (Massat, Constable, McDonald, & Flynn, 2009; Openshaw, 2008). The impact of the home environment on the development of children is widely recognized; yet, as noted earlier, public schools have become the default provider of mental and behavioral health services for children. To assist with environmental barriers toward the academic success of students, many schools have hired social workers, counselors, and psychologists (Altshuler & Reid Webb, 2009) with the understanding that, for some children, a convergence of education, environment, family, and community is needed (Bye & Alvarez, 2007). School social workers can develop in-

depth relationships with parents through home visits and services outside the school such as transportation to medical appointments (Openshaw, 2008). These workers perform their duties while employing elements of ecological systems theory, which encompasses all aspects of the life of a child being served.

School social workers are often on the "front lines," interceding for children struggling with mental illness, behavioral issues, and environmental challenges. Schools are expected to be "corrective institutions" and do play a major role in assisting children who have acquired some understanding of proper behavior from their parents or other home caretakers (Anand, 2010; Gandhi, 1995). To assist with home, community, and school connections, many schools have enlisted the assistance of school social workers. School social work, as a practice, can be traced back to the 1900s. However, when related programs aimed at addressing student and family concerns external to the school are established within schools, it is often done in a fragmented and rushed manner (Adelman & Taylor, 2000). Minimal time and research are devoted to the optimal way to proceed with program implementation, required credentials, a clear definition of the respective program, and/or programmatic expectations. This is not surprising because the decision makers within the realm of education are typically educators. Educators are not human-service or mental-health practitioners, and the decision to dedicate resources to these services reduces resources dedicated to the primary initiative of the institution, which is educating children.

Social Workers in School

A fragmented and rushed approach to the development of school social-work services can lead to struggles for the practitioners. A number of studies have reported that school social workers often feel marginalized, misunderstood, and underappreciated (Dupper, 2003; Garrett, 2006; Whittlesey-Jerome, 2010). This is a result of social-work practice within a setting hosted by a school (Dupper, 2003); the divergent goals of the education and human-services fields (Openshaw, 2008); inadequate supervision (Acker, 2004; Shim, Hwang, & Lee, 2009); educator perceptions of social services as a luxury or auxiliary support (To, 2006); role ambiguity (Massat et al., 2009); and a lack of advocacy efforts and voice for school social workers (Whittlesey-Jerome, 2013).

Existing literature has underscored the notion that even those individuals charged with supporting school social workers possess limited understanding of the professional job duties with which these workers are charged. Due to the complex nature of the role, as well as the fact that school social workers are typically supervised by individuals who are not human-service professionals, those supervising these workers often lack a clear understanding of the goals of social work (Gleason-Leyba, 2009). Tower (2000) noted that school administrators who are unfamiliar with the role of school social workers tend to have negative attitudes toward these workers. School social workers often do not report service outcomes (Bye et al., 2009) and struggle to advocate for themselves within the highly political environment of public education (To, 2009). Consequently, their voice and sense of empowerment and self-efficacy is limited within the workplace.

Self-Efficacy and Empowerment

According to Bandura (1986, 1995), self-efficacy is defined as beliefs surrounding the personal ability to successfully perform a given behavior. It involves a generative capability to organize component, cognitive, social, and behavioral skills into integrated courses of action to serve innumerable purposes. According to this theory, individuals who possess a higher level of self-efficacy set higher goals; exhibit stronger commitment, motivation, resilience, and perseverance; and are therefore more likely to reach their goals (Bodenhorn, Wolfe, & Airen, 2010). With the myriad struggles inherent to the role of a school social worker, how the sense of self-efficacy is impacted in these workers is an important consideration. It is unclear how those who struggle with feelings of being misunderstood, disenfranchised, and at risk for elimination can be empowered or efficacious as social-work practitioners.

Studies have shown that methods of empowerment operate through the self-efficacy mechanism (Ozer & Bandura, 1990). Individuals who judge themselves to be highly efficacious cope better with negative and challenging situations. Environmental factors, such as clearly defined programmatic and role expectations, enhance self-efficacy within the workplace (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy has been linked with empowered workers (Breeding, 2008). Indeed, it is not uncommon for school social workers to progress through their workdays with little sense of empowerment or self-efficacy. This is ironic, given the fact that the profession of social work is built upon principles of empowerment (Wallach & Meuller, 2006) and self-efficacy is a "common thread" through the healing process of clients. Struggles inherent to the role of school social

workers often impede the sense of empowerment for these professionals (To, 2006).

Consequently, it was helpful to explore empowerment and self-efficacy of this population

within the workplace.

Power includes the capacity to mobilize resources to accomplish work

(Sarmiento, Laschinger, & Iwasiw, 2004). Empowerment was defined by Hur (2006) as a

process because it occurs in relation to other individuals. As Dupper (2003) reported,

school social workers are particularly vulnerable to being underappreciated and

misunderstood by school personnel who are not human-service providers, which can lead

to a lack of power within the entire organization (Sarmiento et al., 2004). Those services

misunderstood are often targets for elimination (Garrett, 2006). Organizational shifts and

economic stress can cause the social-worker role to be surrendered to other professionals

within the organization, causing social workers to become marginalized if not terminated

(Dane & Simon, 1991; Whittlesey-Jerome, 2012). Such dissuasive factors within the

workplace impact the self-efficacy of school social workers.

From an empowerment perspective, social workers as professionals create venues

for those disenfranchised and unable to exercise power, enhancing their social

competence and enabling them to realize the benefits of an expanded base of societal

resources and opportunities (DuBois & Miley, 2011). Social workers challenge social

injustice and promote social change that improves a variety of conditions (Yamano,

2011). Within the school setting where values and human resources are based upon

school culture and education, these same workers who advocate for the empowerment of

all, overlook practices that would allow them to acquire a greater personal sense of

workplace empowerment (To, 2006). All of these factors can impact the empowerment of school social workers within the workplace. Job characteristics, such as role ambiguity, participation in decision making, and supervision, are also related to empowerment (Wallach & Mueller, 2006).

Empowerment is central to the work of improving human lives (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010) and is a concept that can either occur or not occur on many levels— individual, community, and organizational (Gutierrez, GlenMaye, & DeLois, 1995). Organizational theorists emphasize the importance of work environments that foster and cultivate an empowered workforce (Peterson & Speer, 2000). They emphasize the importance of work environments that cultivate empowered workforces because such environments foster workers who demonstrate initiative and confidence in their abilities, function as collaborative team members, and adapt well to continuous change (Wallach & Meuller, 2006)—all elements related to self-efficacy. Studies have revealed that organizations that empower employees by creating a setting that allows for participation in decision making, skill development, impact, and administrative support cultivate employees more capable of empowering organizational clients and communities (Gutierrez et al., 1995).

Gap in the Literature

Researchers have focused on workplace empowerment and self-efficacy within many arenas; however, school social workers who have openly reported struggles encompassing a lack in these characteristics (Bye et al., 2009; Dibble, 1999; Dupper, 2003; Gleason-Leyba, 2009; Massat et al., 2009; Openshaw, 2008; Wallach-Meuller,

2006; Whittlesey-Jerome, 2012) have been overlooked in this important area of study. This is an important gap to fill within related literature because, if social workers feel empowered, they become more efficacious and better able to empower their clients (Gutierrez et al., 1995; Van Voorhis & Hostetter, 2006).

Although school social workers are often helpless in the face of authority, they must strive toward a model of partnership and greater politically savvy when interacting with school personnel to gain a higher sense of empowerment (To, 2009). Despite the importance of workplace empowerment and self-efficacy for social workers, a paucity of related research is evident. Examination of the spectrum of experiences related to the self-efficacy and empowerment of school social workers allows for greater understanding surrounding how these elements interplay with the service delivery of these practitioners.

Statement of the Problem

The challenge for school social workers working within a host setting where education is valued more highly than social well being cannot be overemphasized (Bye & Alvarez, 2007). The experiences of school social workers with empowerment and self-efficacy within the workplace have been overlooked as a potential factor in the ability of these workers to empower and serve their clients. To engage in empowering practice and respond effectively to the demands of their work, social workers must have a sense of such empowerment and self-efficacy (Van Voorhis & Hostetter, 2006; Wallach & Mueller, 2006). Consequences abound when a lack in this regard is present. When workers are empowered, their practice tends to be consciously consumer oriented and driven (Guiterrez et al., 1995). Increased levels of the innovation and proactive behavior

that benefits clients are demonstrated (Hardina & Montana, 2011; Onyishi, Ugwu, &

Ogbonne, 2012).

Empowerment leads to a sense of control and an increase in the elements of self-

efficacy (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010). In the absence of these elements, consumers

suffer as the performance of social workers diminishes (Chong & Ma, 2010).

Examination of the experiences of school social workers with empowerment and self-

efficacy within the workplace may result in greater awareness to how empowered and

efficacious school social workers can more effectively contribute to the well being of the

children and families they serve. The findings of this research can be generalizable to

other professional populations extending student services such as school counselors and

psychologists. These workers have expressed similar struggles as practitioners also

operating within the host setting of schools.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to develop an in-depth understanding of the

spectrum of experiences encountered by school social workers related to empowerment

and self-efficacy within the workplace. Empowerment and self-efficacy have been shown

to increase the ability of human-service practitioners to empower their clients and fulfill

the goals of the organization within which they practice (Hardina & Montana, 2011;

Onyishi et al., 2012; Wallach & Mueller, 2006). The findings of this research may be

conducive to immediate application by school social workers and other education

professionals, such as school counselors and psychologists, potentially resulting in an

increase in their own sense of empowerment and self-efficacy within the workplace, thus

improving their service delivery. The primary goal behind the study was to bring awareness to a phenomenon neglected within existing literature by describing the essence of the lived experience of school social workers. The research holds potentially positive implications for policy makers, education administrators, other student-services professionals, community stakeholders, and others who hold a vested interest in human-services practitioners practicing within schools.

Patton (2002) explained that qualitative inquiry is particularly oriented toward exploration, discovery, and inductive logic. In this qualitative study, a phenomenological research paradigm was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of school social workers with empowerment and self-efficacy within the workplace. A phenomenological approach was appropriate for the study because it allows for the recognition of each individual and community as unique and deserving of respect. The design was also a good fit because schools are complex institutions. Consistent with the phenomenological approach, I had a key role in data collection and analysis. Participants were invited to convey their thoughts and experiences of workplace empowerment and self-efficacy as school social workers. This phenomenological study involved in-depth interviews, observation, reflexive journals, and qualitative content analysis to tap the practice wisdom of experienced school social workers currently practicing within public-school settings in the state of Pennsylvania. A purposeful, criterion-based sample of 12 school social workers located throughout Pennsylvania was recruited.

Research Questions

This study will serve as a contribution to existing literature on school social workers, counselors, and psychologists as it addressed the following research questions:

1. What is the spectrum of empowerment experiences encountered by school social workers?

2. How do social workers become efficacious within the host setting of the school?

Maxwell (1996) explained a potential step in the data-analysis process known as contextualizing (i.e., coding or thematic analysis), whereby the researcher attempts to understand the data, typically through review of interview transcripts and various other methods toward identifying relationships among different elements within the text. Moustakas (1994) also discussed a modified version of the van Kamm method of data analysis, which included clustering and thematizing invariant constituents. Priori themes, as described by Ryan and Bernard (2003), are themes derived from characteristics of the phenomenon under study and already addressed in existing research. The following priori themes were thought to potentially emerge from the data collected in the study: (a) the perceptions of school social workers as to whether they are an accepted member of the school team, (b) perceptions of the school social-worker role, (c) the sense of empowerment experienced by school social workers, (d) the level of self-efficacy experienced by school social workers, and (e) whether school social workers actively network or tend to work in isolation. I was also alert to emerging themes during data analysis.

The following interview questions exemplify those that measured the priori themes:

- Describe the level of understanding possessed by school personnel of the work you perform as a school social worker using a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 representing *limited to no understanding* and 10 indicating *complete understanding*.

- What experiences have you encountered that have motivated a sense of powerlessness?

- How would you describe your current level of self-efficacy, as it relates to your current school system?

- What experiences have you encountered that have left you with a sense of professional ineffectiveness?

- Who do you rely upon for support within the workplace?

The Interview Guide used in the study is provided in Appendix A.

Conceptual Framework

The theoretical foundation of this research included the encapsulation of both a synthesized view of the empowerment espoused by Hur (2006) and the Bandura (1977) self-efficacy theory.

Empowerment Theory

The origins of empowerment as a form of theory can be traced back to the humanitarian and educator, Freire (1973), who linked education and a plan to liberate the oppressed people of the world (Hur, 2006). Empowerment theory, as defined by

Gutierrez et al. (1995), is the process of increasing the personal, interpersonal, or political

power that allow individuals, families, and communities to take action to improve their

circumstances. Peterson and Speer (2000) espoused that empowerment can be considered

at the following three levels:

1. The macro level that attends to political and objective change.

2. The micro level that focuses on individual or personal change.

3. A blend of the first two approaches in an interface of micro and macro levels.

Self-Efficacy

According to Bandura (2005), self-efficacy is "the belief in one's capabilities to

organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations"

(p. 1). Simply put, self-efficacy is a belief in the personal ability to succeed in a particular

situation. Bandura described such beliefs as determinants of how people think, behave,

and feel. The tenets of this theory explain that those with a strong sense of self-efficacy

look at challenges as tasks to be mastered , are deeply invested in the activities within

which they participate, form a strong sense of commitment to their interests and

activities, and rebound quickly from setbacks and disappointments. Individuals with a

weak sense of self-efficacy avoid challenging tasks, believe difficult tasks and situations

are beyond their capabilities, focus on personal failings and negative outcomes, and

quickly lose confidence in personal abilities.

Examining the experiences of school social workers through the Bandura self-

efficacy model offers valuable insight into the experience of empowerment encountered

by school social workers. Self-efficacy and empowerment are often used interchangeably.

As Breeding (2008) stressed, self-efficacy is frequently an indicator of an empowered status, while Gutierrez et al. (1995) advanced that motivating individuals to become efficacious does not equate to increasing coping skills or adaptation, but rather, represents an increase in the actual power of the individuals to progress toward action.

Nature of the Study

As noted, the study was qualitative in nature. Qualitative research is consistent with understanding the experiences of school social workers, as they relate to empowerment and self-efficacy within the workplace. As also previously mentioned, Patton (2002) explained that "qualitative inquiry is particularly oriented toward exploration, discovery, and inductive logic" (p. 55). The study was designed to employ a phenomenological research paradigm to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of school social workers with empowerment and self-efficacy within the workplace. This approach was selected because it supported the search for greater understanding surrounding the lived experiences of a small number of individuals who encounter the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). The design also allowed for the development of patterns, themes, and relationships of meaning through prolonged engagement (Moustakas, 1994). Data was collected via in-depth, face-to-face interviews, as well as field notes. Data analysis was completed using a framework provided by Moustakas (1994).

Operational Definitions

The following terms were used throughout the study and are defined for purposes of the research:

At-risk students: Struggling students who are vulnerable to premature departure from school. They are low academic achievers who also exhibit low self-esteem. They are generally from families of low socioeconomic status, tend to avoid participation in school activities, and display minimal identification with the school (Kelly, 2008). At-risk students often present disciplinary and truancy problems that lead to credit abuse, impulsive behavior, and problematic peer relationships. Family difficulties, drug addiction, pregnancy, and other problems prevent these students from successfully participating in school. As they experience failure and fall behind their peers, school becomes a negative environment reinforcing their low self-esteem (Donnelly, 1987, p. 2).

Collective empowerment: Occurs when individuals join in action to overcome obstacles to attain positive change for their population group (Hur, 2006).

Efficacious: Refers to possessing the power to produce a desire effect. Individuals who judge themselves as highly efficacious, find it easier to dismiss intrusive negative thoughts (Ozer & Bandura, 1990). The more efficacious an individual perceives themselves with regard to a given task, the greater amount of effort is expended in its performance (Chong & Ma, 2010).

Ethical decision making: Comprised of systematic rules or principles governing right conduct. All practitioners, upon entering a profession, are charged with the responsibility to adhere to the standards of ethical practice and conduct set by the respective profession (Raines & Dibble, 2011).

Host setting: An organization with a primary function of one type of service but that also offers other services within its setting. The secondary-service practices are

typically in line with, but different from, those of the host organization (Oberhofer-Dane & Simon, 1991).

Psychological empowerment: Refers to a framework that allows the articulation of empowerment as intrinsic task motivation manifested in four cognitions that reflect their orientation to work. The four cognitions are meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. All of these manifestations reflect an active, rather than passive, orientation to a work role (Spreitzer, DeJanasz, & Quinn, 1999).

School social worker: Employed by a school system. Such workers provide many services to children and adolescents within U.S. schools that ultimately reduce barriers to their academic success. Social workers have operated within school settings in a majority of U.S. states and a number of foreign countries since the 1900s. The majority of these professionals hold a master's degree in social work and have specialized training in supporting students within the context of local schools (Bye & Alvarez, 2007; Kelly, 2008).

Self-efficacy: Belief in the personal ability to impact personal circumstances to achieve goals. Bandura (1986) defined self-efficacy as "people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance" (p. 391).

Social work: The professional activity of assisting individuals, groups, or communities to enhance or restore their capacity for social functioning and create societal conditions favorable to this goal. The practice of social work involves one or more of the following ends: (a) helping individuals obtain tangible services such as counseling or

psychotherapy, and (b) helping communities or groups provide or improve processes.

The practice of social work requires knowledge of human development and behavior; of

social, economic, and cultural institutions; and of the interaction between these factors

(Kadushin & Harkness, 2002).

Strengths perspective: A view of all individuals, groups, families, and

communities as possessing strengths. The focus is on available resources, opportunities,

possibilities, exceptions, and solutions. The strengths perspective recognizes the struggles

that may impact individuals; however, these challenges are not viewed as debilitating

(Raines & Dibble, 2011).

Assumptions

The study was conducted with several assumptions. It was assumed that the

participating school social workers would describe a spectrum of experiences related to

empowerment and self-efficacy within the workplace that occurred during 2013 when the

data was collected and analyzed. It was also assumed that school social workers within

the state of Pennsylvania were willing to participate in the study to inform current and

future school administrators and decision makers. It was assumed that the respondents

depended upon their own perceptions and understanding of the terms and variables

presented. Lastly, although school social workers may not realize the manner or extent to

which workplace empowerment and self-efficacy impact their work, it was assumed the

participating workers answered the study interview questions in an open and honest

manner.

Scope

The scope of the study included individuals currently employed as school social workers within the state of Pennsylvania and who have filled this role for a minimum of 3 years.

Delimitations

Delimitations are represented by the potential relevance of the findings to other population groups. The study may be relevant to other populations who share similar conditions such as school counselors, nurses, and psychologists, as well as other social workers who operate within other settings. Statistical generalization were not sought in the research, but rather, the goal behind the study was to develop an in-depth understanding of the experiences of school social workers that are related to empowerment and self-efficacy within the workplace.

Limitations

The study sample of the research was confined to school social workers currently employed within the public schools of Pennsylvania and who have held the position of school social worker for a minimum of 3 years. These criteria are to ensure that the participants have solid experience in the practice of school social work. The study was limited by the experiences and insight recalled and shared by the participants.

Significance of the Study

The study addressed an important gap in existing literature by focusing on the spectrum of experiences related to the empowerment and self-efficacy of school social workers within the workplace. The manner in which these professionals gain

empowerment and self-efficacy has been overlooked as a potential factor in the work

they perform for clients. To engage in empowering practices and respond effectively to

the demands of their work, social workers must feel a sense of empowerment and self-

efficacy within the workplace (Van Voorhis & Hostetter, 2006; Wallach & Mueller,

2006). The findings of the study can also benefit the colleagues of school social workers

such as school counselors and psychologists.

