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Social Workers' Views on Students With Developmental Disabilities in Charter and Private Schools in Idaho

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Health

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Branden Smalley

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

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Walden University
2026

Abstract

Social Workers' Views on Students With Developmental Disabilities in Charter and

Private Schools in Idaho

by

Branden Smalley

MS, Northwest Nazarene University, 2014

BS, University of Phoenix, 2009

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Social Work

Walden University

May 2026

Abstract

Idaho private and charter schools are experiencing increased enrollment, including students who are developmentally delayed. Such an increase in the population of developmentally delayed students presents challenges for school social workers in providing needed therapeutic services. This study addressed the limited therapeutic services for students with developmental disabilities in Idaho's private and charter schools, as perceived by school social workers. The purpose was to examine school social workers' perceptions of the barriers and challenges they encounter when supporting students with developmental disabilities in private or charter schools in Idaho. Participant eligibility criteria included holding a minimum of a bachelor's degree in social work and possessing direct experience working with students with developmental disabilities in private or charter school settings. Using a generic qualitative research design with ecological systems theory as the lens, semistructured interviews were conducted with nine social workers collected through purposive sampling. Data retrieved from the semistructured interviews were analyzed with Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis process. Findings suggest that students with developmental disabilities often experienced limited access to therapeutic services. These findings indicate the need for further study in support of vulnerable students within the current context of public to charter school environment; findings also support positive social change by offering ideas to address access barriers.

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Dedication

First, I dedicate this capstone project, which involved numerous hours spent on classwork and research and to my whole world: Jesus, Bri, Dylen, Josiah, Tytus. My family helped me the whole way.

Additionally, I want to dedicate this research project to the supplemental reason of why I wanted to jump back into research: this is for all the vulnerable disabled students, but specifically Josiah and Richie.

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To Dr. Debra Wilson, my committee chair and Dr. Larscheid, my second committee member, I am very thankful for the both of you for always taking my calls and continuous feedback. For that and more, I thank you!

Lastly, I want to reflect on my journey. This process is a long haul and a lot of pushing forward to complete. This journey could not have been completed without a support group, chatting with other professionals, and some self-motivation to reach the finish line. There are moments when climbing a mountain that you believe you are about to reach the summit, only to discover there is more mountain ahead. In those moments, remember that one step at a time is all you can take!

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

Introduction

There are 7.3 million disabled students in the United States enrolled in the public school system, or 13% of all enrollments. Thirty-four percent of these enrollments specifically have a learning disability (Schaeffer, 2024). These disabilities include an intellectual disability, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, autism, or traumatic brain injury. Once the treatment team has determined the criteria, the student can access therapeutic services within their school system (Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, 2024).

Idaho requires that public educational institutions provide special education services for students diagnosed with a developmental disability. To service these students, an individual educational plan (IEP) is required to meet the individual student's needs. (Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, 2024). In 2004, the Disabilities Education Act established the standards and requirements to meet individual services that include, but are not limited to, providing a school social worker or behavioral interventionist. These services are conducted within the classroom to uphold the student's rights while ensuring the student remains within that environment for integration (Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, 2024; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 2004).

However, according to the Institute for Youth in Policy (2025), in considering the current struggle within the public educational system with the developmentally delayed population, policymakers are researching alternative models of charter or private schools serving the developmentally delayed students. Currently, the enrollment rates of charter

schools are 24% higher than those of the public educational system for two reasons. According to the Institute for Youth Policy (2021), these reasons are funding and educational outcomes of students who access an IEP or 504 behavioral plan within the private or charter school sector (Institute for Youth Policy, 2021).

The first portion of this section is organized in the following manner: the problem statement addresses the social issues affecting students in private and charter school settings. Additionally, the purpose statement examines the gap in practice related to the challenges and barriers social workers face in providing services to students with developmental disabilities. Finally, the nature of the doctoral project outlines the research design and approach that was used in the study.

This section then turns to the remaining components of this study. The significance of the study explains why this research matters and how it contributes to understanding service gaps for developmentally delayed students in Idaho's charter and private schools. In addition, the theoretical and conceptual framework will draw on Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Rosenkoetter et al., 2007) to provide a holistic lens for examining the systems that shape students' access to services. Values and ethics are addressed in the final subsection illustrating how the alignment with the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics (NASW, 2024) to ensure professional integrity. Finally, a review of professional and academic literature situates the study within existing scholarship and highlights the need for further inquiry.

Problem Statement

Research social problems of concern have prompted researcher to search for literature regarding students in Idaho with a developmental disability who remain underserved in a charter or private school setting. According to the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare (2024), therapeutic or developmental therapy is only required in public schools. Therefore, charter or private school students cannot access the required services (Wolk et al., 2019). Typically, a school social worker provides therapeutic services prescribed by a treatment team in the public school sector. When a student is enrolled within the public school sector and is qualified to access developmental services through an IEP or 504 behavioral plan, the student can access developmental therapy, behavioral intervention, speech therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, or an isolated classroom to resolve overstimulation and other behavioral issues (Idaho State of Board Education, 2024).

Idaho currently has 168 private schools serving 22,195 students and 805 public schools serving 317,583 students. Nine percent of students enrolled in several counties within the educational system of Idaho have a developmental delay (Idaho State Board of Education, 2024). In Ada County, there are 8,241 students enrolled, and 15% of those individuals have a developmental delay. Further, the 617 students within Blaine County have a rate of 19% with said delay (Idaho State Board of Education, 2024).