It was anticipated that the school social workers who participated in the research

described experiences reflective of a spectrum of power levels, from powerlessness to

empowered, and that they would be better able to empower their clients if they were more

empowered and efficacious themselves within the workplace. Subtle increases in their

level of empowerment and self-efficacy could potentially equate to a significant

improvement in their service delivery. Further, if school social workers felt more

empowered, it is anticipated that incidence of burnout and alienation would decrease,

leading to positive work-related outcomes such as innovation, creativity, and other

proactive behavior. The implications for positive social change from this study include a

better understanding of the manner in which school social workers can gain

empowerment and self-efficacy within the workplace. This knowledge will inform

decision makers in school administrative positions, potentially reducing barriers leading

to the lack of empowerment and self-efficacy in school social workers. This is expected

to, in turn, enhance the ability of these workers to positively impact the children and

families they serve.

Summary

The experiences of school social workers with regard to empowerment and self-efficacy have largely been overlooked within related literature. Rather than concentrating solely on the problems inherent to the role of a school social worker, this phenomenological study was conducted with a focus on the spectrum of experiences encountered by these workers, from situations of powerlessness to those of power, and from a lack of self-efficacy to a sense of complete efficacy. Exploring these experiences allows for a deeper understanding of where within the spectrum of experiences school social workers practice at the highest level for the benefit of the children and families they serve. These professionals have as much to gain by learning from such mutual experiences as do the children and families they serve. The practices these workers employ to gain empowerment and self-efficacy within the workplace represents a major gap within existing literature (To, 2006).

The study was introduced with a statement of the problem of interest, which is centered in school social workers passively progressing through their work experience. Discussion of the background and purpose of the research also identified the rationale behind the study, which was to examine the empowering and self-efficacy practices of these practitioners. Research themes and the methodology of the study have been presented. The significance of the research for all stakeholders was outlined, and the limitations and delimitations of the study were acknowledged and clearly presented. The review of related literature conducted for this research addresses the following primary areas: (a) the history of school social work and its practice, (b) concerns inherent to

school social work, and (c) the empowerment and self-efficacy related to the role of a

school social worker.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Introduction

The sense of empowerment and self-efficacy experienced by school social

workers has been overlooked as a potential factor in the ability of these professionals to,

in turn, empower their clients. Research has focused on workplace empowerment and

self-efficacy within many other arenas; however, school social workers, who have openly

reported a spectrum of adverse issues with these characteristics, have been overlooked in

this important area of research (Bye et al., 2009; Dibble, 1999; Dupper, 2003; Gleason-

Leyba, 2009; Massat et al., 2009; Openshaw, 2008; Wallach-Meuller, 2006; Whittlesey-

Jerome, 2012). This review of existing related literature will provide the rationale and

support for this study. To ascertain the complexity of the role of the school social worker,

it is imperative to comprehend both the history and current status of the practice.

Research Strategy

The literature search conducted for this study involved several information

sources. The Walden Thoreau 360 link database search process was employed for each

initial search. The specific databases used included ProQuest, PsychINFO, SAGE,

PsychArticles, and ERIC. Additional articles were located by reviewing the sources

within articles deemed relative to the study. Numerous related books were obtained. The

keywords used for the search were *pupil service personnel, school social workers, school

social worker and empowerment, self-efficacy and the school social worker,* and *school

mental-health practitioners.* This led to a very small number of articles addressing school

social workers and specific programs, but with a focus on the educational setting.

Additional textbook resources were acquired and the following keywords were added: *empowerment, self-efficacy, job satisfaction, supervision, mental-health worker, administration,* and *history.* All of these terms were connected with the keywords *social workers* and *school social workers.* Caution was needed because much of the existing research related to school social workers, empowerment, and self-efficacy was conducted from the perspective of service delivery (i.e., how school social workers empower their clients, rather than their own experiences of empowerment as professionals). Professional organizations on both the state and national levels were contacted, as well as experts within the fields of school social work and social-work supervision to validate the absence of such research. Additional resources were obtained through the School Social Worker Association of America, as well as back issues of the journal published by this organization. However, a lack of qualitative research exploring the spectrum of school social workers related to empowerment and self-efficacy within the workplace was consistently evident.

Related Constructs

The study was based upon the synthesized view of empowerment espoused by Hur (2006) and the Bandura (1977) self-efficacy theory. A thorough explanation of the key elements of these theories validates the theoretical foundation of the study.

Empowerment Theory

Empowerment is the process of increasing personal, interpersonal, and/or political power, enabling individuals, families, and communities to take action toward improving adverse situations (Staples, 1990). Empowerment and social justice, both of which emerged from the perspectives of social ideology and self-help, have long been at the "heart" of the social-work mission (Van Voorhis & Hostetter, 2006). On the opposite end of the power spectrum would be powerlessness, which entails a subjective belief in the inability to meet the expectations of others and determine outcomes.

Background. The notion of empowerment as a form of theory can be traced back to the humanitarian and educator, Freire (1973), when he linked education with a plan to liberate the oppressed people of the world (Hur, 2006). Gutierrez et al. (1995) defined empowerment "as the process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power, enabling individuals, families, and communities to take action toward improving adverse situations" (pg. 250). Peterson and Speer (2000) postulated that empowerment can be considered at three levels—(a) the macro level, which attends to political and objective change; (b) the micro level, which focuses on individual or personal change; and (c) a blend of the first two levels.

Conger and Kanungo (1988) expanded thought surrounding the empowerment theory by explaining empowerment as a process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organizational members through the identification and removal of conditions fostering powerlessness. Through this model, empowerment could be assessed as different interventions were added. Similarly, Biron and Bamberger (2011) discussed

empowerment in relation to a process involving the transformation of employees who lack control over the work process to employees possessing significant control over their lives, moving from one end of the power spectrum to the other end.

Individual/Psychological. Thomas and Velthouse (1990) further extended the Conger and Kanugo (1988) explanation of empowerment. Rather than a dispositional trait, Thomas and Velthouse defined empowerment as a set of cognitions or states influenced by the work environment that help to create an active orientation to a job role (p.667). The development of a theoretical framework articulates empowerment as intrinsic task motivation manifest in four cognitions that reflect the orientation to work. The set of cognitions identified by the Thomas and Velthouse model as the basis for worker empowerment are a sense of impact, competence, meaningfulness, and choice .

Collective. Collective empowerment develops when individuals join in action to overcome obstacles and attain social change (Staples, 1990, p.32). Boehm and Staples (2002) indicated that the notion of collective empowerment encompasses the concept of collective belonging (i.e., individuals belong to the social networks of peers where there is an emphasis on autonomy while belonging to the collective establishment). This involves community belonging and identification with similar others. The concept fits the experiences of school social workers who are often the sole practitioners within their school districts or buildings, but who may develop connections with others in similar roles outside their districts. These connections may come in the form of professional organizations or small, "grass-roots" collaborative efforts.

There are four critical elements to the model of empowerment defined by Boehm and Staples (2002)—collective belonging, community involvement, control over the community organization, and community building. *Collective belonging* has been described. *Community involvement* has been explained as a common theme of empowerment. The main concept is that, by taking part in community activities, change can be effectuated. Collective empowerment is termed *control over community organizations,* which implies joining forces for influence within an organization. Collective empowerment, as described by Boehm and Staples is *community building,* which refers to the creation of a sense of community among members that serves to increase their ability to contribute to social change.

Hur's synthesized concept of empowerment. The concept of empowerment encompasses a variety of aspects across a broad variety of disciplines. Historically, the criticism of empowerment has been its perceived characteristics of overly individualistic and conflict oriented, resulting in an emphasis on control rather than cooperation (Speer, 2000). Hur (2006) described a synthesized process of empowerment as providing an overarching framework that encompasses a variety of empowerment theories and many disciplines such as community psychology, management, political theory, social work, education, women's studies, and health. I drew upon this multidimensional conceptualization of empowerment to increase understanding of the spectrum of experiences encountered by school social workers that are related to empowerment and self-efficacy within the workplace.

The Hur (2006) theory combined elements of the Thomas and Velthouse (1990) model of psychological empowerment, which tends to be more individualistic, and those of the Boehm and Staples (2002) collective empowerment model. The Hur process of empowerment can be synthesized into five progressive stages—the existence of stratification and oppression, conscientizing, mobilizing, maximizing, and creating a new order. The empowerment process then becomes a process that is not a constant, but rather, a continuing development that involves numerous changes, impacting systems and allowing individuals or groups to gain control over life, community, and society (Hur, 2006). The study was conducted to explore the experiences of school social workers with empowerment in the workplace because these professionals report feeling devalued and misunderstood.

Empowerment and the school social worker. Empowerment has long been a key concept within disciplines such as counseling, psychology, and social work (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010); yet, the concept is traditionally linked to practice (i.e., how clients are taught to become empowered). Empowerment can be viewed as a "social justice contract" between individuals and society (DuBois & Miley, 2011) or, as Gutierrez et al. (1995) advanced, a way to increase the actual power of a community of clients, enabling action to be taken to improve adverse situations. Little is known about the possibilities of empowering school social workers as professionals (To, 2007).

Empowerment as an employee. According to Leonardsen (2006), empowerment cannot be interpreted as an individual project because human beings are social and dependent upon others. Humans are both socially and materially situated, meaning that

groups of people have differing experiences. Gilbert, Lashinger, and Leiter (2010) found a clear correlation between worker empowerment in health-care professionals or a lack of such power resulting in emotional exhaustion and burnout. Thornburg and Mungai (2011) reported factors such as isolation, lack of leadership consistency, and lack of input as adversely impacting teacher empowerment.

Past studies have outlined correlating factors for teacher empowerment and such variables as job satisfaction, efficacy, and burnout. Given that school social workers often experience additional struggles, such as practicing within host settings and inadequate supervision, the expectation of their daily empowerment of others becomes questionable with such barriers to their own empowerment within the workplace. School social workers are called upon daily to empower individuals to reflect upon oppression and combat such social ills (To, 2007). Some of these workers continue to mistakenly recognize solely the empowerment that involves well-organized and large-scale social actions that generate fundamental change in oppressive social institutions. Because they often find themselves in a position of advocating for others within the educational setting, it is important that self-advocacy and empowerment is not neglected. They must not forget to advocate for and empower themselves (Bodenhorn, Wolfe, & Airen, 2010).

Self-Efficacy

With all the factors that can potentially impact the sense of empowerment within school social workers, the vulnerability of their self-efficacy must also become a consideration. The Bandura (1986, 1997) theory of self-efficacy provides a framework for examining the self-efficacy experiences of school social workers. The theory was

introduced during the late 1960s by Alfred Bandura (1986). This theorist defined self-efficacy as beliefs surrounding the personal ability to successfully perform a given behavior and "a generative capability in which component cognitive, social, and behavioral skills must be organized into integrated courses of action to serve innumerable purposes" (p. 122). According to this construct, individuals possessing a high level of self-efficacy set higher goals; exhibit stronger commitment, motivation, resilience, and perseverance; and are therefore more likely to reach their goals (Bandura, 1986, 1995).

Social-cognitive theorists have purported that, in the absence of a belief that desired outcomes can be achieved, there is little motivation to pursue ambitious goals and strive toward resiliency during challenging times (Holcomb-McCoy, Harris, Hines, & Johnston, 2008). Within school settings, studies have shown that students of teachers with high professional self-efficacy perform better than students of teachers with low professional self-efficacy (Bandura, 1995; Caprara, Barbaranelli, Borgogni, & Steca, 2003). Other studies have indicated that school counselors with high levels of self-efficacy perform better in their job roles, as rated by their supervisors (Daniels & Larson, 2001). Based upon self-efficacy theory and research that has linked high levels of self-efficacy with student-achievement outcomes, how the levels of self-efficacy and empowerment in school social workers impact their own performance, client outcomes, and evaluation is a concern.

Throughout the process of refining the self-efficacy theory, four primary sources of self-efficacy emerged. Enactive mastery is the most powerful source of information in relation to self-efficacy and involves the experience of completing a task. The second

source, vicarious experience, is observing or hearing another individual completing a task. The affective state is the third source and refers to the emotional state induced by attempts to complete a task with verbal persuasion. The final source of information for the creation of self-efficacy refers to the delivery of information concerning the ability of an individual to complete a task. Phrases such as "You can do it" and "You got this" would be examples of encouraging statements; however, dissuasive statements can also be delivered such as "There is no way you can do that."

Self-determination is increased with the development of personal knowledge, skills, and beliefs (i.e., empowering personal characteristics) that allow for greater control (Breeding, 2008, p.97). The "ying and yang" relationship between empowerment and self-efficacy introduces the question as to whether efficacy can manifest without empowerment, or whether empowerment can manifest without self-efficacy. These theories served as the theoretical lenses to frame this study that explores the spectrum of empowerment and self-efficacy experiences of school social workers and gained deeper insight into the collective lived experience of these workers.

Other School Personnel Experiences with Empowerment and Self-Efficacy:

Empowerment and self-efficacy are topics of interest for many groups of people across a variety of settings. The related struggles are not new within schools. Many studies of teachers and power have found that educators share some of the same feelings as school social workers with regard to a spectrum of power experiences (Pyle, Wade-Woolley, & Hutchinson, 2011). Empowered teachers are described by Ndoye, Imig, and Parker (2010) as educators with a sense of full engagement in the decision-making

process of their schools. School systems that empower teachers offer flexibility, autonomy, and authority to their educators. Some elements of empowerment described by teachers are the same as those described by school social workers. While existing literature on teacher empowerment includes components applicable to school social workers, the studies do not cover all of the relative struggles and factors encountered by these workers. The two populations are very different, and the struggles for school social workers are amplified due to their auxiliary status (Bye & Alvarez, 2007; Garrett & Barretta-Herman, 1995; Phillippo & Stone, 2011).

The differences between the struggles of teachers and school social workers, in relation to power, can be "drilled down" to operation within a host setting and number of practitioners. While there are many teachers in any given school system, there are few school social workers, and these social workers are often treated as auxiliary and expendable partners within the education arena (Bye & Alvarez, 2007). Past research on school personnel related to empowerment and self-efficacy has revealed that, if personnel such as school counselors believe they are capable of working with diverse populations, they will act accordingly (Holcomb-McCoy et al., 2008). To empower students, school counselors must engage in their own self-reflective process that leads to a sense of empowerment (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007).

Relative to teachers, the topics of empowerment and self-efficacy are very important because teachers have been portrayed through the years as both the problem and the solution in debate surrounding the improvement of schools (Thornburg & Mungai, 2011). Researchers have reported a direct correlation between the personal

efficacy of teachers and their job satisfaction, as well as a link between their feelings of

personal efficacy and their belief in the school system within which they work. Studies

on teacher empowerment have found that teachers with a high sense of empowerment are

less resistant to change. Woodfolk reported that teacher self-efficacy has been correlated

with positive student and teacher outcomes (as cited in Shaughnessy, 2004). Research in

the area of collective efficacy within the field of education has been primarily focused on

teachers, but has found that personal beliefs can affect systematic change by working

together, which to a large extent, is grounded in the perceived self-efficacy of the group

members (Fernandez-Ballesteros, Diez-Nicolas, Caprara, Barbaranelli, & Bandura,

2002). Put simply, teachers who have a strong sense of self-efficacy also feel a strong

sense of collective efficacy.

Historical Perspective on the Profession of School Social Work

To understand some of the complex issues surrounding practice empowerment for

school social workers, it is imperative that the history of this practice is well understood.

School social work is one of the oldest subspecialties of general social work and has

entered its second century (Kelly, 2008, p.3). Social-work services in schools, similar to

many other roles within education, has gradually developed and evolved. The focus of

this work has followed the historic concerns of education and U.S. society (Massat

et al., 2009). A primary component is home visitation (Allen & Tracy, 2004). The

practice has evolved from social, political, and economic events throughout history (Bye

& Alvarez, 2007). Social workers practicing in school settings are not a new

phenomenon. The profession can be traced back to the turn of the 20th century (Altshuler & Reid-Webb, 2009).

During the 20th century, schools broadened their mission and scope toward greater inclusion and respect for school-attendance laws (Massat et al., 2009). During the early 1900s, compulsory attendance laws were introduced. The first state to pass such legislation was Massachusetts in 1852 (Bye & Alvarez, 2007). This law mandated that children between 8 and 14 years of age were required to attend school at least 3 months out of every year for 6 consecutive weeks. Exceptions were made for children who could demonstrate previous mastery of the respective classroom content and disabled or poor children. Although other states were slow to follow the lead of Massachusetts, with only three additional states enacting similar statues before the 1870s, by 1900, two thirds of all U.S. states had instituted compulsory attendance laws. These requirements continue to be determined on a state-by-state basis; consequently, school social workers tend to focus on truancy along with poor school performance (Dupper, 2003).

Social workers were originally referred to as visiting teachers. The influx of these professionals into school settings was fueled by immigration, due to the significant increase in the number of school-aged children (Agresta, 2004). School social work was introduced in approximately 1906 within four major cities—New York, Boston, Hartford, and Chicago (Allen-Meares, 2007). Social workers were typically not hired by schools; they were more commonly contracted from outside providers. For example, within New York, a settlement house for immigrants sponsored the social-worker position in schools (Massat et al., 2009). The first documented hiring of a visiting teacher by the Board of

Education was spurred by the desire to broaden the mission of education during 1913 in

Rochester, New York. This was an important event, signaling that the education system

recognized a correlation between outside factors and the academic success of students.

The introduction of school social workers also indicated a need and desire to connect

home, school, and community.

In 1920, the first professional organization of what would become school social

workers began as the National Association of Visiting Teachers. The first meeting

convened within New York City. This organization would later become the American

Association of Visiting Teachers and go on to publish a journal known as the *Bulletin*

(Massat et al., 2009). Of particular importance during the early 1900s, was the collective

efforts of school social workers to educate teachers on the manner in which poverty, poor

health, and the exploitation of children through child labor adversely affected school

attendance, thereby concurrently impeding academic success (Agresta, 2004). Thus, the

premise of NCLB of every child deserving access to appropriate education long preceded

the Act. School social workers were introduced in public schools to empower and support

the most at-risk and disenfranchised students. The majority of their duties were defined

by the social and systemic conditions of the school systems within which they practiced.

The role of the school social worker varied from system to system, as remains the case.

The Great Depression of the 1930s returned the focus of school social work to the

most basic survival needs (Dupper, 2003). Families and children often lacked such basic

needs as food, clothing, school supplies, and shelter. Malnutrition was common and many

children dropped from school to work in order to supplement the family income (Bye &

Alvarez, 2007). School social workers were helpful in assisting families with many aspects of survival. As the crisis of the Great Depression receded, the initial services of school social work were again offered (Bye & Alvarez, 2007). The trends in service delivery ran parallel to societal needs. During this period in history, an increase in racial and ethnic tension was evident among children and their families as family members were mobilized for war. The divorce rate more than doubled between 1940 and 1946, and out-of-wedlock births increased from 71 to 127 per 10,000 newborns (p.13).

Numerous social forces continued to shape the practice of school social work through the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s (Dupper, 2003). In 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, KS* concluded that separate but equal educational facilities were unconstitutional and truly unequal, which introduced numerous social challenges for schools. One such challenge emerged as desegregation and educating a mix of students from a variety of backgrounds and life experiences.

Federal legislation increased the role of the government in public education. Related Acts included the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination in federally assisted programs; the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which authorized grants for compensatory education in schools for children from low-income families; the 1972 Education Amendment Act, which prohibited sex discrimination in the admission and treatment of students by educational institutions receiving federal funding; the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which indicated that students with a disability may need special accommodations but not special education and related services (e.g., children with ADHD can be served with a 504 Plan); the Child Abuse Prevention and

Treatment Act, enacted in 1974 to provide resources to keep children in school; the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, also known as the Buckley Amendment, which limited the ability of schools to share information from student records without parental consent; and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, passed in 1975 to increase the responsibility of schools to provide a free and appropriate public education within the least restrictive environment for all children. In response to this body of legislation and other mandates, school social workers focused their effort on the modification of school conditions and polices that had a detrimental impact on students by applying general systems theory and the ecological framework.

During the 1980s, schools faced the challenge of educating growing numbers of students with learning and behavioral problems, as well as educating increasingly diverse student populations (Dupper, 2003). During the 1990s, school violence became a major concern and the focus of state and federal mandates such as the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 and the Safe Schools Act of 1994, both aimed at violence prevention within schools. A movement to use schools as hubs for the identification of at-risk students and the venue for service delivery also manifested during the 1990s. The push for a full-service school model and grant funding expanded and the number of school social workers and the scope of their role continues to increase.

A review of the first 100 years of school-social-work practice demonstrates many parallels between the administration, policy, and practice of today and those of earlier periods (Bye & Alvarez, 2007). The struggles evident throughout the 100-year history of the practice continue to plague the profession. Wide variations in education and training,

supervision, and qualifications continue to exist, as does the struggle to establish an effective presence within the host setting of public education. Variation in the position titles of school social workers is also evident, with many currently referred to as home-school visitors. School social workers have been providing services to public schools for over a century. While the services have evolved over time, the overall purpose of addressing environmental barriers to the academic success of students has remained constant (Altshuler & Reid-Webb, 2009).

General Social Work Practice

To understand the subspecialty of school social work, a brief explanation of general social-work practice is needed. Social work, as a profession, has an extensive history. In 1898, Columbia University became the first school of social work within the United States, marking the introduction of this work as a professional career (Ritter, Vakalahi, & Kiernan-Stern, 2009, pg.9). However, many individuals performed what is now formally known as social work prior to the Columbia University course work. Ritter et al. (2009) further chronicled the history of general social-work practice, explaining that the profession was greatly expanded and legitimized by the Roosevelt and Johnson presidencies as the role of the federal government was significantly expanded in the provision of social welfare for citizens.

Whether social work is a science or art is a subject of frequent debate, with many concluding that elements of both exist in the practice. General social workers operate within a variety of settings and for a large variety of client populations from infants to the elderly. They serve as advocates, helpers, counselors, change agents, and community

mobilizers. Social workers function on a micro level, advocating for individuals, as well as on a macro level where they work to eliminate barriers from a societal perspective. Social workers functioning on a mezzo level work with small- to medium-sized groups such as neighborhoods, schools, and other local institutions. The school social worker operates at this mezzo level; however, their practice is relevant within all realms/levels of functioning.

According to the *Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers* (1999), the primary mission of the social-work profession is

> To enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. A historic and defining feature of social work is the profession's focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society. Fundamental to social work is attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living.
>
> (p. 4)

One very simple definition of social work offered by Ritter et al. (2009) is a discipline or field addressing social problems and human behavior.

School Social Work Practice

School social workers represent the few human-service professionals practicing within school systems. Often categorized under the "umbrella" of pupil-services personnel with school counselors and psychologists, the role of these workers is complex, multifaceted, and often undefined. School social workers "bridge the gap" between home

and school and connect the community to the larger school system. These individuals reduce barriers that impede academic success for students and serve as the primary referral resource for basic human needs such as housing, food, clothing, and emotional support. Community mobilization and staff support are also common expectations of the school-social-worker role (Openshaw, 2008). Garrett (2006) described such workers as often serving as a mini agency, filling a number of social-work tasks at any given time.

Social work is practiced within a variety of settings and with a vast array of populations. School social work has been increasingly recognized as a subspecialty of general social-work practice. It is a specialty area requiring a specific skill set and knowledge base. Arguably, all of the elements of general social work are present in the practice of school social work; however, the latter is practiced within school settings, necessitating not only knowledge in social work, but also in education. School social workers are liaisons between the home, community, and school. It is a task-oriented field and practitioners are involved in a variety of roles including child welfare; practice collaboration; advocacy; group work; mediation; administration; leadership; and individual, career, health, family, and socialization counseling (Teasley, Gourdine, & Canfield, 2010). These workers collaborate with other school-based professionals, as well as outside agencies, to connect all the facets that form the whole child. The primary focus of the education system is educating children, while school social workers understand that barriers to the academic success of children may be rooted in sources outside the school walls (source, publication date). These professionals work tirelessly to educate teachers on factors from an ecological perspective.

Family involvement in school has long been correlated to academic success for students, regardless of the age or economic status of the students served (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). School social workers are a key link between home and school, assisting families with the education process and staff with their understanding of a variety of education and lifestyle differences among students (Allen & Tracy, 2004). School social work draws its legitimacy and function from its ability to make education work for groups of children who would not otherwise benefit from typical educational offerings (Massat et al., 2009). These workers help students who are struggling to find success in school. They often explore the lives of children outside school to identify barriers to their academic success, subsequently working on behalf of the children to eliminate the identified barriers. The goal is always focused on assisting students with their education journey. Impediments can be sourced in the home or community; consequently, the school social worker is charged with connecting the community, home, and school for the benefit of the children. As described earlier, these experienced workers are often practicing at all levels (i.e., micro, macro, and mezzo) of social work (Allen & Tracy, 2004).

School social workers traditionally operate from an ecological perspective, which focuses on the reciprocal interaction of students with environmental factors (Dupper, 2003). Rather than viewing struggles as internal to the child, school social workers attempt to examine the "whole child," considering the entirety of his or her experiences. The ecological model of practice is strengths based and system focused. This perspective emphasizes the influence of the social environment and provides the perfect platform for

the school social worker who is visiting homes and connecting families and schools

(Allen & Tracy, 2004). Although not every task identified through this model is

performed by the school social worker, these workers are often the coordinators of

services.

Frustration has been expressed by school social workers with regard to their

peripheral status with K-12 schools. Scholars concerned with school-based social

services have noted a marginalization within the K-12 system (Phillippo & Stone, 2011).

Services with a loosely defined conceptual basis differ substantially in the specific types

of services delivered. Generally speaking, school social workers are physically located

within public-school settings and available to the general population; however, their

assistance is targeted to children experiencing difficulty with academic success. These

professionals provide a combination of school- and home-based services that involve a

comprehensive array of services tailored to individual student and family needs. These

can include case management, crisis intervention, information and referrals, parenting

education and support, health services, transportation, financial counseling, employment

information, housing support, and basic counseling. Although the specific services may

differ in nature, the intensity, scope, and mode of delivery are all facets of an explicit

value system or approach to service delivery that is guided by the ecological systems

theory (Allen & Tracy, 2004). This theory approaches child development from within the

context of a system of relationships that form the environment of the respective child.

The Bronfenbrenner theory defines the complex layers of an environment, each

having an effect on child development (Glasgow-Winters & Easton, 1983; Openshaw,

2008). The construct was recently renamed the bioecological systems theory to emphasize the biology of a child as the primary environment fueling development. The interaction between factors within the maturing biology of children, their immediate family/community environment, and the societal landscape fuels and steers their development. Changes or conflict in any one layer will ripple throughout other layers. Therefore, to study child development, not only must the immediate environment of the child be examined, but the interaction of the larger environment must also be investigated. School social workers also operate from a strengths-based model focused on building upon the strengths of individuals and their family members, rather than a sole focus on the existing problems (Allen & Tracy, 2004; Openshaw, 2008). The services are typically comprehensive and flexible due to the large array of services offered toward meeting individual goals and the needs of each child and/or family.

Problems Inherent in the School Social Worker Role

A prevalent concern in the realm of social-work practice within host settings is the ability of school social workers to develop within themselves a sense of empowerment and self-efficacy, as it relates to their workplace. This concern encompasses the host setting itself, duties and role discrepancies, communication, data collection and accountability, and supervision.

Operation in a Host Setting

School social workers operate within a host setting where social work is not the primary or grounding profession (Blosser, Cadet, & Downs, 2010). Consequently, these workers cannot simply focus on their jobs, which entail working with struggling children

and families. Rather, they must be dually focused in their interventions targeting

detrimental conditions in schools, families, neighborhoods, and communities by ensuring

a concurrent positive impact on the academic success of the children served (Dupper,

2003). School social workers must be knowledgeable on the functions of the education

institution and the many interacting roles while functioning as a competent social worker.

In essence, they must be experts in two fields—education and human services.

Duties and Role Discrepancy

Some of the questions and challenges inherent to the role of school social workers

are nearly as old as the professional itself (Kelly, 2008). A persistent struggle has been

the ability to adequately define the professional identity of these workers and

conceptualize the complexity of their job role (Allen-Mears, 2007). The role is often

misunderstood and ambiguous (Allen-Meares, 2007; Costin, 1975; Mears, 1977; Weiner,

2005). Garrett and Barretta-Herman (1995) found that only 10% of school social workers

had an accurate, documented job description. Typically, each district develops the job

description for the social worker they employ, and that description and the assigned

duties may change without the input and expertise of the worker. Lack of consistent job

descriptions exacerbates the role-ambiguity issue and leaves school social workers

vulnerable to unclear standards and expectations (Steele-Grissett, 2008).

An unfamiliarity with the roles and duties of school social workers is common

due to the lack of clarity and definition Surrounding their professional role (Altshuler &

Reid-Webb, 2009; Beauchemin & Kelly, 2009). These workers have often been charged

with creating their own paths within school systems, which can be challenging without a

comprehensive model of the job role (Blosser et al., 2010). These challenges are compounded with role discrepancy, which manifests when a conflict exists between the tasks a school social worker believes he or she is to perform and those the school system and administrators view as appropriate to perform.

Past literature underscores the notion that even those individuals charged with supporting school social workers typically possess limited understanding of the job duties of these workers. The role is complex, with much of the work conducted "behind the scenes" and, with the confidential nature of the work, supervisors often lack a clear understanding of the goals of the role (Gleason-Leyba, 2009). Tower (2000) noted that administrators unfamiliar with school social workers tend to carry negative attitudes toward these workers.

Communication and Accountability

Tower (2000) suggested that school social workers are not highly valued by school administrators because the administrators do not understand the role of the social workers, partially due to a lack of documentation by the workers (Gleason-Leyba. 2009). School social workers are better at helping students and families make gains in their emotional health and well being than they are at sharing their successes with others and publicizing the positive outcomes of their work. Perhaps this modesty is admirable; however, it does not communicate to others, especially policy makers such as principals, directors of special education, and school-board members, the vital importance of their role to students, parents, and teachers (Garrett, 2006). It is often a challenge for school social workers to gain visibility and convince others within the school system of the

validity of their role and skills (Openshaw, 2008). These workers would benefit from openly communicating their collective outcomes.

Data Collection and Accountability

Somewhat related to NCLB, *data-driven accountability* is a common term throughout the field of education. It is challenging for school social workers to measure the outcomes of their work and its impact on children and families. In this era of measurable outcomes and data-driven programming, it remains a challenge for school social workers to demonstrate that their interventions make a measurable difference in student achievement (Kelly, 2008). As noted earlier, these workers are traditionally weak in the area of documenting their accomplishments (Gleason-Leyba, 2009). Current practice demands not only a "paper trail" for compliance issues, but such an accounting is now also needed to demonstrate delivery of the outcomes schools, parents, and students are demanding (Kelly, 2008).

Keeping all stakeholders in the services of school social workers updated with documented practice is critical. It is imperative that school administrators understand how these social workers contribute to academic achievement because these stakeholders are generally responsible for deciding which, if any, mental-health professionals will continue to work within their schools (Franklin, 2001). Davis (2006) reported that surveys have consistently demonstrated that social workers prefer and most often use informal interactive tools for evaluating practice. These evaluative measures include such informal means as supervisor feedback, consultation with colleagues, client statements, and clinical experience. Documenting the success of overall practice models in social

work can be challenging (Diehl & Frey, 2008), partially because the problems experienced by students and families, as well as the services received, are highly individualized. As noted earlier, Tower (2000) suggested that school social workers are not highly valued by school administrators because the role of these workers is not clearly understood. Administrators unfamiliar with the role tend to carry negative attitudes toward those filling such positions.

Isolation

Kadushin and Harkness (2002) recognized that the social worker operating within a host setting experiences additional stress compared to those operating within more traditional settings. These workers not only feel the pressure associated with meeting the demands of an ever-increasing caseload, but also that related to the necessity of justifying their decisions to a critical audience of professionals. Because the number of social workers within school settings is historically low, these workers struggle with a sense of aloneness, isolation, and overwhelming self-reliance (Caselman & Brandt, 2007). As is evidenced within existing literature, supportive work environments that provide ample opportunity for professional-development opportunities equate to social workers who provide high-quality services, derive greater gratification from their jobs, and who are committed to their profession (Acker, 2004). The sense of isolation dissipates and school social workers report a greater commitment to remain on the job when a sense of teamwork and connection between the worker, administrator, counselor, and other school personnel is present (Caselman & Brandt, 2007).

Supervision

The Code of Ethics compiled by the National Association of Social Workers (2002) clearly states that the supervision of school-social-work programs must be provided by credentialed and experienced social workers with master's degrees in the field; yet, this is rarely the case. According to Openshaw (2008), "School social workers often are supervised by educators, who focus on education and protecting the school district, while social workers focus on the client" (p. 22). The supervision of social workers by individuals external to the field of social work is viewed as a lack of valuation surrounding social work as a profession within the organization (Kadushin, Berger, Gilbert, & de St. Aubin, 2009). Some school social workers receive no supervision at all (Bogo & McKnight, 2005). This can be a particularly challenging dynamic for those workers for whom proper supervision is ingrained during the course of their education.

While school social workers are required to possess an in-depth understanding of both the human-service and education systems, they are generally supervised by trained educators with limited knowledge of the human-services field and often by individuals who have no desire to understand the field. Many supervisors have no background in social work, forcing workers to spend valuable time explaining not only what they do, but why they do it (Gleason-Leyba, 2009; Tower, 2000). Garrett and Barretta-Herman (1995) found that less than 25% of school social workers are supervised by a social worker, and only 10% of the school social workers surveyed reported the existence of an accurate job description.

Administrators charged with the supervision of school social workers may struggle with the need to serve as advocates for the social workers they serve. This is partially true because, over time, while they may become familiar with the role of the social workers, other administrators may remain uneducated in this area. Even when school social workers are provided with supportive supervisors with a sense of the role and responsibilities of the workers, the social workers are typically left on their own. As noted by Gleason-Leyba (2009), even with supportive leadership, school social workers are frequently left to shape their own roles. This can lead to a "double-edged-sword" dichotomy because it can be beneficial for appropriate program development, but also lead to the demise of the social worker if a problem emerges due to the lack of authoritarian support.

Caselman and Brandt (2007) noted that social workers who sensed that their roles were understood and supported by school administrators have reported high levels of job satisfaction and empowerment along with a desire to remain in their positions for the long term. Two additional studies that assessed the job satisfaction of school social workers found that these workers report high levels of job satisfaction when they have school administrators who demonstrate a commitment to the work (Pamperin, 1987) and when there is congruency between the worker and administrator regarding the role of the worker (Agresta, 2004). These issues—job satisfaction, commitment, and support—are all linked to empowerment and self-efficacy.

Social workers within the education system often encounter the necessity to legitimize their presence as a school professional, similar to school psychologists and

counselors (Altshuler & Reid-Webb, 2009). School social workers must become more proactive in their efforts to educate those within their school systems surrounding their role and related programmatic outcomes. They must also advocate for appropriate supervision (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002). Being a "guest" within a host setting, such as a public school system, presents complex challenges for social workers and amplifies the need for regular supervision (Bye & Alvarez, 2007). Bogo and McKnight (2005) asserted that supervision in social work is driven by the respective organization. The organizational culture and political imperatives determine the type of supervision.

Supervision realties for school social workers are far from ideal and, in some circumstances, nonexistent. Garrett and Barretta-Herman (1995) found that fewer than 25% of these workers receive supervision from a social worker. In agencies where social services is the primary function, supervision is generally provided by designated social workers filling administrative positions and who have greater experience or a higher level of formal education than the workers under their authority. This allows less experienced social workers to learn from more seasoned individuals through shared work experiences. In schools, this supervisory function is typically delegated to an education administrator trained as a teacher and subsequently as a school administrator.

Social workers face a variety of job-related stressors; the work is challenging with a high degree of risk. Social workers are supporters, but the stress of assisting others can become overwhelming. Quality supervision has been found to reduce job burnout for these workers and allows a focus on client needs rather than personal needs (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002). Collins-Camargo and Millar (2010) noted that regular, well-informed,

and sensitive supervision emphasizing care and appropriate autonomy, rather than an excessive focus on standards setting, will also provide appropriate advice and clear information on agency procedures and practice to enhance the overall career experience for social workers. Social-work supervision is a rather complex process that has benefitted from a wide range of research.

Ethical Concerns

School-based mental-health professionals have an ethical and fiduciary responsibility to the students they serve, and the ethical decision-making model is a process available to all social workers (Raines & Dibble, 2011). The struggle for these professionals manifests when the host organization does not share the same ethical values. Ethical dilemmas can be caused by a variety of factors such as a lack of funding and inadequate supervision (Openshaw, 2008). Raines and Dibble (2011) advanced that regularly scheduled opportunities to address ethical problems decreases the professional isolation that is a significant problem among professionals working within host institutions such as schools.

Bowers and Pipes (2000) documented the following seven advantages to ethical consultation for social-work practitioners:

- Stimulation of the thinking process, resulting in the generation of new ideas or options resolving an ethical predicament.
- Receipt of feedback surrounding current thinking and the quality of ideas under consideration.
- Generation of new options that would not normally be considered.

- Discovery of personal factors and conflicts not previously apparent.

Reassurance that the best effort is being extended to clients.

- Greater confidence in client outcomes.

- Reduction of legal liability.

A regularly scheduled time to meet and discuss ethical concerns decreases professional isolation for school social workers working within a host setting (Raines & Dibble, 2011).

Summary

This review of literature related to the topic of study provided a rationale for the necessity of the research. The school social worker has played an integral role within school systems since the early 1900s (Bye & Alvarez, 2007); yet, these workers continue to struggle with issues such as the divergent goals between education institutions with the primary aim of educating students and school social workers seeking to provide mental-health services (Massat, Constable & McDonald, 2009). Such divergence can lead to a sense of professional tension and dissonance among school social workers, potentially impinging upon the work they perform (Link, 1991). Attempting to meet the competing needs of their profession and those identified by the school can lead to school social workers feeling disenfranchised. Indeed, these workers have expressed concerns that amplify their lack of empowerment within the workplace (Agresta, 2006; Altshuler & Reid-Webb, 2009; Bye et al., 2009; Garrett & Barretta-Herman, 1995), and such lack clearly has an adverse impact on their self-efficacy (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010).

School social workers have an incredible ability to impact children and families. A thorough understanding of the experiences of these workers surrounding empowerment and self-efficacy within the workplace could make a valuable contribution to the field of school social work and other professions such as school counselors and psychologists who encounter similar situations. Future implications of the exploration include the enhancement of self-efficacy and empowerment for school social workers, potentially improving their service delivery.

The appropriate methodology for analyzing the spectrum of experiences encountered by school social workers, as they relate to empowerment and self-efficacy within the workplace, is an important consideration. An overview of the manner in which the research questions were addressed, and by whom, is provided in the following chapter. The data-collection procedures and instrumentation are also described, as is the data-analysis schema.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to develop an in-depth understanding of the spectrum of experiences encountered by school social workers related to empowerment and self-efficacy within the workplace. The following two research questions guided the study:

1. What is the spectrum of empowerment experiences encountered by school social workers?

2. How do social workers become efficacious within the host setting of the school?

Themes

Theme identification is one of the most fundamental tasks of qualitative research (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Maxwell (1996) explained that this identification is equivalent to the conceptualizing step in the data-analysis process. The following priori themes were thought to potentially emerge from the data collected in the study: (a) a sense of belonging among school social workers as members of the school team, (b) perceptions of the school-social-work role, (c) empowerment of school social workers, (d) efficacy of school social workers, and (e) networking versus isolation of school social workers. Priori themes were derived from characteristics of the phenomenon under study and from preestablished definitions drawn from existing literature (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Research Tradition

Qualitative research methods are applied when a phenomenon of human nature is to be studied in depth and when variables cannot be easily identified (Creswell, 2007).

Due to the lack of existing investigation focused on school social workers, defining

variables for the proposed study was challenging. According to Creswell (2007),

"Qualitative research begins with assumptions, the possible use of a theoretical lens and

the study of research problems; inquiring into the meaning that individuals or groups

ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 36). This was accomplished in the study by

entering the world of the school social worker. Face-to-face interviews, journaling, and

observation of the participants helped to gain a deeper understanding of how school

social workers describe their experiences with empowerment and self-efficacy within the

workplace.

Patton (2002) outlined the benefits of open-ended interview questions, postulating

that this type of questioning allows researchers to understand the world as viewed by the

respondents. Such questioning allows an understanding and capturing of the perspectives

of participants without predetermining those viewpoints. Patton advanced that data can be

collected via three different means—(a) discussion using open-ended questions, or focus

groups with small groups of participants; (b) observation of participants, and

(c) document review. Direct quotes can be drawn from the interviews to gain further

insight into the feelings and perspectives of the respondents. Written documents, such as

journals, case notes, presentations, publications, and reports, can be used to assess

information on the study participants and their environment.

The most familiar qualitative approaches include ethnography, case study,

grounded theory, phenomenology, and a general approach. Phenomenology aims to gain

a more in-depth understanding of the meaning of the daily experiences of the population

under study (Patton, 2002), while narrative qualitative research is conducted when the researcher desires to use the stories of individuals as data (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Grounded theory supports the development of new theory or refining existing theory. It allows a focus on the process of generating theory (Moustakas,1994). Grounded theory is applied to build rather than test theory and involves unraveling the elements of an experience. This method is dependent upon very specific steps and procedures, and participants are selected in a very different manner than is implemented with other methods of qualitative inquiry. Participants are selected to build and verify theory.

Ethnography is the earliest distinct method of qualitative inquiry, and the notion of culture is central to this design (Patton, 2002). It supports the study of a society and social problems. Examples outlined by Patton (2002) included environmental degradation, technological diffusion, and the gap between the rich and the poor. Using this research method, the investigator lives among the people under study so that participant observation is conducted in a natural manner allowing a deep understanding of the culture (Ellis et al., 2011).

Other methods of qualitative inquiry were considered for this study, but would have been less effective in providing the insight necessary to understand the lived experiences of school social workers. Phenomenology was selected because the study was conducted to seek an understanding of a phenomenon of interest that has not been previously researched, which will fill an existing gap in related literature. I did (a) investigate a phenomenon (i.e., the experiences of school social workers with empowerment and self-efficacy) that needs to be better understood by describing and

discovering its essence (Hanks, 2008); and (b) provided insight into the lived experience of school social workers, individuals who share the same phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Future research will be able to build upon the findings of this qualitative study.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in this study was to ensure that the data collected and analyzed were free from bias and personal opinion and that the study was conducted in an ethical manner. A crucial factor in conducting qualitative research is that the investigator serve as an instrument of the study and is cognizant of any personal opinions, beliefs, and bias that could affect the findings. This was particularly important in this study because I have served as a school social worker for 14 years, so it was imperative that past experience was bracketed prior to the data-collection process. *Bracketing* is a process by which the researcher suspends or sets aside bias, common understanding, and accepted theory or beliefs to examine the phenomenon in an objective fashion. This is a facet of a larger process known as *epoche,* whereby the researcher attempts to become aware of prejudices (Patton, 2002). Qualitative research is designed through decisions made by the respective researcher who is the instrument in the line of inquiry.

Participants of the Study

The participants in this study consisted of 12 school social workers, selected from a convenience sample. The study participants are all currently school-social-workers, all hold a master's degree, and are working within the state of Pennsylvania. They have all filled the role of a school social worker for a minimum duration of 3 years. The sample includes males and females of any age, gender, or race residing within any geographical

region within the state of Pennsylvania. The sample size of 12 participants is based upon past research indicating that thematic saturation is achieved at 12 participants in qualitative study (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). A purposeful, criterion-based sample was selected from a list of professionals who are members of the Pennsylvania Association of School Social Work Personnel. A letter describing the study was sent to the Association and potential participants (see Appendix B).

Procedures

Phenomenological investigation requires a series of methods and procedures that satisfy the requirements of an organized, disciplined, and systematic study (Moustakas, 1994, p.103). The following procedures served as a sequential guide for this research in the recruitment and informing of participants, the collection and analysis of data, and in validating the findings:

1. Contacted the president of the Pennsylvania Association of School for Social Work Personnel via e-mail or telephone.

2. Sent an informative letter detailing the nature of the study to the Association and requesting assistance in recruiting participants (see Appendix C).

3. The Association president was asked to distribute the letter provided in Appendix D to the membership to solicit participation.

4. Those members desiring to participate in the study contacted the researcher directly to express their interest.

5. After receiving the list of all interested individuals, participants were selected based upon the predesignated criteria.

6. Selected participants were contacted and scheduled for face-to-face interviews. The interviews took place in a mutually agreed-upon, neutral location.

7. During the interviews, each participant was required to execute a Consent Form that also described the study and contained a clause allowing the participants to discontinue their participation at any time (see Appendix E). The interview subsequently proceeded with the questions provided in Appendix A.

8. Audiotapes of the study interviews were transcribed verbatim and examined according to the preestablished steps for data analysis.

9. Follow-up interviews, e-mail correspondence, and phone calls were not conducted as they were not necessary for validation and clarification purposes.

Data Collection

The collection and analysis of data in this study were concurrently conducted. Data collection was performed over a 5-week period and cycled through the stages of analysis outlined by Moustakas (1994). Data collection consists of audiotaped, face-to-face interviews and the collection of field notes. The interview began by building rapport, signing the consent form, and gathering general information surrounding the life and experiences of the respondents. According to Patton (2002), interviewing participants allows information to be collected on those experiences that cannot be observed, as well as to capture the perspectives of those under study.

As noted earlier, the additional technique of field notes was employed during the data-collection process of this study. Fetterman (1989) explained that many options and variations are involved in taking field notes such as the time and place of recording, the manner of storage, and the writing materials used. The manual nature of the note taking is not optional. Field notes contain direct quotations that provide insight into the perspectives of those observed. Patton (2002) documented that field notes can serve at least four purposes—(a) assist the interviewer with formulating new questions as the interview progresses forward, (b) provide early insight potentially relevant to pursue in subsequent interviews, (c) facilitate later analysis with important quotations, and (d) serve as a backup in the event of recorder malfunction or operator error. The use of in-depth interviews and field notes in this study assisted with garnering participant experience in rich detail.

Data were organized by creating files of the transcribed interviews. The files and recordings are maintained in a locked filing cabinet within my home office and I will have sole access. The interviews were transcribed after each was conducted rather than waiting until all have been completed. As the data was transcribed, the process of analyzing the information began and continued as all interviews were completed. Follow-up interviews were not needed but would have been scheduled if information was uncovered through the review of the transcripts or data-analysis process that required clarification.

Data Analysis

The data collected in this study was analyzed through the Moustakas (1994) framework of thematic content analysis. Several of the methods presented by Moustakas were reviewed and this framework was deemed to be the most applicable for this research. It is based upon a simplified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. Moustakas recommended a step-by-step process for phenomenological data analysis. Step 1 involves a full description of the experiences of the researcher relative to the phenomenon under study. This element was particularly appealing because I am a school social worker. This step is recommended so the personal experiences of the researcher can be separated from the experiences of those under study.

During the second step of the Moustakas (1994) framework for data analysis, the experiences of the participants that are relative to the phenomenon will be recorded. Described as textural descriptions, this step could include quotes taken directly from transcripts. The third step is recording how the participants experienced the phenomenon and the structural description of their experiences. This stage also includes when and where the phenomenon occurred for the participants. Step 4 involves the development of significant statements made by the participants that relate to the phenomenon; in this case, to empowerment and self-efficacy. Moustakas referred to such statements as *meaning units.* Step 5 is categorizing the statements or meaning units by grouping (i.e., clustering) them into themes. Step 6 involves developing a composite description of the phenomenon, incorporating both textural and structural descriptions. This provides the overall essence of the experiences.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Verification of Findings

The findings of this research were verified rather than validated, which is common in qualitative study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) asserted that verification of the findings maintains the spirit of qualitative inquiry. Their recommendations for such verification consist of procedures comprising persistent observation, triangulation, peer review, negative case analysis, clarification of researcher bias, member checking, rich and thick descriptions, and/or external audits. This research employed peer review; clarification of researcher bias; triangulation; member checks; and rich, thick descriptions.

Triangulation

This study is fitting for the implementation of triangulation. Patton (2002) explained that triangulation uses different data sources of information by examining evidence from the sources and using it to build a coherent justification for themes (p.555). Rich data, collected from audiotaped interviews and field notes, were cross-referenced to ensure that I was not projecting any bias into the findings.

Member Checks

Considered the single, most important provision for strengthening the credibility of a study (Guba & Lincoln, 1985), member checks involve confirming the interpretation of the data with the participants. Member checking in this study was conducted in two ways. During the interviews, the participant responses were restated or summarized for the interviewees to acknowledge interpretation accuracy. Member checks were also

conducted during and upon study completion by distributing the findings with the participants. This allowed the sample to critically analyze the findings and provide any desired comments. The participants affirmed the summaries and reflected their views, feelings, and experiences.

Rich Data

The last category of verification employed in this study is rich, thick description, which is described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as a way of achieving external validity. By describing a phenomenon in sufficient detail, the extent to which the conclusions drawn are generalizable to other times, settings, situations, and people can be evaluated.

Discrepant Evidence

Discrepant evidence refers to data that are contrary to themes or categories (i.e., information that does not comply with any expected outcome, but that was reported). This information is still included in the analysis to ensure that all perspectives are represented. Including the discrepant evidence also adds to the validity of the study.

Peer Review

The dissertation chairperson and other committee members reviewed the study and procedures incorporated and asked for comments or questions. This approach also decreased the likelihood of personal bias on the part of the researcher and the inherent inaccurate conclusions.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of a study can be applied to other situations (Merriam, 1998). The findings of the proposed research can benefit all providers of human services within school settings such as counselors and psychologists.

Confirmability

Shenton (2004) explained that confirmability is objectivity to the qualitative investigator. Miles and Huberman (1994) advanced that a key element to ensuring confirmability is researcher ability to admit personal predispositions. I readily admitted personal bias and created questions that assessed the spectrum of experiences encountered by school social workers, as they relate to empowerment and self-efficacy, to ensure confirmability.

<div align="center">Ethical Protection of Participants</div>

Researchers have an obligation to respect the rights, needs, values, and desires of all informants (Creswell, 2009). A facet of the required procedure to ensure the protection of study participants was the process mandated by the Institutional Review Board to monitor research for Walden University. Approval for this research was obtained through the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB # 09-07-13-0036398). No known harm was associated with participating in this study. However, the in-depth interviews did hold the potential to be intrusive in nature; hence, there was careful consideration throughout data collection to protect the participants from any such violation. The study sample was comprised of adult school social workers who were free to choose whether to participate. These individuals were briefed on their right to

withdraw from the study at any time. If a participant decided to withdraw or not to participate at the onset, they were informed that no repercussions would have resulted from that decision. Had a participant experienced psychological distress, they would have been provided with information on counseling services in their area (National Institute of Health, 2009). The participants will be identified solely by age, gender, and geographical location within the state of Pennsylvania, as well as their social work credentials and years working within the field of social work.

The objectives of this research were made known to the participants and each individual completed a consent form prior to the study interview. The interviews were conducted throughout the state of Pennsylvania and all identifying information has been removed from the study documentation; hence, confidentiality will be protected. Files, audiotapes, and transcripts are stored in a locked cabinet within my home office. Only myself and dissertation committee members will have access to the transcripts; however, if the participants are given verbatim transcripts of their own interviews at their request, identifying information will be removed from the transcripts prior distribution. A copy of the informed-consent form is provided in Appendix D. The collected data will be maintained for a period of 5 years on an encrypted external hard drive accessible only to me. All data will then be destroyed by reformatting the external hard drive; all hard copies will be shredded.

Chapter Summary

The methods and processes that were employed in the study have been discussed and the selected phenomenological methodology that was applied to investigate the

experiences of school social workers with self-efficacy and empowerment have been described. Semi- structured interviews were conducted as the methodological approach in this qualitative phenomenological study. A research journal was also maintained, as well as field notes to record participant observation.

The data-collection methods helped to establish the validity of the study. However, a major limitation of the research may be reliability due to the small sample and their location within the single state of Pennsylvania. The findings are reported through presentation of the data, the analysis of the screening information, and the in-depth interviews. Emerging themes are discussed, as well as recommendations toward social change.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

From the beginning of the profession, school social workers have been working as guests in host settings where the mission and decisions are defined and dominated by people who are not social workers (Oberhofer-Dane & Simon, 1991). Although the host agencies may have different goals and values, school social workers still need to demonstrate their relevance to the organization hosting them (Garrett, 2006). These workers report being misunderstood, misdirected, and unsupported, all elements that suggest struggles with empowerment and self-efficacy. What has not been documented in the literature is the empowerment and self-efficacy experiences of school social workers. This study is the first step in filling a void in the literature to better understand what these workers experience. The overarching research questions focused on the spectrum of empowerment experiences encountered by these workers and how they have become efficacious within their practice environment. School social workers were interviewed and they provided information regarding their experience.

This chapter details the processes in which participants were recruited; the profile of each participant; how the data were obtained, store securely, and analyzed; the steps of verification used to ensure accurate and quality data were collected; and the identification of themes.

Recruitment

Sample recruitment was conducted as planned and outlined in the study design. The collaborating organization The Pennsylvania Association of School Social Work

Personnel (PASSWP), followed instructions outlined in the research proposal research

for sample recruitment. The intended recruitment process for participants was to solicit

the assistance of PASSWP as an avenue to identify individuals for this study. This

process proved to be very successful. The initial recruitment step included an email that

was sent out to the general PASSWP membership (Appendix D) requesting that

interested parties contact me directly.   The process designed for sample recruitment was

followed accordingly. I was then permitted by PASSWP to make an announcement

regarding potential participation at their annual state conference, which occurred on

September 20, 2013 in Hershey, Pennsylvania. The response rates were as abundant as I

had predicted. From the 17 individuals who expressed interest in participating, I chose

12 to interview. There were several individuals who volunteered who serve as school

social workers in private schools or in schools operated by Intermediate Units. The study

was limited to individuals working in public schools. Decisions regarding which

individuals were included were made based on the previously determined criteria;

practicing school social work for a minimum of 3 years and currently employed as a

school social worker in Pennsylvania. I also took into consideration geographical

locations as to maximize the representation from as much of the state of Pennsylvania as

possible. Individuals selected for participation, when contacted, appeared eager to be

interviewed demonstrated a high response rate and freely volunteeed to participate in

study. The process to acquire participants was without difficulty, a fortunate result of

working in helping profession is the willingness of school social workers to assist one

another.

All interviews were conducted in the state of Pennsylvania and this collection occurred over a 12 week period during the last week in September, October, and early November 2013, spanning a 5 week period. The research tools used in the study were, semistructured interviews, field notes, and a researcher's journal. All data collection adhered to standard procedures, and ethical guidelines to ensure confidentiality and validity as described in Chapter 3.

Demographics

This study sought to interview school social workers who were currently employed in said role and held the position for a minimum of 3 years. The population sample proposed in the study was acquired as planned through the cooperative efforts of the Pennsylvania Association of School Social Work Personnel. The age range was between 33 years and 62 years of age, gender equally represented, mixed ethnicity, and reported practicing school social work for 4 to 14 years.

Data Collection

As the purpose of this research study was to gain insight into the lived experiences of school social workers, it was necessary that these professionals' stories be told. The phenomenological approach allowed for this method (story telling) through the use of personal interviews.

Participants Profiles

Table 1

Participant Overview

Participant	Age Range	Number of Years	Gender	Degree	Race
P1	50-60	10	Female	MSW	White
P2	40-50	5	Male	MSW	White
P3	60-70	10	Male	MSW	Black
P4	30-40	9	Male	MSW	White
P5	40-50	12	Male	MSW	White
P6	30-40	6	Female	MSW	White
P7	40-50	8	Female	MSW	White
P8	40-50	6	Female	MSW	Black
P9	30-40	4	Female	MSW	White
P10	40-50	10	Female	MSW	White
P11	40-50	14	Female	MSW	White
P12	40-50	6	Female	MSW	White

Data collection occurred as anticipated and outlined in Chapter 3 and the data were generated by interviewing 12 participants. Each participant was interviewed in person at a location chosen by them and venues included my office, the worker's own office, meeting rooms in their schools, and a local restaurant. Adhering to confidentiality protocol, participant names were not included but replaced with unique identifiers. Additionally, identifiers of locations were eliminated as well. The length of the interviews ranged from 31 to 46 minutes. Consent forms were reviewed and signed at the beginning of the interview.

Semi-structured Interviews

Participants were asked to respond to each question but were assured that no pressure would occur if they did not for any reason wish to answer any question. Participants were prompted to expand on or clarify statements as needed and additional

clarified information was given, if requested. The questions that were asked are included in Attachment A.

Field Notes

The use of in-depth interviews and field notes in this study assisted with garnering participant experience in rich detail. As each individual was interviewed, I documented many of their statements right on the interview guide. Using field notes proved to be valuable during the interview process as a manner in which to divert some of my direct eye contact with participants when they were speaking. This appeared to allow the interviewees an additional level of comfort.

Researcher's Journal

The journal served as an integral part of the interview process. Information included in the journal included a log of all participants, assigned identifiers, contact information, date of interview, and notes which served as reminders of critical participant statements. Interview reflections and observations were also noted. The journal assisted with researcher continuity and provided a singular location for recording both germane and tangent thoughts relative to the interview process. The journal was divided into multiple sections including: (a) a complete chronicle of all activities directly relating to the research effort, email distribution and responses, participant contact and interview scheduling, transcription processes, theme identification and coding evolutions; (b) participant interview details and, (c) researcher notes and observations.

Data Maintenance and Security

The interview journal also served as a research log that included confidential participant information, interview details, and my own personal experiences. The research log, digital audio files, and all transcriptions (when not in my possession) were secured in my home office in a locked filing cabinet. All computer files were backed up on an external hard drive that is password protected, updated after every change in data and maintained in the same locked cabinet. A unique folder was created for each participant, with all filed (transcriptions and digital voice files) being maintained in the participants respective folders. All identifying information was removed from the transcripts prior to the verification procedures.

Data Analysis

The entire analysis process aims to examine the lived experience from the ones who produced the experience rather than imposition of other people's interpretations. It should be the interpretations of the participants in the phenomenon under study that define the commonalties of the lived experience in the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). It is not the researcher's own thinking of the phenomenon, the other researchers' experience of the phenomenon, or the theoretical descriptions of the phenomenon that are under analysis (Moustakas, 1994).

The theming and coding of data were performed in stages. The interview transcripts were transcribed, printed out, and analyzed through a multistep process using the modified version of the Van Kamm method of data analysis presented by Karl Moustakas.

The first step involved reading each transcript in its entirety to gain a general understanding of what the data were providing. Referred to as horizonalization by, this step involved going through each transcript numerous times and highlighting significant statements or quotes that provide insight into how the participants experienced the phenomenon.

The second step, reduction and elimination involved identifying the invariant constituents, which involves looking at two requirements. These requirements suggested by Moustakas (1994) for inclusion as a horizon of experience would be: (a) Does it contain a moment of the experience that is necessary and sufficient for understanding it, and (b) Is it possible to abstract and label it? (p.121) Expressions not meeting the above requirements were eliminated leaving the invariant constituents.

Step three involved developing clusters of meaning. During this stage of the data analysis process, I revisited all of the significant statements that were previously highlighted and themes began to emerge from these clusters of meaning. These clustered and labeled constituents are the core themes of the experiences of school social workers with empowerment and self-efficacy in the workplace.

Final identification of the invariant constituents and themes occurred in the fourth step of the data analysis process. This was done by assessing three questions: (a) Are they expressed explicitly in the complete transcription, (b) Are they compatible if not explicitly expressed, and (c) If they are not explicit or compatible, they are not relevant to the experience and should be eliminated.

Constructing an individual textural description of the experience occurred during step 5. I was able to write a description of the context or setting that influenced the school social workers experiences with empowerment and self-efficacy in the workplace. Whereby step 6 encompasses the constructing of an individual structural description for each school social worker interviewed. Individual textural descriptions were completed for six of the participants and an example is included at Appendix G. There were also six individual structural descriptions created, this encompasses the how of the school social workers experienced with empowerment and self-efficacy. An example of one of the individual structural descriptions is found in Appendix H.

Combining the individual textural description and the individual structural description for each participant allowed me to construct a Textural-Structural Description of the meaning and essences of the empowerment and self-efficacy experience of the school social workers interviewed. I created a textural-structural description for six of the participants as well. An example of one of these is included is Appendix I.

The final step involved creating a composite description of the entire participant poll. From the individual textural and structural descriptions, I was able to write a composite description that represents the essence of school social workers experiences with empowerment and self-efficacy in the workplace.

While individual participant's descriptions varied, they revealed common themes throughout the structure of their work experience. Themes were included as outcomes when at least half, six or more, of the participants recognized said theme as part of their experience. These themes will be further discussed later in this chapter and include:

Supervision is Educational not Clinical, School Personnel do not Understand the Roles and responsibilities of School Social Workers, School Social Workers Connectedness versus Isolation, Communication with Stakeholders Regarding Duties and Outcomes of School Social Work Programming, The Impact of Funding on Services and Job Security and the emergent theme, School Social Workers Commitment to Service. Information on discrepant cases will also be reported.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness helps one evaluate the quality of a phenomenological study and suggests that the research is worth paying attention to. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are elements of trustworthiness that were considered in this research effort.

Once interviews were completed, transcribed, and analyzed, the process of verification followed. The data for this study were verified by peer review, clarifying researcher bias, member checks, and rich, thick description. Of the utilized methods, a rich, thick description has been demonstrated by using direct quotes taken from the transcribed interviews to provide support for the expressions listed in group descriptions. Additionally, one complete transcribed interview is provided, as an example in Appendix F.

As part of clarifying researcher bias it is known that I am a school social worker and has experienced a spectrum of empowerment and self-efficacy experiences throughout my fifteen years in said role. To temper any researcher bias, I employed epoche, particularly, the technique of bracketing, where I made a conscience effort to set

aside my own personal bias. As part of this process, I kept a researcher journal in which I wrote down my biases prior to collecting data. In working through this technique, I was very honest and able to first recognize and then make a conscience effort to suppress my own biases.

The process of member checks was completed after the transcripts were analyzed and verified. Member checking is a process verifying the accuracy of the findings with each participant involved in the study and proved to be worthwhile in this study.

Credibility

As the participant alone is able to validate the credibility of findings based upon reports from the interview data, member checking was an integral part of the study. Each participant was provided a transcript of their interview for verification of accuracy, via email. All of the participants responded back to me indicating that they felt the transcripts were valid and correct. Triangulation of data was employed for achievement of credibility as well. The audio taped interviews, field notes and careful documentation of research protocol represented data triangulation for this study. It was necessary to be very intentional about bracketing as I fit the criteria for this study, serving as a school social worker for over fourteen years. Through my own experience I have preconceived notions about this phenomenon, where if not bracketed, had the potential to hinder my ability to fully experience the participants' experiences with empowerment and self-efficacy. One method of bracketing that I employed was to create a list of preconceived notions, as they were expected to be found through the data collection efforts: That school social workers (a) would express some frustration with their supervision practices

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and (b) would share that they found great enjoyment in their jobs despite some of the struggles that they shared. Through this very intentional process of creating a list of preconceived notions, I was able to first recognize my own biases which allowed me to work to ensure that I remained cognizant of these preconceived notions, thereby limiting the potentiality of these notions impacting the outcomes.

Transferability

The nature of a phenomenological study limits the transferability to very similar participants of the particular study. The findings of this study optimistically will be of benefit to all of the providers of human services in school settings such as school counselors and school psychologists. Many of the school social workers in this study referenced their colleagues, school psychologists, school nurses, and school counselors explaining often that they feel they are all in a similar situation.

Dependability

Dependability was achieved through this study by a clear and concise explanation of all elements of the research. All processes were reported in detail, thereby permitting future research to be replicated should someone desire to do that.

Confirmability

I was very cautious to frame the study as an exploration into the spectrum of school social workers empowerment and self-efficacy experiences to be certain that all experiences were captured. Throughout the study, I carefully documented the procedures employed for checking and rechecking the data to ensure that all major theme and meaning units were captured.

Results: Themes Related to Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to discover how school social workers describe their experiences with empowerment and self-efficacy in the workplace. The findings below are presented by stating the term used to label the experience, which stemmed from the analysis process, and are followed by what these findings meant for the school social workers in this study. These are then followed by analysis of the research questions concerning empowerment and self-efficacy. Finally, discrepant cases are discussed. There were six themes identified through the data analysis process, of which one is an emergent theme, and three subthemes.

Themes and subthemes were identified and included as part of the composite description if a majority of the participants (7 out of 12) identified the same experience, somewhere on the spectrum, from positive to negative. Verbatim sample of participants' responses, including grammatical errors and slang language, are provided to increase the accurate description of the participants lived experiences.

Theme 1: Supervision is educational and not clinical.

Theme 1 emerged from interview questions 6 and 21. Participants were asked about their supervision experiences as a school social worker. Unanimously, all participants acknowledged that they do not receive clinical supervision as a school social worker. The majority explained that they received instruction from their supervisor but do not interact in a manner that would increase their skills as a school social worker. When questioned about supervision received, participants recognized that the supervision received in schools varies greatly from the model that they were taught to have in

graduate school. The supervision that they receive was classified by several school social workers as educational rather than clinical.

The school social workers who were interviewed reported that it is sometimes unclear who exactly their supervisor is, which create challenges when gaining direction and feedback. While supervision was identified as a concern with all participants, more specific examples regarding the lack of clarify over who exactly serves in that role also surfaced.

Examples follow:

P1: I am not really sure who my supervisor is. I had one, when I was first hired, it was the special ed. Supervisor and when her tenure was up here, I was passed to the principal and I suppose the principal is that person but I have a lot of bosses who tell me what to do and I bow to everyone.

P5: Well, first of all, that's always an issue because we don't always know all the time who our supervisor is. We each in our high schools have an assistant principal who is in charge of pupil services so she is our supervisor but ███████ and I have, I have 9 schools and she has 8 schools. So, we have a principal in each of those buildings who in theory at any moment could be a supervisor. We have a supervisor of pupil service who at any moment is a supervisor and we have our director of special ed. Who at any moment is our supervisor and ultimately, our superintendent is our supervisor so….. we have a lot of supervisors.

P6: Supervision is a problem, although my supervisors I don't think know that because that is also a sensitive topic. Supervision in school districts is a big topic,

you know we have all these policies on how we are supervised but none of them teach me how to be a better social worker. They are all teacher related. However, I am in eight buildings and each building has a principal who thinks they are my supervisor and who is one of my supervisor. My supervisor has a supervisor who I often talk to because he is the director of special services. Every student who is special education has a supervisor. There are so many supervisors who supervise me but yet none of them are social workers and have any clue about what I should be doing. But I don't feel like they know what my role should be.

P7: Not existent, very limited. It's like everybody is watching but nobody is. Because I really, when I am here, if I'm doing something with a middle school student, I report to the middle school principal. If I am doing something with a high school student, I report to the high school principal. I've got a principal at (███████████) and then all of their assistants. There is the director of special education. My supervisor is really the director of support services who I haven't had a meeting with yet this school year.

Summary of Theme 1: Supervision is educational not clinical. All of the participants in this study reported struggles with the supervision they receive as school social workers. Common amongst all of the participants was their own concern over a lack of traditional clinical supervision, which is regarded as the norm in social work practice. The participants were also able to narrow down to more specific concerns regarding supervision which included not being clear on exactly who their supervisor is

or the number of individuals filling that role and the inability to have access to their supervisor.

Theme 2: School Personnel do not understand the roles and responsibilities of school social workers.

Theme 2 emerged from the answers to questions 1, 2, 6 and 7. Participants were asked about the understanding of a variety of stakeholders regarding their role as school social workers. The majority of participants shared that school personnel and their supervisors struggle to understand the work they perform, out of the 12 participants, 10 shared that school personnel, such as teachers, lack an understanding of what their role entails. The majority of the participants, seven, shared that their direct supervisor lacks understanding of their role as a school social worker. Many of the workers expressed professional respect for their supervisor lauding the individual as an educator while recognizing they do not come from a social work paradigm.

> P3: Let me say this. Every year I have to explain to the teachers what I do. So, they have to be reminded every year of the things that I do in the school district.
>
> P6: There are so many supervisors who supervise me but yet none of them are social workers and have any clue about what I should be doing.
>
> P7: (supervisor's name) does, the director of support services. Last year, he evaluated me without seeing me interact with anyone. Now he is a principal at a building that I don't even go to. So, this year I feel very rogue, like very much like I am on my own, just trying to do what I am supposed to do with very limited direction.

P8: What they initially thought I did was only work with minorities and poor children. We have come a long way but there is still work to do.

P9: I don't think they have any idea. And I think even if you try to explain to them, they don't, they truly don't understand because they see you purely as therapeutic.

P10: Minimal (understanding). I am the only social worker in the district. I'm not supervised by a social worker. I am supervised by an educator and she's very supportive and she's very appreciative of what I do but I don't think she has the same frame of reference that I do. We don't have supervisory sessions where I really get the chance to talk to her about what I'm doing and what guidance I might need.

Subtheme 1: Families have an understanding of the role and responsibilities of school social workers. While there was an expressed lack of understanding of the school social worker role with supervisors and school personnel, seven out of the 12 participants felt that the families they serve have a pretty clear understanding of what a school social worker can do, most of them clarifying in their responses that the families have a much better understanding of their role than school personnel or supervisors.

P1: Most of the families for better or for worse know what social workers do.

P3: I think the families have a better understanding because they are more aware of what social workers do. They know that when they work with me that I am going to be doing things like providing them with counseling perhaps, referrals to different agencies to help them with different things.

P11: I think that it's more clear than maybe than even the teachers. Because when I am contacting them it is with a clear direct goal that we are attempting to work through.

Summary of theme 2: School personnel do not understand the roles and responsibilities of school social workers. School social workers reported that staff and their supervisors come from a different frame of reference and often it is challenging to have to explain their role time and time again. Many shared that the families they serve have a much better understanding of the role of a school social worker largely because they have worked with human service providers in some capacity outside of school. These workers did report that the lack of understanding of their role by school personnel and supervisors is a source of frustration for them.

Theme 3: School Social Workers Connectedness versus Isolation in the Workplace. Theme 3 emerged from interview questions 18, 19, and 20. Participants were questioned about their level of connectedness, to their district, to their home building and to various supportive individuals in their workplace.

Eight out of 12 of the participants found that they are not very connected to the district as a whole, while seven out of 12 indicated that they feel more connected to the building where they are housed than the district as a whole. Participants reported struggling with being the only person, or one of a very small number, in their role in the district.

P7: I was more connected when I was in the high school guidance office because I did some things with that group sort of as a subgroup but now I'm not with them

anymore. So then it is kind of like out of sight, out of mind with them, I sort of feel like I am a little lone ranger and yet, I feel like I know a lot of people here. It is a weird thing.

P8: Very. I am here 3.5 days out of 6. This is the building that I feel most comfortable in, the most connected to. I actually start each day here and finish each day here, only because it's where all my resources are.

P9: I would probably say although I don't feel very connected, I am probably more connected than anyone else. Like for me and the school psychologist, we are the only 2 people who go to every building but I still don't even feel that connected. I still go into the other schools and feel like I am a visitor. I feel like I could be coming from an outside therapy center and be as connected to the other buildings as I am. I would probably say although I don't feel very connected, I am probably more connected than anyone else.

P10: I'm almost kind of my own entity, which has its advantages but it also has its disadvantages. The building principals, I am in three different buildings primarily, and the building principals I don't think have any idea what I am doing and what my role is and I think they're OK with that. I think as long as I'm not causing any waves or causing trouble for anybody, I think they're more than content to let me do my own thing.

P11: I don't like feeling like an island. Sometimes I feel like I don't have a person I can talk to about some of these things. The counselors are their own group. There are 11 of them, they get together, they are like a real department

and here, it's me. So, that is probably the only time I feel powerless, not because I can't get my way but because I can't process. I have no one to process with.

Summary of Theme 3: School social workers connectedness versus isolation in the workplace. Participants expressed sincere dismay over the lack of a department to connect to. In many cases, the school social workers interviewed were able to identify several individuals within their workplace with whom they feel connected and have developed supportive relationships. When discussing district level and building connectedness, the workers used words like *island, lonely, rogue, lone ranger,* and *red-headed stepchild.*

Theme 4: Communication with Stakeholders regarding duties and outcomes of school social work programming.

Theme 4 emerged from interview questions 4 and 8.Communication was touted as a manner in which to increase empowerment and self-efficacy for many participants. The participants all shared a variety of manners by which they communicate with stakeholders, both internal and more macro level. School social workers felt that they were strong in their efforts to communicate internally but were weak when sharing outcomes with external stakeholders, such as the community and school boards.

P1: Be seen and be heard, be very very visable and let people know how damn busy you are. The other half of that is to reinvent yourself.

P4: I think just working with the district and letting them know what is working, communicating with the district about the program, and what is working. Communicating with the district about what is needed and the successes that the

program is having on an individual level and then a macro and micro level.

Macro being the whole emotional support and the kids overall.

Subtheme 1: Communication with internal stakeholders. Eight of the 12 participants acknowledge the importance of communication with internal stakeholders, such as teachers and school administrators.

Participants were eager and willing to share some of the communication methods that they employ internally to gain visibility and empowerment in the workplace.

P2: Having something on paper like this binder which was created a few years ago where we use a form to document the note not everyone does that, I don't think the other two do that but I do because if someone says, what have you been doing, you can show them the binder and you have clear documentation that you have been doing stuff.

P3: I make sure that I interact with administration, consult with the teachers, work with the students to get that empowerment.

P6: We have a lot of say. They allow us to give our opinion. Maybe they don't take our opinion but we are including in a lot of macro policy making and procedure improvement making meetings and that kind of stuff. I also think that myself in the other social worker advocate our skills in that area. If we weren't asking to be there, they probably would not invite us but we are the ones going hey we need to meet about this policy.

Subtheme 2: Communication with macro level stakeholders. These participants recognized that they could be stronger in the area of communicating with

macro level stakeholders such as school board and community members. Seven of the

participants recognized that this is an important element in both becoming more

empowered and being more efficacious.

> P7: We don't do that much at all. I guess that kind of goes through the
>
> supervisor kind of thing. We did have some more communication with them
>
> when they were considering cutting the position. When we had the budget cuts a
>
> few years ago social work was definitely on the chopping block so we had more
>
> input with that then.
>
> P10: I have been doing a lot of networking outside of the school to develop and
>
> get more community support in place and that's what has empowered me,
>
> something a little bit bigger and maybe more meaningful than the social skills
>
> lessons that I offer in the ES rooms.

**Summary of Theme 4: Communication with stakeholders regarding duties
and outcomes of school social work programming.** School social workers indicated
that communication is vital to the success and continuation of their programs in schools.
Some of the manners in which they amplify these efforts include: writing articles for
local newspapers, reaching out to community groups, attending open houses, facilitating
in-service workshops for staff members, submitting reports to the board of school
directors, sharing programmatic successes with the public relations department.

Theme 5: The Impact of Funding on Services and job Security

Theme 5 emerged from the answers to interview question 9. Participants indicated
that the financial struggles that have plagued public education in Pennsylvania have most

definitely had an impact on their role as school social workers. Repeatedly, participants

spoke of not having enough resources for the families they serve as well as being fearful

of losing their jobs.

Individuals reported that they are concerned about their job security, certain that

they are traditionally one of the scrutinized positions each year. Ten of the 12

interviewees indicated that they absolutely feel at-risk for losing their jobs due to the

decreased state funding of education in Pennsylvania.

Of the 12 individuals interviewed seven expressed feelings of ineffectiveness

when they could not access needed services for families. Struggles accessing services

occurs for a variety of reasons according to these school social worker but it leads to

frustration for the workers and the families.

When questioned about being efficacious in their role as school social workers,

participants mentioned barriers to services and systematic constraints that are out of their

control as areas to be considered.

The social workers interviewed shared their views on how the decrease in

funding for public schools is mirrored in human service agencies as well. Seven of the

individuals interviewed indicated that they often encounter challenges finding the

resources that they need to meet the needs of the families they work with.

> P1: Absolutely positively certain that it has been discussed whether or not we
>
> need the social worker because of my salary and I am sure that has been discussed
>
> at every renewal of contracts and at every budget time. I am certain of that. I
>
> mean nobody comes up and tells me that because they are probably thinking that

they will crush me deeply and they will but I know, I can tell. There are times that I have felt a vibe, even from the guidance counselors because they have vacancies that are not going to be filled and they are very upset about that

P5: I wish that, I often think that I would like to find a way to have more housing for people. There's so many people on our Red Cross shelter waiting list that it feels useless sometimes to even tell a family to put their name on the list. Options from there are so few, you know, section 8 has been closed for years now. So there just really aren't options to help families that really want to stay tax paying citizens and raise their kids. Sadly that is usually moms, single moms. I wish there was some better ways to help them have housing.

P6: I think the services that are available in our county put a million road blocks in front of us, funding, insurance for families, transportation, housing, all those things that we battle against every day, drugs and alcohol, mental health, all those things, I think they stand in our way.

P7: When we had the budget cuts a few years ago social work was definitely on the chopping block so we had more input with them then. I think the services that are available in our county put a million road blocks in front of us, funding, insurance for families, transportation, housing, all those things that we battle against every day, drugs and alcohol, mental health, all those things, I think they stand in our way. But, in general, given what I have available to me, I'm effective.

P8: We were just having this conversation earlier. It's always a scary situation when it's negotiation time because you never know what may need to go when the budget needs to be trimmed. I don't ever want to get too comfortable with thinking that I can't be the one to go because I've seen it happen already across the board. We are definitely impacted by the budget but at the same time our administrators continue to work with us to become more self-sufficient.

P10: I think the frustrations that I have in terms of having inadequate resources to direct families to. A lot of times I am asked to connect families to health services and there's waiting lists and there's all these snafus with different medical coverage. I have had some very difficult and frustrating experiences when trying to get families what they need. That's what leaves me feeling like I am not effective.

P11: So far it hasn't been. Not that I am not anxious every year wondering if I am going to be in next years' budget. But, do I get nervous every fall thinking you have to have English teachers but you don't have to have a social worker, yes.

Summary of Theme 5: The impact of funding on services and job security.

The majority of participants, nine out of 12 admitted that they live with the uncertainty of losing their jobs. There was mention of not being a mandated position several times. While the workers indicated that they attempt not to dwell on the fact that they seem to be an "at-risk" position, it can become disconcerting when you have to always attempt to

prove your worth. School social workers also indicated that financial situations have impacted their ability to find and then to access services for the families they serve.

These participants presented a resolve to work through various barriers that stand in the way of obtaining services for children and families. The participants unanimously presented feeling powerlessness over systematic concerns that occur either within the human service system or at the district level. The workers indicated that even though powerlessness might be felt in situations where they have limited control, they continue to dig even deeper and be creative with interventions and access to services in order to assist their clientele.

Summary

The major themes and subthemes developed from the participant dialogue portrayed a spectrum of experiences with empowerment and self-efficacy for school social workers in Pennsylvania. Those interviewed shared creative manners in their approach to increasing their professional empowerment and self-efficacy as well as dedication to their profession and the families and children they serve.

It is worthy to note that even though some of the themes appear rather negative the participants generally expressed enjoying their jobs. They also indicated a desire to continue to serve the families and children under their charge with enthusiasm and a sincere dedication.

Emergent Themes

Theme 6: School Social Workers Commitment to Service

Theme 6 was identified as an emergent theme that developed from the data gathered from interview questions 13, 14, 15, and 16.Participants were very adamant about elements of empowerment and self-efficacy coming from within and being drive by their efforts to be committed to the children and families that they serve. Eleven of the twelve school social workers indicated that their own dedication contributes to their feelings of effectiveness.

> P1: I feel like if I have 8 cards in my hand and I have the opportunity to play every single one of them to assist someone in making progress and I do that then that is being effective. I don't feel that withholding a certain strategy is effective or ethical.

> P2: But if in my judgment I feel that I have done as much as what I could do within a healthy range of my job and my personal life um, then I feel that I've been as effective as I possibly could. So it comes down to, can I say I am doing as much as I possibly can or do I say, gee, I could have done more and that would not have taken that much effort to do that.

> P8: I tell people, we work hard to work our way out of a family's life by empowering them to stand on their own two feet and advocate for themselves.

Summary of Theme 6: Commitment to Service

Over and over again, the school social workers interviewed indicated their dedication to the population that they serve of a way to be empowered and efficacious in their work environments. Feelings of being efficacious and empowered also emerge for

these individuals when they share their skills and knowledge with the children and families they serve.

Discrepant Cases

A majority of the discrepant data was derived from participant three. Unlike the other eleven participants, participant three identified with very few themes of powerlessness and ineffectiveness. This participant was the eldest individual interviewed and stated that he does not experience powerlessness and that being ineffective, ever is simply not an option. From the very first to the very last question, the interview with this individual felt rushed and he appeared to be looking for affirmation from me, even asking several times if he gave a good answer. The interview was interrupted three times by phone calls, which the participant readily answered. While I greatly appreciated the time this participant took with me and the interest he displayed in the study, his answers were consistently different than those received from the other eleven participants.

Composite Depiction

This composite depiction is the collective representation of the empowerment and self-efficacy experiences of the school social workers interviewed for this study. The school social workers interviewed expressed a spectrum of experiences when discussing empowerment and self-efficacy in their work environments.

From within the data, one can see the affinity for their work expressed by these school social workers. Given the chance to tell their stories, these school social workers expressed a spectrum of experiences relative to empowerment and self-efficacy in their workplace. When sharing their experiences with empowerment, the one end of the

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spectrum, where school social workers would express a lack of empowerment, concepts such as a lack of clinical supervision, limited understanding of their role by stakeholders, and concerns regarding finances and a lack of job security were mentioned. Conversely, school social workers shared that they gain empowerment by their continued dedication to their work as well as communicating programmatic needs and outcomes to both internal and external stakeholders.

When sharing their experiences with self-efficacy, school social workers again shared experiences ranging from a dire lack of self-efficacy to feelings of reflecting a relatively strong sense of self-efficacy. A lack of self-efficacy as reported by these individuals come from such things as lack of clinical supervision, funding concerns and uncertainty regarding job security while increased feelings of self-efficacy can be obtained through enhanced communication efforts and commitment to service.

Summary

This chapter provided information regarding the recruitment means necessary to identify participants for this study. The school social workers involved in this study held a minimum of a master's degree and were employed as a school social worker for at least 3 years. Results of the study indicate that indeed school social workers experience a spectrum of experiences regarding empowerment and self-efficacy in the workplace. There are clearly elements that can enhance their feelings of empowerment, such as increased communication with stakeholders as well as factors that leave them feeling powerless such as the lack of understanding that people have regarding their role and the lack of adequate supervision. The school social workers interviewed shared that being

effective is driven in part by internal motivation, dedication and commitment to their role

while ineffectiveness results when they feel at-risk for losing their jobs and barriers to

accessing the services needed for the children and families they serve. Chapter 5

provides an interpretation of the findings, implications for social change,

recommendations, and conclusions.

Chapter 5: Discussions and Conclusions

Introduction

Chapter 5 reviews the purpose, problem research questions, and methodology; as well as introduces discussion in the interpretation of findings, theoretical framework from a post-inquiry vantage, implications for social change, recommendations for further study, and critical reflections. This chapter opens with discussion on the method of inquiry and the intent of the study.

Overview

School social workers reported various struggles that all point to a variety of experiences with empowerment and self-efficacy. The purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of school social workers empowerment and self-efficacy experiences driven by two central questions: (a) What is the spectrum of empowerment experiences encountered by school social workers, and (b) How do social workers become efficacious within the host setting of the school?

A qualitative method, particularly phenomenological inquiry was chosen because I sought to understand the lived experiences of a small number of individuals who share the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). The phenomenologist's role is to accurately describe the social and psychological phenomena as experienced by the participant, with a focus on the lived experience (Groenewald, 2004). The selected qualitative method of inquiry was justified by the fact that other qualitative methods and quantitative methods were not appropriate to investigate the meaning of a lived experience (Golafshani, 2003).

Criterion-Based sampling was employed. Inclusion criteria (school social workers employed in role for a minimum of 3 years, currently employed in role, and employed in Pennsylvania school) were delineated with the assistance of the Pennsylvania Association of School Social Work Personnel professional organization, via an email announcement (Appendix D), with the intent of locating participants who would be willing and capable (criteria determined) of engaging in the study. Twelve participants provided in-depth discussions on their experiences of empowerment and self-efficacy in the workplace.

Interpretation of the Findings

The intent of this study was to explore the spectrum of empowerment and self-efficacy experiences of school social workers. The findings in this study were derived from the experiences of the twelve school social workers interviewed. The results are representative of responses to the research questions, researcher's field notes, literature review and the theoretical frameworks that ground the study. Iterations of data review led to the development of the major themes. Six major themes and three subthemes surfaced during the data analysis process. Each of the sections examined were discussed from the lens of the major themes identified and delineated in Chapter 4.

Theme 1: Supervision is Educational not Clinical

The first theme related to empowerment was reflective of supervision practices for school social workers. The participants' responses validated this theme as being significant to this study. One hundred percent of participants reported having no clinical supervision by a person trained in social work in their current positions. The Code of

Ethics compiled by the National Association of Social Workers (2002) clearly states that the supervision of school social work programs must be provided by credentialed and experienced social workers with a Master's degree. While not every individual expressed the same level of frustration, they unanimously spoke of the lack of supervision by a trained professional with some knowledge as an area of concern.

A curious element relative to the responses to the questions regarding supervision was the response from numerous participants who clearly stated that they had no idea who their direct supervisor is. As noted in Gleason-Leyba (2009), school social workers are frequently left on their own to create and shape their program and role. This can lead to a "double-edged-sword" dichotomy because it can at times be beneficial to be autonomous, when support or validation is needed, it may not be there. Those interviewed clearly recognized this as a problem area in their professional role but I did not hear anyone express a proactive approach to the concern.

Theme 2: School Personnel do not Understand the Role and Responsibilities of School Social Workers

The majority of respondents indicated a lack of understanding of their role by school personnel, even after many attempts had been made to provide clarity. They felt that their supervisors also lacked a clear understanding of the tasks they performed on any given day. The group of people who have the best understanding of the school social worker's role, according to those interviewed is the children and families that they serve. This lack of understanding by key stakeholders can certainly impact school social workers. As Garrett (2006) indicated, services misunderstood are often targets for

elimination. This certainly was a shared experience that leaves school social workers struggling to feel empowered.

Caselman and Brandt (2007) noted that social workers who sensed that their roles were understood and supported by school administrators have reported high levels of job satisfaction and empowerment along with a desire to remain in their positions for the long term. Two additional studies that assessed the job satisfaction of school social workers found that these workers report high levels of job satisfaction when they have school administrators who demonstrate a commitment to the work (Pamperin, 1987) and when there is congruency between the worker and administrator regarding the role of the worker (Agresta, 2004). These issues—job satisfaction, commitment, and support—are all linked to empowerment and self-efficacy.

Theme 3: School Social Workers Connectedness versus Isolation

Isolation was a particularly salient theme related to both empowerment and self-efficacy for the workers interviewed. Kadushin and Harkness (2002) recognized that the social worker operating within a host setting experiences additional stress compared to those operating within more traditional settings. These workers not only feel the pressure associated with meeting the demands of an ever-increasing caseload but also pressure related to the necessity of justifying their decisions to a critical audience of professionals. Because the number of social workers within school settings is historically low, these workers struggle with a sense of aloneness, isolation, and overwhelming self-reliance (Caselman & Brandt, 2007).

The majority of the school social workers interviewed affirmed experiencing feelings of isolation. Although there were expressions of connectedness within their home base building, the workers expressed feeling isolated in their role and concerns with a lack of a department to connect with.

Theme 4: Communication with Stakeholders regarding the Duties and Outcomes of School Social Work Programming

Tower (2000) suggested that school social workers are not highly valued by school administrators because the administrators do not understand the role of the social workers, partially due to a lack of documentation by the workers (Gleason-Leyba. 2009). School social workers are better at helping students and families make gains in their emotional health and wellbeing than they are at sharing their successes with others and publicizing the positive outcomes of their work. Perhaps this modesty is admirable; however, it does not communicate to others, especially policy makers such as principals, directors of special education, and school-board members, the vital importance of their role to students, parents, and teachers (Garrett, 2006).

Although seven of the school social workers interviewed stressed the importance of both internal, micro and external, more macro level communication with stakeholders, the majority, eight readily admitted that they are very deficient in their efforts to communicate with external stakeholders. School social workers often do not report service outcomes (Bye et al., 2009) and struggle to advocate for themselves within the highly political environment of public education (To, 2009). This would clearly an avenue for school social workers to use to increase their empowerment and self-efficacy

in the workplace. Manners of communication that were mentioned by the school social workers interviewed include: staff development, newsletters, reports to the school board of directors, articles in the local newspapers, visibility at school and district events, involvement in community groups, and more traditional methods such as email and face-to-face communication.

Theme 5: The Impact of Funding on Services and Job Security

A lack of adequate funding resulting in barriers to service was a theme that those interviewed identified as having a large impact on their increased self-efficacy as school social workers. Participants shared detailed examples of systematic concerns that impeded their ability to fully assist families.

They mentioned specific services such as: insurance, housing, mental health services as direct services that are often quite challenging to access for the children they work with. The school social workers interviewed also shared frustration in their attempts to access ample services for the families and children that they serve. They indicated that financial constraints of human service organizations result in simply not enough services and long waiting lists to meet the needs of those who could benefit from such services. They appear resolved to the fact that instead of working on social policy, they just need to become more creative in their efforts to circumvent the system.

The lack of job security was spoken of as an element that caused feelings of powerlessness in the workers interviewed. To (2006) pointed out that educator's perceptions of social services as a luxury or auxiliary support can negatively impact the school social workers job security. The majority of participants indicated that they felt

powerless when it came to saving their own job and shared a profound level of certainty

that their jobs are often discussed for potential elimination when budget are tight.

Theme 6: School Social Workers Commitment to Service

The school social workers interviewed overwhelmingly placed a huge emphasis

on their own commitment to their work as validation of their effectiveness as workers.

They expressed a sincere dedication to their work and expressed gaining personal as well

as professional satisfaction in knowing that they are doing everything within their control

to assist their clients. As noted by Blosser et al. (2010), school social workers have often

been charged with creating their own paths within school systems, which can be both

liberating and challenging. The school social workers interview clearly used the ability

to forge their own paths and be committed as a means to gain empowerment and to

become efficacious in their work environments.

Past research on school personnel related to empowerment and self-efficacy has

revealed that, if personnel such as school counselors believe they are capable of working

with diverse populations, they will act accordingly (Holcomb-McCoy et al., 2008). To

empower students, school counselors must engage in their own self-reflective process

that leads to a sense of empowerment (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). The responses

from the individuals interviewed indicated that their experiences mirror those of the

groups previously researched.

This theme provided another example of promise for improvement in some of the

struggles inherent in the role of school social workers. The workers believe that this is an

area in which they have control, regardless of the systematic struggles they may face.

The workers questioned were extremely enthusiastic about their work and expressed a desire to assist struggling children and families as well as determination to mesh their service with the educational systems in which they work. They measured their success by the level of service that they provide and remain secure in their resolve to continue to be creative in their interventions.

Conceptual Framework

This study is viewed through the lens of empowerment and self-efficacy theories.

Empowerment Theory

Empowerment is the process of increasing personal, interpersonal, and/or political power, enabling individuals, families, and communities to take action toward improving adverse situations (Staples, 1990). Empowerment and social justice, both of which emerged from the perspectives of social ideology and self-help, have long been at the "heart" of the social-work mission (Van Voorhis & Hostetter, 2006). On the opposite end of the power spectrum would be powerlessness, which entails a subjective belief in the inability to meet the expectations of others and determine outcomes. The school social workers who were interviewed in this study were asked questions related to their experiences of empowerment and a lack of empowerment in their workplace.

This theory shed light into the experiences of school social workers who operate in the host setting of public schools. The findings of the study were both congruent with the literature on empowerment and workers and raise some additional questions relative to school social workers empowerment in the workplace. The social workers described experiences where they feel powerless such as systematic regulations that do not support

their efforts and having their positions eliminated. They shared feelings of disempowerment when their role was not understood even after much explanation by internal and external stakeholders and expressed feelings of a lack of power regarding their supervision practices. Conversely, these workers also shared manners in which they themselves work to increase their empowerment such as touting their programs and finding ways to increase revenue in the district by billing the Federal Access Program for direct school social work services. As many of the individuals reported, they have developed and utilize a variety of communication methods to enhance their empowerment in the workplace, although most felt that they could further enhance their feelings of power if they were to communicate programmatic outcomes to both internal and external stakeholders. They appeared to be pondering how to continue to use communication as an empowerment tool even during our interviews. While there are some proactive measures that these workers can use to increase their feelings of empowerment, clearly adequate and regular supervision remains a barrier to this end. The same sense of optimism and promise was not displayed when discussing this theme. The social workers interviewed appeared resign to the fact that the current manner in which they receive supervision, or lack thereof, was not going to change anytime soon.

Self-Efficacy Theory

Hur (2006) described a synthesized process of empowerment as providing an overarching framework that encompasses a variety of empowerment theories and many disciplines such as community psychology, management, political theory, social work, education, women's studies, and health. This multidimensional conceptualization of

empowerment was used to increase understanding of the spectrum of experiences encountered by school social workers that are related to self-efficacy within the workplace.

The workers interviewed clearly feel that they are effective when they provide comprehensive services in a dedicated, creative, and determined manner to the children and families that they serve. This internal drive towards a sincere commitment to helping families was shared over and over by the workers in the data collection process and appeared to be a true measure of how effective they are. The workers indicated that they felt effective when they gave all of the knowledge that they had about a particular situation to a family, when they gave 100%. An additional method of becoming more efficacious that school social workers shared was communication in a variety of manners with both internal and external stakeholders. While admittedly, these efforts could be enhanced, the workers acknowledge that communication regarding programmatic outcomes was certainly a tool for increasing their self-efficacy.

The workers interviewed shared that their self-efficacy is negatively impacted by some systematic and policy related issues. Impediments such as barriers to service and inadequate funding lead to the workers feeling less that effective. Also mentioned as elements that lead to feelings of ineffectiveness were the lack of funding related to job security and a lack of clinical supervision from a liked trained professional. The school social workers interviewed indicated that the autonomy they are given to be efficacious can also be a doubled edged sword when it comes to needing support from their supervisors or higher ups. They shared that they are perpetually worried about losing

their jobs because school social workers are not mandated in Pennsylvania. The workers did not share statements that indicated a desire to work towards systemic changes, rather an attitude of being creative in their efforts to circumvent these barriers.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations of this study have been identified. First, the scope of this study was limited to twelve school social workers in Pennsylvania. Due to the small sample size and specific geographic location, the results cannot be generalized to all school social workers. Expanding the number of participants across a broader geographical area would be useful in understanding the experiences of school social workers.

The researcher's presence during data gathering, which is unavoidable in qualitative research, may have affected the subjects' responses. Additionally, special attention needed to be given to ensure issues of anonymity and confidentiality when presenting findings. Several respondents questioned how confidential the information would be. I was able to explain the procedures that I employed to ensure their confidentiality. Regardless of these limitations, I believe that the results represent accurately the spectrum of empowerment and self-efficacy of the school social workers interviewed.

Recommendations

As mentioned above, the findings of the study were both congruent with the literature on empowerment and self-efficacy and raise some additional questions relative to school social workers empowerment and self-efficacy in the workplace. Further

research needs to be conducted in order to learn more about how to best support and
maximize the human resource that is school social workers. Such research should:

1.) Research into the supervision practices of school social workers would be
beneficial.

2.) Research that looks at programmatic evaluation and outcomes of school social
work programs.

3.) It may be beneficial to examine empowerment and self-efficacy in a
comparative study in states where school social work service is mandated
versus those where no such mandate exists.

4.) Expansion of the study in a geographical nature, investigating the experiences
of school social workers in other areas is also recommended.

Future research in the above mentioned areas would benefit practitioners of
school social work as well as the service recipients. The most salient subject mentioned
by every interviewee is supervision practices. This was a topic that was discussed
throughout the research, often even before questions related to it were asked. The
findings of this study support the notion that supervision is a factor that weighs heavily
into the empowerment and self-efficacy experiences of school social workers and would
be a topic of particular benefit in future research endeavors.

Implications

Positive Social Change

School reform and various related mandates have placed enormous stress
on schools who have gradually become the default providers of mental-health services for

children (Altshuler & Reid-Webb, 2009). Such legislation has forced educators to recognize the importance of emotion, motivation, and parental attitudes on student achievement (Bye & Alvarez, 2007). In many instances, the only contact children and their families experience with a mental-health professional is through the school system (O'Brien et al., 2011).

The school social workers involved in this study have demonstrated a strong commitment to their profession and a dedication to meshing the human service and education fields. This study's findings could contribute to social change through gaining insight into the empowerment and self-efficacy experiences of school social workers, possibly leading to an improved approach towards decisions made that impact these workers, thereby impacting the manner in which they deliver service. Educational administrators and other decision makers in academia, such as school board members can build upon the knowledge gained by the individuals involved in this study and use their experiences to more effectively tap into the human resource of school social workers.

Extending beyond the population of this study, other similar human service professionals working in school settings such as: school counselors, school psychologists, and even school nurses, experiencing like instances, are potential benefactors of the results. Countless students and families benefit from the services of school social workers and like professionals daily. Many times the school becomes the avenue to connecting families to services and often, the human service providers in schools are the only professionals of this sort that the children will have contact with. It is vital that education systems utilize the skills of these professionals in the most effective way

possible so that children, families, schools, and communities can gain the largest benefit possible.

Practice Implications

This study gave research participants a chance to tell their stories, which they readily did. From these stories and the sharing of the information collected, several practice implications were formulated. Based on the findings of the study, Implications for school social work practitioners, school social workers should:

1. Enhance their efforts to communicate with both internal and external, micro and macro level stakeholders. Methods of communication could include but are not limited to: newsletters, reports to the board of school directors, information shared with the district public relations representative, professional development workshops, back to school nights, open houses, community meetings, reports to school boards, and newspaper articles.

2. Increase their efforts to educate administrators and other stakeholders on the importance of regular and appropriate supervision for school social workers.

3. Work to become aware of the manners in which they can be politically active. Linking with professional organizations which support their efforts may be a starting point.

Recommendations for educational administrators: In order to maximize school social work services, educational administrators should:

1. Explore the potential for greater understanding of the roles and responsibilities of school social workers.

2. Assess the best methods of supervision and evaluation practices of school social

workers.

In summary, my recommendations are directed to (a) social work practitioners,

(b) educational administrators, and (c) further research and came directly from the

research findings.

Dissemination of Findings

The results of this study would benefit a wide array of constituencies. To that

end, I expect to present the results of this study through media, attempting to publish an

article in several professional journals. Speaking engagements will also be sought

through a minimum of two professional organizations, The Pennsylvania Chapter of the

National Association of Social Workers and The Pennsylvania Association for School

Social Work Personnel.

Researcher's Critical Reflection

School social workers are a passionate and committed group of people working to

improve the lives and educational journey of the students they serve. As a school social

worker for 15 years, and the first school social worker in the county in which I live and

work, I have experienced some of the struggles outlined in the research. This reality, and

the outcomes of such, coalesced to provide the impetus for this research project.

The personal experience with the phenomenon warranted a concerted effort of

bracketing, in order to gain an unbiased view into the lived experiences of the

participants. I needed to avoid any superimposition of my personal experiences as a

school social worker on the acquired data. Beyond sharing of the study's criteria, I

identified with many aspects of the participants' empowerment and self-efficacy experiences.

It was a pure joy to travel around the beautiful state that I live in and meet passionate and dedicated school social workers who were willing to tell their stories. It was interesting to hear about their work and to learn about the spectrum of their experiences. I firmly believe that there is work to be done to increase the position of schools social workers in public schools in Pennsylvania and learning from one another is a starting point towards that end.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to gain insight into the empowerment and self-efficacy experiences of school social workers in the workplace. Phenomenology was the best approach for the research effort as the goal was two-fold, to provide an avenue for the workers to tell their stories and for me to gain insight into their lived experiences. These goals were achieved through the process of face to face in-depth interviews and an extensive literature review. The information uncovered in this study helped to improve understanding of a phenomenon unique to the school social workers interviewed. It is hoped that from this research effort, increased interest will be developed and additional research will occur that will be beneficial to school social workers, thereby enhancing their ability to adequately serve the children and families in public schools.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Interview Questions

1. Describe the level of understanding school personnel possess with regard to your role as a school social worker.

2. How would you describe the understanding of the families you serve with regard to your work?

3. How do you initiate involvement with a student or family?

4. Please describe the communication you extend and receive regarding the students you serve.

5. How are conflicts regarding the academic versus social/emotional needs of students served within your school system?

6. How would you describe the level of understanding possessed by your supervisor with regard to your work?

7. What is the level of awareness of staff members regarding the needs of the populations you serve that are external to the school?

8. How do you communicate to colleagues and those you serve?

9. How is your professional role impacted by the political system of your school district?

10. What does it mean to you to be empowered as a worker?

11. What experiences have you encountered that have left you with a sense of powerlessness?

12. What strategies do you employ to gain empowerment within the workplace?

13. How would you describe your current level of empowerment as a school social worker?

14. What does it means to be effective as a school social worker?

15. How would you describe your current level of self-efficacy as a school social worker?

16. What experiences have you encountered that have left you with a sense of professional ineffectiveness?

17. How do you know when you are effective?

18. Who do you rely upon for support within your workplace?

19. In your experience as a school social worker, how connected do you feel within your home office?

20. Please describe your level of connectedness, or lack thereof, with your school district.

21. Please describe the supervision you have received as a school social worker.

Appendix B: Letter to Professional Association

July 23, 2013

Dear President Peter Fidgett and Board Members of the Pennsylvania Association of School Social Work Personnel Member:

My name is Kathy Minnich and I am a doctoral candidate at Walden University. I am conducting dissertation research on the experiences of school social workers with empowerment and self-efficacy within the workplace. A vast number of studies have assessed these characteristics in the general population social work practitioners. However, the experiences of school social workers represent a gap in existing related literature. This research will provide insight into school social worker's experiences with empowerment and self-efficacy.

Your assistance in conducting this much needed research is vital to identify school social workers within Pennsylvania who would be willing to participate in the study. Those currently employed as school social workers for a minimum of 3-year duration will meet the criteria for participation in this study. Once identified, I will contact these individuals to discuss the nature of the study. They will be free to choose participation and, if they accept the invitation will be free to discontinue participation at any time. Information provided by the participants will be strictly confidential.

I would welcome a telephone call from you to discuss any questions that you may have concerning this study and your role in identifying research participants. I can be reached at (717) 577-0478.

Thank you for your consideration.

Kathy J. Minnich, LCSW, HSV, RPT
Doctoral Candidate
Walden University

Appendix C: Letter of Cooperation

Appendix D: Recruitment Letter

[Potential Participant]
[Address]

Dear _____:

My name is Kathy Minnich and I am a doctoral candidate at Walden University. I am conducting research in partial fulfillment of my doctorate on the experiences of school social workers with empowerment and self-efficacy within the workplace. A vast number of studies have assessed these characteristics in the general population of social-work practitioners. However, school social workers represent a gap in existing related literature. This research will fill that gap by providing insight into the experiences of specifically school social workers that are related to empowerment and self-efficacy within the workplace.

Acknowledging the value of your time, I would appreciate your consideration of participation in this important study. To fully understand your experience, a 1.5 to 2-hour interview would be conducted with you at a location of your choosing. Nothing uncomfortable will be required of you. The interview is designed to simply learn of your experiences surrounding empowerment and self-efficacy within the workplace. All information gathered during the interview will be held strictly confidential and you are free to discontinue participation at any time with no adverse repercussions.

Please contact me at your earliest convenience to schedule a date and time for the study interview. My telephone number is (717) 577-0478. You can also email me at kathy.minnich@waldenu.edu

Thank you for your consideration.

Kathy J. Minnich, LCSW, RPT, HSV
Doctoral Candidate
Walden University

Walden University Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study entitled *A Phenomenological Study of the Empowerment and Self-Efficacy of School Social Workers Within the Workplace* that will examine the practices school social workers employ to acquire empowerment and self-efficacy within the workplace. You have been selected as a potential participant due to your knowledge and/or experience related to the topic of study. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before acting upon this invitation to participate in the study. The research will be conducted by Kathy Minnich, Doctoral Candidate at Walden University.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to develop an in-depth understanding of the spectrum of experiences encountered by school social workers related to empowerment and self-efficacy within the workplace.

Procedures:

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to meet with the researcher for a face-to-face interview in your office or other location of your choosing for approximately 1.5 to 2 hours.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. Your decision to participate will not affect your current or future relationships with Walden University, your employer, or the Pennsylvania Association of School Social Work Personnel. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw that participation at any time with no adverse repercussions and you may also refuse to answer any interview questions you consider invasive or stressful.

Risks and Benefits of Participation:

There are no known risks associated with participation in this study. Potential benefits may be derived from the dissemination of new information to stakeholders that could enhance the empowerment and self-efficacy of school social workers.

Compensation:

There is no form of compensation for participation in this study.

Confidentiality:

All records maintained for this study will be kept private. Any published reports will exclude all information with the potential to identify any participant. Research records will be maintained within a locked file accessible solely by the researcher and faculty supervisor. Interviews will be audio-taped solely for purposes of providing an accurate description of your experiences. The recording will be destroyed after 5 years from completion of the study.

Contacts and Questions:

You may ask any questions directly to the researcher conducting this study, Kathy Minnich, or her advisor, Dr. Jay Greiner. Kathy Minnich can be reached at (717) 577-0478 or Kathy.minnich@waldenu.edu. The research-participant advocate at Walden University is Dr. Leilani Endicott, who you may also contact at 1-800-925-3368, Extension 2393 or at Leilani.Endicott@waldenu.edu, should you have any questions with regard to your participation in this study. You will receive a copy of this form from the researcher. Approval for this research was obtained through the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB # 09-07-13-0036398).

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information and have asked any existing questions and received answers. I consent to participation in this study.

Printed Name of Participant:_____

Signature:_____   Date:_____

Signature of Investigator:_____   Date:_____

Participant #6

KM: Ok, so the first question is: If you could, please describe the level of understanding that school personnel such as teachers possess regarding your role as a school social worker?

P6: Um, I think for me in ██████████████) , they have a decent understanding. I am currently the social worker for elementary, middle and high school and so I think the teachers in those individual buildings know what I can do for them but they don't know what I do district wide. I don't think the high school teachers have any idea that I am working with kids in the elementary schools. Even though I like to remind them that I am in 8 schools which is why I didn't return their email right away. But I think the teachers who are in each building know that I can refer to resources and they know that I can be available to talk to kids who aren't having a good day. And, I think that it depends on the teacher but some teachers refer to me way too often. I had a teacher email me today and was like, can you see this kid, I think they are having a bad day. I have to explain that my job is way bigger than that and I am probably not the first line of defense. So I kind of have to push back a little and then I have some teachers who probably do not even know I exist. A lot of our AP and honors teachers, like this year I had a student who is homeless but a great student so I emailed the teachers because this family actually allowed me to disclose that they are homeless and I was trying to get some fees waived for the class. The teacher wrote back and said I never had a homeless student before. I wrote back and said, well you have actually you just didn't know it. That is also a district issue because we are a relatively wealthy district so that is a whole other issue. So, I think once they have experienced it, working with me, they understand but the ones who have never had a case with me for whatever reason, I think they have no clue.

KM: How would you describe the level of understanding of the families you serve regarding your role?

P6: The families that I serve before they've met me have no clue that I even exist. And then once I introduce myself, depending upon the scenario, obviously if it's a truancy case they make a lot of assumptions that I am this big scary person who's going to take them to court right away. It's not until after I explain my specific role and what I can offer them that they understand that I am here to help and help them connect with resources. But the families who are low income have heard of social workers and have worked with social workers in the past so I think they have a decent understanding. But most families in my district because it is a wealthier district have no clue that I even exsist.

KM: How is the process to get you involved with a student initiated?

P6: It depends. Unfortunately, (school district name) does not have a formal social work referral process, despite our efforts to make that happen. I have been in other districts where there has been a more formal process that's for me very helpful and allows, there's a very clear opening and closure to the case process. That is really helpful. Here it's not. The referral, anybody can make a referral to me. Honestly, it's like, the guidance office

is across the hall, if they make a right, they come here, if they make a left, they go there and sometimes it depends on which way they turn. But I, sometimes it takes effort on my part to say, OK, have you talked to the guidance counselor? Have you talked to the principal? Or, I will talk to those people, Do you want me to take this case? Is this to my level yet? Is it an appropriate referral? You know, we have to figure that part out for each case because there is not really a formal process.

KM: Describe the communication that you give back to the person who refers then. What does that look like, the back and forth, after you start working with them?

P6: It depends on the situation. Most of my referrals come from the guidance counselors or principals. Because they are part of the immediate team supporting that student, obviously on a need to know basis. I get back to them as to what progress has been made. If it's a teacher making the referral, my response is something to the effect of " I am working on it." Obviously my response is more vague. But the staff here is great so they care about how things are going so if for some reason I haven't gotten back to them, it's not unusual for them to be like, "hey, I am just checking in". When it comes to the teachers, they often have an unrealistic opinion about what they think was going to happen so I try to remind them, "listen , hey you are not going to see immediate improvement from the student but please know that we are working with them."

KM: How are conflicts regarding the academic needs of students versus the social /emotional needs of students handled in your system?

P6: That's a good question. (deep breath). We, the social workers, we have a ton of support. First of all, we are very lucky in ██████████ to have a ton of support, we have social workers, we have guidance counselors, we have SAP coordinators, we have guidance counselors in every building, we have nurses, we have principals, assistant principals. We have the gamut and we even just hired more staff last year, which in these budget crisis times is rare! And, we are really lucky so whenever I have a student who is not doing well academically but has behavioral or mental health needs, you know, we make an effort as a team to communicate with the teachers, you know what can we do to support them academically. I have one case right now of school anxiety and I'm lucky to get the kid in the building, let alone all of his classes. It is not realistic for him to be staying for clinic, it's just not. It is not gonna happen. So, we are reaching out to the teachers saying this is the reality of the situation so for your class, how would you like to handle it? Usually, they are so great and flexible. They respect our professional opinion, which is huge! And, then we have some teachers who are by the book. I have one teacher right now who is like, No! He's going to get an F! And, even though there's so many other factors. Our principals are very supportive with that and so we will have to address that specifically.

KM: How would you describe the level of understanding possessed by your supervisor regarding your role?

P6: Well that is a good question. This is just between you and I, right?

KM: Yes, well I do type it up but you become a number.

P6: We were just talking about this the other day that we have, for our specific role as a social worker, although I technically have one supervisor for the district, who is our director of pupil services, who is a psychologist, he is the supervisor for all pupil

services, you know, social workers, counselors, psychologists, and nurses. However, I am in eight buildings and each building has a principal who thinks they are my supervisor and who is one of my supervisor. I am sorry, I do not mean to make it seem like they aren't because they kind of are. My supervisor has a supervisor who I often talk to because he is the director of special services. Every student who is special ed. Has a supervisor. There are so many supervisors who supervise me but yet none of them are social workers and have any clue about what I should be doing. And, so I respect them all professionally and they all give great advice. I don't get any formal supervision. We don't have like a set, you know I was in foster care before I was in education and we had a set schedule, every Monday at 4:00, we had an hour of supervision. That doesn't happen here. I am lucky if I get 5 mins. To talk my case out with (name of other social worker), the other social worker. Supervision is a problem, although my supervisors I don't think know that because that is also a sensitive topic. Supervision in school districts is a big topic, you know we have all these policies on how we are supervised but none of them teach me how to be a better social worker. They are all teacher related.

KM: What is the level of awareness that staff members have regarding the students that you serve that are external to the school, homelessness, family problems, etc.

P6: Staff in school, do they understand that?

KM: Yes.

P6: My pupil services staff understand that. They aren't always supportive of that. Often in my district my homeless students are the homeless that are sleeping on a bench. They are doubled up so my staff is not sensitive to that for some reason. That's not good enough. That is not homeless enough for some reason, I don't really understand! And, so or maybe it's a family who was wealthy and a parent died or a parent got sick so now they are not as wealthy but because they were wealthy and everybody knows that, they are not poor enough! I've run into that a lot and I often feel like I am defending my families to my staff. That they are worthy of the service that I am trying to get for them. Does that makes sense? I don't want to make it seem like they are not sensitive because they really are, most of them are, but it takes me explaining things to make that happen.

KM: How do you communicate with the more macro stakeholders, school board members, central office administrators, the macro people about your role?

P6: I feel like because my role is in multiple buildings here, I have a direct line to our central office on a daily basis, which I don't feel like other pupil services staff in my building feel that connected. I am up at our district office all the time. I call them all the time. I don't necessarily call the superintendent, but we have an awesome superintendent and he is really accessible so if I wanted to, I could do that as well. I am in meetings with them all the time. We have a lot of say. They allow us to give our opinion. Maybe they don't take our opinion but we are including in a lot of macro policy making and procedure improvement making meetings and that kind of stuff. I also think that myself in the other social worker advocate our skills in that area. If we weren't asking to be there, they probably would not invite us but we are the ones going hey we need to meet about this policy.

KM: How has your role been impacted by the political or financially situations in your district, if at all?

P6: Definitely impacted financially. I used to be the sole social worker for just the high school and now I am in 8 schools and my partner was for one high school and now he is in 9 schools. That was done because we used to have an IU social worker for all of the lower level elementary and middle. But, a side note, that was ridiculous. They let her go and then spread us thinner. But, you know, I really like being the social worker for all levels because I get to know the families earlier. Talk about macro, I get to know the whole system and I love that. But, it does change my role. I am not available for students who are just having a bad day anymore. I don't do counseling. I am not in IEPs anymore. I don't run regular groups anymore. It is all crisis management referring out and moving onto the next one. Does that answer that question?

KM: Absolutely! Do you guys bill for your service?

P6: We used to but we don't anymore, just because I am not in any IEPs anymore. I would love for us to. The social worker who was here from the IU who did all elementary and middle, she ran all groups so she was billing for everything. And then and at that time, I had time to run groups and see kids individually in the high school so we were all billing and then when they spread us thin, they took us out if all IEPs because I can't commit to what is in the IEPs.

KM: What does it mean to you to be empowered as a worker?

P6: That's a good question. I definitely feel empowered here. I feel like I have the permission to do what I thing is really best for a student and a family. I have the resources. I am allowed to go to my countywide meetings. I am allowed to connect. I am given time and flexibility to form relationships with the people I need to work with to make this job a success. I am appreciated. I am thanked often by my staff, not necessarily by my staff or my students. But definitely my staff makes a point, they recognize that I am spread thin and I think they try to respect my time. I do feel empowered. You didn't ask this but I am going to say it anyway. On the flip side, I don't think people know what we do and they sometimes ask us to do unrealistic things or things that are not a part of our job. Sometimes they are not sensitive enough to the things that we are trying to get for our families. Today is a good day so you got that answer. If you have talked to me Monday, you would have gotten a different answer. I feel like often for some reason I have to convince my staff that the families are worthy enough and I think that is discouraging . So often I get discouraged here because we are spread so thin. I feel like we can't do as good of a job as if I had more time I could do. That part is a struggle for us but I think in general I know it could be worse and I do feel supported.

KM: And that was the next question, what experiences have you encountered that have left you with a sense of powerlessness? So I think you hit it but if you think of more….. Are there any strategies that you use to gain empowerment in the workplace?

P6: I think I am you know, and my partner as well, we are confident enough in our services that we advocate for ourselves. You know, if I think that something needs to happen, I'll do my best to make it happen. I won't ask permission, I'll say sorry later. I think also that we do a good job and so that allows us to be treated with respect and that in turn allows us to be empowered. It allows us to feel like we can continue to do a good job. You know, we don't slack off. We are committed to be here every day and work

overtime. I think that if we, in situations where we don't feel empowered, we try to make that change. Right now, we are really working on our district suicide protocol and we have made a lot of progress and honestly it is because of ███ and I. I probably would not say that in a meeting but it is. It could be so much better and it is really discouraging that it is not better. It is fairly straight forward. And, although it is not going the way we want it to, we are empowered enough to work to make a change.

KM: How would you describe your current level of empowerment?

(interrupted by coworker who quickly left the room)

KM: OK, how would you describe your current level of empowerment?

P6: Today, I feel empowered. Yesterday I was almost in tears, does that make sense? You know my cases, my caseload. I stayed yesterday until 5:30 because I was so discouraged, and so far behind, and just didn't feel supported. But, I got myself together and today's a new day. So, I guess it really depends on the cases you know the push back that I'm getting from administration. That is sometimes the thing that beats us down the most, you know, people telling us no and not understanding. We come from an interesting perspective and I recognize that administrators come from a perspective of supporting the whole school. They have to make sure the whole school is safe and we are advocating for our student and our family and while I recognize that. Sometimes those values conflict.

KM: What does it mean to you to be effective as a school social worker?

P6: I would like to think that if I can, well obviously you know, we have high standards and to be effective, that means that my kids are coming to school and my kids are healthy happy and graduating. You know, the families are thanking us but that is pretty high standards and not usually the case. There are realistic option would be did we have some successes today. That is my new strategy for not being down for not leaving with work on my shoulders. All right, you know what good work happened today. I think we are very effective. We get our kids resources, we advocate for them. We are creative to find ones if they don't exists. We do some awesome things. Yeah, we are effective. Not to pat ourselves on the back but school social workers are awesome. And, so I think we are effective. I think regardless of whether my truancy numbers are down. I don't think the numbers really say it all. I think in general, we do a pretty impressive job.

KM: How would you describe your current level of self-efficacy as a school social worker?

P6:I definitely, I mean I think, I think right now, you mean??

KM: How effective do you feel?

P6: I feel effective. I do, I really do. I think because ███████ really allows me to. They really do and as discouraged as I sometimes get, I have the freedom to do what I think is necessary for my families. Sometimes I don't always ask, sometimes they don't always know where I am to make that happen. I think if I told them everything that I did, if I was telling my supervisor every little minute, everything that I was doing, they might challenge me a little more but they allow me to make it happen. So, I definitely think that I am effective given what's available to me. I think the services that are available in our county put a million road blocks in front of us, funding, insurance for families, transportation, housing, all those things that we battle against everyday, drugs and

alcohol, mental health, all those things, I think they stand in our way. But, in general, given what I have available to me, I'm effective.

KM: What experiences have you encountered that have left you with a sense of professional ineffectiveness, if any?

P6: All those barriers. Honestly I think when you get a family and they have no insurance and the kids needs help and they are not in crisis you know what the heck do you do with that kid? I mean we have awesome school resources, thank goodness. But when you need something more than that, what, we're going to wait 2-3 months for MA to kick in and they're going to get services that way. So, but yet they're not in crisis so there is nothing immediate. So that's, those are my hardest ones and I tell the school, "sorry, nothing is going to happen right away". And that is just the reality.

KM: How do you know when you are effective?

P6: Hmmmm. That's a good point. Nobody really ever tells me when I am effective. That's just a personal, I have to tell myself. Actually though, it is funny. Ever since ███ and I got spread to the other schools, elementary and middle schools think that we're amazing and they thank us all the time. It's really interesting. No offense to the high school but they don't do that. We're all running around like chickens with our heads cut off and whereas when you do something for the middle school, they are like, "you are awesome. Thank you so much!" It's just different personalities and I think because their crisis cases are smaller in number and so when we do get involved, it's for the really serious ones and so when we do help, they just think we are awesome! So, we definitely get thanked but I still believe that most of the time, it's a personal internal type thing. We have to remind ourselves, or we will remind each other. Like, Monday, I called ███ and I was like, I can't do it, it's too much. Give me a pep talk.

KM: And you support each other. Which leads to the next question. Who do you rely on for support in your workplace?

P6: Definitely my co-worker who is also a social worker. I think that's my biggest problem. Although I have counselors and psychologists who are supportive of me, nobody else besides my other social worker knows the specific services and the specific actions that I as a social worker need to take or can take or should take. And so, if I, I can't imagine being a social worker in a district by myself. Who would….I mean obviously they would conference with other social workers in other districts, which we do. I think…he fact that we know other social workers in our county is awesome, you know, we get ideas from each other and can collaborate. That's great! So, obviously my other pupil services staff support me , I don't think that any of them is really qualified enough to be to know what my role is. And I don't know what their role is. I'm not putting them down. It's just different.

KM: In you experience as a school social worker, how connected do you feel with this building?

P6: I feel connected to the building. I don't feel. I am on this little island by myself. So I don't feel personally connected. I don't go to the football games and I don't have the most school spirit and I don't socialize that much with everybody outside of school. I don't have a department, it's just me. Um, so I feel connected. You know I love my job and I'm thankful to have my job. And I feel connected and I feel happy when I am here.

But I don't feel this overwhelming sense of pride that I think other staff members feel who have departments and things like that.

KM: How connected do you feel to the district as a whole?

P6: I feel probably more connected to the district as a whole because I am so spread out in all the other buildings. I mean none of my colleagues would be comfortable walking into our district central office and going upstairs to where the supervisor's offices are. Where I go every day. So, I feel more connected to the whole district probably more so than one building.

KM: And the last question is if you could talk a little bit more about supervision. You did touch on it but the question actually is: Please describe the supervision that you receive as a school social worker.

P6: Sure, um, ▮▮▮▮▮▮ does have a formal supervision process that is pretty impressive. We actually have staff members who are charge of that for the district and it is really, especially our induction process for a new staff member, it is pretty impressive. But it's teacher oriented. And so, like now, every year, we're required to pick a supervision topic. SO, for the last 3 years, I have picked what is called collaborative colleagues and ▮▮▮ and I are allowed as our formal supervision to meet together and collaborate and explore whatever we wanted to explore and that was awesome that they supported us in that. But when, that's helpful but when it comes to a supervisor supervising me, my supervisor is, my formal one supervisor is a psychologist and so he supports me. If I call, he answers. He'll come over and meet with me but he doesn't know my job and although he tries, he often doesn't tell me what I think is helpful. And doesn't really give me the direction that I need and so I find that I don't go to him as much because of that. ▮▮▮ and I supervise each other kind of thing, which is great that we have each other but it's not great when you really have a big case and you really want somebody higher than you to have your back. I do feel that they support me. If I say, "listen, I need you to be on my side about this. This is what I really think is best, they do support me. But I don't feel like they know what my role should be. And, so I really wish we had some more formal supervision but there is no other social worker in the district who can provide that to us. So, it's not even like it's an option here and we're not getting it.

KM: Anything else that you want to tell me about your job, a thought that the questions sparked?

P6: I don't think so. Those were really good questions. I love my job. I'm grateful to have my job. We were meeting this morning and ▮▮▮▮▮▮ is the one district that doesn't have social workers and I was just listening to the questions that they have and I'm like they need social workers. We're awesome and we do a lot. I just feel like a lot of people don't know that. I think they know we're good, they just don't know what we do.

Appendix G

Sample Textural Description

Participant # 7

Participant number 7 shared with the researcher what experiences she has had with empowerment and self-efficacy in the workplace. She identified with all seven themes identified in the research. Included in the list below is where she was on the spectrum of how she experiences empowerment and manners in which she increases her self-efficacy in the workplace.

Theme 1: Supervision practices. When interviewed, participant 7 clearly identified with all of the other participants when she shared that the lack of supervision is a struggle for her. She detailed how that impacts her.

> P7: Not existent! Very limited. It's like everybody is watching but nobody is. Because I really, when I am here, if I'm doing something with a middle school student, I report to the middle school principal. If I am doing something with a high school student, I report to the high school principal. I've got a principal at Bear Creek and then all of their assistants. There is the director of special education. My supervisor is really the director of support services who I haven't had a meeting with yet this school year. So, it's kind of like there's a lot of people watching but I am responsible to a person who I really don't see that often. When I first got here, I tried to have supervision with the director of special ed. And finally, she kind of laughed at me and was like, "Honey why do you keep trying to meet with me?".

Theme 2: Understanding of role. As with the majority of other participants, this individual explained her experiences with other staff members understanding her role as a school social worker.

> P7: Some of the regular education teachers do not until they've had one of my students. They are like I didn't know why we needed a social worker until I had one if your students and then you helped me and now I know.

Theme 3: Connectedness versus Isolation. The majority of the school social workers interviewed shared feelings of isolation. Participant seven explained how that can happen.

> P7: Sometimes I feel like I float so much, like if they do a dress up day so everybody wears crazy hair and I am like OK, I am at the high school and then the middle school and then I am going to Bear Creek. All that stuff that builds camaraderie, like wearing jeans, doing this, doing that I know of miss out on. Some of that I need to foster my own connectedness. I was more connected when I was in the high school guidance office because I did some things with that group

sort of as a subgroup but now I'm not with them anymore. So then it is kind of like out of sight, out of mind with them, I sort of feel like I am a little lone ranger and yet, I feel like I know a lot of people here. It is a weird thing.

Theme 4: Communication. This school social worker shared that communication allows her to experience empowerment and self-efficacy.

> P7: Sometimes we talk verbally and sometimes we talk through emails. A lot of happens here through emails. And, usually I just give general information to check and see if how they are doing. Or if there is a concern, I'll take it to a teacher about what the students concern is. I try to keep everything as confidential as I can. It can be very challenging in a school setting to keep things confidential as you would like it to be but that is kind of the nature of the beast.

Theme 5: Finances and Security. The school social workers interviewed were largely able to share that the current financial crisis facing public education in Pennsylvania impacts them by threatening their job security. Participant seven shared how this theme plays into her role as a school social worker.

> P7: When we had the budget cuts a few years ago social work was definitely on the chopping block so we had more input with that then. We really haven't had and I came through the budget cut.

Theme 6: Commitment to Service. Participant 7 identified her own commitment to providing services to the kids she serves as a manner in which she increases her effectiveness.

> P7: I think I am pretty effective. I have a pretty high graduation rate. The E-town graduation rate is pretty high. We have a very small dropout rate which is very good. Last year, I had pretty many of my crew make it.

Theme 7: Barriers to Service

She identified with the majority of participants who explained that communication is paramount to becoming empowered as a school social worker but that she struggles with communication at a more macro level.
She stated, "We don't do that much at all. I guess that kind of goes through the supervisor kind of thing. We did have some more communication with them when they were considering cutting the position. When we had the budget cuts a few years ago social work was definitely on the chopping block so we had more input with that then." This participant also whole heartedly acknowledged the concerns with supervision and how those concerns manifest in her workplace.

She shared, " My supervisor is really the director of support services who I haven't had a meeting with yet this school year. So, it's kind of like there's a lot of people watching but I am responsible to a person who I really don't see that often. When I first got here, I tried to have supervision with the director of special ed. And finally, she kind of laughed

at me and was like, "Honey why do you keep trying to meet with me?". And I thought I should. I kept scheduling meetings with her once a month. I was trying, this was my first year and I thought she wanted to know what I was doing so I kept trying to schedule once a month once every other month meetings with her. She was like, "I don't need to talk to you, go do social work." It was weird for me because I was so used to having supervision. It was like just what I did. And, even now I don't think she quite grasps what I do. I hear comments and I think, seriously, even after all of these years, you still do not know. She will say things like, " you go on and do social worky things". I don't think she quite knows what those social work things are but she knows that I am out there doing them.

Appendix H

Sample Structural Description
Participant # 9

Theme 1: Supervision-Participant 9 identified this as a struggle area for her. Participant nine described a semi-supportive supervisor who provides no type of clinical social work supervision. It appears as though he is kind to her and allows her to have some level of autonomy but really is not a trained social worker. It was interesting to watch the individuals interviewed react to the two questions about their supervisor/supervision. It was almost like I could see the wheels turning. They actually seemed to be processing the entire process as they answered. Participant number 9, like many of the others interviewed seems to have a nice working relationship with their supervisor but what is lacking is the common training and knowledge of the school social worker role and skill set. Her level of empowerment relative to supervision seemed to be along the lines of, "While I enjoy being autonomous, who has my back."

Theme 2: Understanding of Role-struggle with staff and supervisor: This participant appeared genuinely frustrated when sharing her ongoing attempts to validate her role to staff members such as teachers. She shared that no matter how much effort she puts into explaining and clarifying her role, staff members, community members and her supervisor still struggle to understand. She did share that there is such a small number of people that she works closely with that the lack of understanding simply comes from limited contact. She has decided to enhance her empowerment by focusing on those contacts and making her role clear to others that she has contact with as that serves two purposes, serving children and families and educating people on her role as they see her work.
Also expressed with this individual was the fact that the school staff struggle to understand how extensive and severe some of the struggles that children and families face.

Theme 3: Connectedness versus isolation-experiences both connectedness and isolation: While participant number nine did express feelings of isolation she seemed to gain empowerment from fighting some of the battles relative to social justice and seeing gains for a family or child. It appears as though she does experience the isolation of being the only school social worker in her district but has had enough social work victories to feel empowered in her social work efforts, a different way of thinking, through the successes that her alternative paradigm has brought children and families.

Theme 4: Communication-internal is good, external could use some work. This was an area where I could also almost visible see this school social worker's cognitive wheels turning. It seems as though she put a lot of effort into publicizing her role when she first started in the school district many years ago but has since only focused on micro level work with little to no sharing of outcomes.

Participant nine did explain some intensive communication methods that she shares with internal stakeholders. She really focuses on more micro level work and is dedicated to letting the staff members about the work that she is accomplishing with a child in their classroom.

Theme 5: Finances and Security-identified with this theme due to potential job loss. This individual indicated feeling powerless in the face of potentially losing her job due to budget cuts. She seemed frustrated by knowing that her position is constantly discussed as a potential cut item. There was an increased sense of power expressed when she discussed billing for her services and being one of the few individuals in schools who can actually do that.

Theme 6: Commitment to Service-identified with this theme as it relates to effectiveness Participant number nine is an extremely dedicated and hard working school social worker who is just on fire for the professions. She explained that her sense of self-efficacy is driven by her commitment to serving the children and families that she works with and that is and will always be her measuring stick. Admittedly, it feels great when internal stakeholders recognize her work, she really seems to be driven by the successes of kids.

Theme 7: Barriers to service-also related to this theme also as it related to effectiveness. This school social worker seemed overwhelmed with some of the systematic barriers in place to not only obtaining services for families but also in holding children accountable for things like attendance. The system overall appeared to be a source of great frustration for this participant.

Appendix I

Sample Textural/Structural Description
Participant # 6

Participant six explained to this researcher what she has experienced regarding empowerment and self-efficacy as a school social worker in the workplace

She related that to the majority of the textural themes identified in this research, confirming that she experiences the following:

Theme 1: Supervision-struggle for her
Theme 2: Understanding of Role-struggle with staff and supervisor
Theme 3: Connectedness versus isolation-experiences both connectedness and isolation
Theme 4: Communication-internal is good, external could use some work
Theme 5: Finances and Security-identified with this theme due to increased workload
Theme 6: Commitment to Service-identified with this theme as it relates to effectiveness
Theme 7: Barriers to service-also related to this theme also as it related to effectiveness

Participant 6 really captured the essence of the school social worker's spectrum of experience with empowerment with the following quote so I feel inclined to include it here.

> P6: Today, I feel empowered. Yesterday I was almost in tears, does that make sense? You know my cases, my caseload. I stayed yesterday until 5:30 because I was so discouraged, and so far behind, and just didn't feel supported. But, I got myself together and today's a new day. So, I guess it really depends on the cases you know the push back that I'm getting from administration. That is sometimes the thing that beats us down the most, you know, people telling us no and not understanding. We come from an interesting perspective and I recognize that administrators come from a perspective of supporting the whole school. They have to make sure the whole school is safe and we are advocating for our student and our family and while I recognize that. Sometimes those values conflict.

Participant number 6 also shared with the researcher how she experiences empowerment and an increased sense of self-efficacy in the workplace. She identified with all seven themes identified in the research. Included in the list below is where she was on the spectrum of how she experiences empowerment and manners in which she increases her self-efficacy in the workplace.

Theme 1: Supervision. Participant six explained that she is not really certain who her supervisor is and that she receives no formal supervision in her workplace.

> P6: Supervision is a problem, although my supervisors I don't think know that because that is also a sensitive topic. Supervision in school districts is a big topic,

you know we have all these policies on how we are supervised but none of them teach me how to be a better social worker. They are all teacher related.

Theme 2: Understanding of Role. This school social worker indicated that school staff struggle to understand her role within their system.

P6: On the flip side, I don't think people know what we do and they sometimes ask us to do unrealistic things or things that are not a part of our job. Sometimes they are not sensitive enough to the things that we are trying to get for our families. Today is a good day so you got that answer. If you have talked to me Monday, you would have gotten a different answer. I feel like often for some reason I have to convince my staff that the families are worthy enough and I think that is discouraging . So often I get discouraged here because we are spread so thin. I feel like we can't do as good of a job as if I had more time I could do. That part is a struggle for us but I think in general I know it could be worse and I do feel supported.

Theme 3: Connectedness versus isolation. While this worker expressed feeling somewhat connected to her home building, she shared real feelings of isolation as well.

P6: I am on this little island by myself. So I don't feel personally connected. I don't go to the football games and I don't have the most school spirit and I don't socialize that much with everybody outside of school. I don't have a department, it's just me. Um, so I feel connected. You know I love my job and I'm thankful to have my job. And I feel connected and I feel happy when I am here. But I don't feel this overwhelming sense of pride that I think other staff members feel who have departments and things like that.

Theme 4: Communication. Participant six provided a nice description of using communications as a method be more empowered and increase self-efficacy.

P6: , I have a direct line to our central office on a daily basis, which I don't feel other pupil services staff in my building feel that connected. I am up at our district office all the time. I call them all the time. I don't necessarily call the superintendent, but we have an awesome superintendent and he is really accessible so if I wanted to, I could do that as well. I am in meetings with them all the time. We have a lot of say. They allow us to give our opinion. Maybe they don't take our opinion but we are including in a lot of macro policy making and procedure improvement making meetings and that kind of stuff. I also think that myself in the other social worker advocate our skills in that area. If we weren't asking to be there, they probably would not invite us but we are the ones going hey we need to meet about this policy.

Theme 5: Finances and Security. Participant six explained that the decreases in financial support from the state level in Pennsylvania has resulted in direct programmatic struggles for her.

P6: Definitely impacted financially. I used to be the sole social worker for just high school and now I am in 8 schools and my partner was for one high school and now he is in 9 schools.

Theme 6: Commitment to Service. Commitment to service ranked high with participant six as a means to become efficacious.

P6: So, I definitely think that I am effective given what's available to me. I think the services that are available in our county put a million road blocks in front of us, funding, insurance for families, transportation, housing, all those things that we battle against every day, drugs and alcohol, mental health, all those things, I think they stand in our way. But, in general, given what I have available to me, I'm effective.

Theme 7: Barriers to service

P6: All those barriers. Honestly I think when you get a family and they have no insurance and the kids needs help and they are not in crisis you know what the heck do you do with that kid? I mean we have awesome school resources, thank goodness. But when you need something more than that, what, we're going to wait 2-3 months for MA to kick in and they're going to get services that way. So, but yet they're not in crisis so there is nothing immediate. So that's, those are my hardest ones and I tell the school, "sorry, nothing is going to happen right away". And that is just the reality.

Kathy Minnich, LCSW, RPT, HSV, PhD (ABD)

Objective: To continue to impact children and families by serving as an instructional leader for future human service professionals.

Licenses and Certifications:

Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW)	State of Pennsylvania	2012
Licensed Social Worker (LSW)	State of Pennsylvania	1998
Registered Play Therapist (RPT)	Association for Play Therapy	2003
Home and School Visitor (HSV)	State of Pennsylvania	2001
Principal K-12	State of Pennsylvania	2011
Supervisor of Pupil Personnel Services	State of Pennsylvania	2010

Professional Experience

2012-Present   Temple University

Coordinator of Play Therapy Certification

Adjunct Instructor- School of Social Work Program (MSW program)

Courses taught: Introduction to Play Therapy

Play Therapy with Special Populations

1999-Present   Northeastern School District   Manchester, PA
School District Social Worker

2000-2008   Kathy Minnich Counseling   York, PA
President/Therapist/Owner

- Provided outpatient and in-home therapy services to families and children.
- Supervised two subcontracted employees.

- Maintained all necessary paperwork and records needed for business
- Billed insurance companies for payment
- Testified in court regarding services provided to children and families
- Worked diligently and with compassion to identify areas of struggles for families and to assist with their healing

Education

2005-Present   **Walden University**
- Enrolled in **Ph.D. in Educational Psychology Program**
- Maintain GPA of 3.88
- Anticipated completion: 2/2014
Dissertation method: Qualitative
Dissertation Theory: Empowerment and Self-Efficacy
Dissertation Topic: A Phenomenological Study of School Social Worker Empowerment and Self-Efficacy in the Workplace.

Shippensburg University
- Earned Supervisory Certification in Pupil Services GPA: 4.0
- Earned K-12 Principal Certification GPA: 4.0

1995-1998   **Temple University**
• Earned a Master's in Social Work degree
• GPA 3.87

1991-1993   **Shippensburg University**
- Earned a BA in Sociology
- Involved in many campus activities

1989   **Spring Grove Area Senior High School**

Professional Organizations
- Pennsylvania Association for Play Therapy: Charter member, Member of the state board of directors (1998-2008): President (2004), Secretary (2005-2008).
- Pennsylvania Association of Pupil Services Administrators
- National Association of Pupil Services Administrators
- National Association for Social Workers; Central Pennsylvania Regional Chairperson 2009- Current;

Executive Board Member (2011-present)
- Association for Play Therapy
- School Social Work Association of America
- PA Coalition for Student Support Services Personnel-Charter member 2011
- Pennsylvania Association of School Social Work Personnel

Community Organizations
- Member Rotary Club of North York; active member of the Community Service Committee
- Member Northeastern Women of Today
- Member St. Paul United Methodist Church-Manchester
- Member of the Northeastern York Community Roundtable (Vice-Chair-2012)
- Member of Servant Board of Directors for the Northeastern Angel Food Program
- Member of the County of York Children, Youth, and Families Advisory Board; Appointed by County Commissioners
- Key Community Leader for York County Communities That Care 2010; appointed by Human Services Department
- Executive Board member of York County Communities That Care (2010-present)
  Served on the community resources assessment group
  Led an effort to begin an initiative focused on teen pregnancy prevention in York County (2010)

Professional Recognitions

The Second Mile Community Partner of the month June 2008

Who Cares Award winner for Northeastern School District 2012

Conference Presenter:

Mutual Storytelling in Play Therapy: PA-APT State Conference, November, 1999

Incorporating Pets in Play Therapy: PA-APT State Conference, April, 2003

The Use of Pets in Play Therapy: West Chester University, October, 2003

Expanding Your Toolbox: meshing Directive and Non-Directive Play Techniques PA-APT

State Conference, June 2009

Social Workers in Multicultural School Environments: PA-NASW State Fall Conference,

October, 2009

Poverty Forum PA-NASW Conference October 2011

In-Service Northeastern School District Employees Poverty Workshop January 2012

Sandtray workshop PA-NASW State Conference October 2012