According to the Idaho State Board of Education (2024), the average price of private education per student in elementary school is \$8,961.00, and for high school is \$9,105.00. Most private schools are religiously affiliated; the Association of Christian

Schools International (ACSI) monitors 64% of these. According to ACSI (2024), this connection has strengthened educators and provided a continued educational standard. On the other hand, the public school system is overseen by the State Board of Education and has members appointed by the Governor of Idaho (Idaho State Board of Education, 2024).

However, according to the Private School Review (2024), the private or charter schools throughout the state of Idaho do not require teacher certification within their staff, and it is challenging to provide qualified teachers, administrators, and directors to support the developmentally delayed population (Private School Review, 2024).

Historically, and according to Stalneck (2022), school social workers employed by the public school system were initially called “visiting teachers.” These individuals assisted the teacher with some students struggling in the educational setting. Implementing such services removed barriers that the student may have had in their home and classroom. Said services were first started in three major cities: Boston, Massachusetts; New York, New York; and Hartford, Connecticut, in 1906. Eventually, this program transitioned from classifying “visiting teachers” to “school social workers” in 1942 (Stalknecker, 2022, para.2).

To address this problem, the state of Idaho has continued to work within the public school sector. However, Idaho has shown increased educational failure and the need for therapeutic services (Idaho State Board of Education, 2024). According to Moore (2022), additional research is necessary regarding the effectiveness of school-

based services. How can these services be accessed, and what are the issues regarding accessibility with therapeutic school services?

Research for this study was drawn from school social workers within the charter or private school districts. This research explored these entities' barriers and challenges while assisting students with developmental delays. As the state of Idaho continues to show an increase in student access to private or charter schools, there is also a need for students with a developmental delay to access services within these educational settings (Idaho Administrative Procedure Act, 2024).

An emphasis of the present study is the examination of the systemic challenges of developmentally delayed students face in accessing services. It will assist the current research on the practice of school social workers within the public, private, and charter school systems (IDAPA, 2024). Additionally, the study explored the collaboration between school social workers and educators to further understand the services offered and those that cannot be accessed.

Purpose Statement and Research Question

This generic qualitative inquiry explored social workers' views that support students with developmental delay(s) enrolled within a charter or private school regarding potential challenges or barriers to therapeutic or intervention services. Specifically, the study aimed to obtain through an in-depth semistructured interview that captures the experiences of the school social worker practitioners that may exist with the developmentally delayed population. These lived experiences are critical in

understanding the gaps in service provision and provide context for the enrollment and service trends seen across Idaho educational field.

Idaho State Board of Education (2024) and Idaho Department of Health and Welfare (2024) are required to provide school-based services for children with disabilities under the IDEA (2024). However, according to the Idaho State Board of Education (2024), there has been a decrease in overall students in the public school sector, while the private and charter schools have seen a significant increase. Overall, public school district experienced a triple-digit drop in enrollment in 2024. Moreover, the three highest decreases are the Twin Falls School District, with 235 fewer students, and the Blaine and Minidoka School Districts, showing a combined 232 fewer students (Idaho State Board of Education, 2024).

Furthermore, the State of Idaho has shown that public student enrollments have decreased by 10,836 statewide, and these individuals have sought private or charter education. According to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2024), charter schools have added 80,000 new students to the public education system. Public education has reportedly shown a decrease in enrollment as a nationwide issue and a continued issue specifically in Idaho. In addition, according to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2024), at least 10% of Idaho, along with California, Utah, and Nevada, show an increasing trend of public education students transferring to charter or private school settings at a steady rate.

Research Question

The following research question guides this study:

RQ: What are the views of school social workers regarding barriers and challenges for students with developmental disability who attend a charter or private school in Idaho?

Key Terms

Individualized education plan (IEP): a program that outlines the specialized instruction and support services a child with a disability needs to succeed in school (IDAPA, 2024).

Developmental disability: a chronic, severe condition that affects a person's physical, learning, language, or behavioral development. It usually begins before the age of twenty-two, can impact daily life, and is likely to continue indefinitely (Idaho Special Education Manual, 2024).

Non-public school: an education program governed and operated by an individual entity excluding the federal government or any state, county, or municipal agency or division of these (IDAPA 2024).

School social workers: are an integral link between school, home, and community in helping students achieve academic success (NASW, 2024).

School-based therapeutic services: services provided to Medicaid-eligible students to receive speech therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and developmental therapy (Idaho Special Education Manual, 2024).

Nature of the Doctoral Project

Given their critical role and involvement with ground-level perspective, the social worker who works with students within the Idaho school system can provide a structured

interview that will be utilized to address the research question. The Zoom online meeting platform was used to complete interviews, and the data collected were used to assess the barriers and challenges for developmentally challenged students. This aligned with the purpose of this research, which is to identify and collect input from school social workers working within private or charter school education in Idaho. A generic qualitative research design was applied to this research, wherein data were collected through semistructured interviews with qualified social workers within Idaho. This design is relevant to exploring the barriers and challenges for students with a developmental delay.

For the research study, a sample population of nine social workers were selected using purposive sampling to gather information for data saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). The data were analyzed from a thematic perspective (Burkholder et al., 2020). Each social worker came from a separate school within a charter or private sector in Idaho.

Significance of the Study

This study researched to obtain school social workers' perceptions directly connected with developmentally delayed students within a private or charter school. Currently, developmentally delayed students cannot access the necessary therapeutic services, according to the Idaho State Board of Education (2024). While reviewing the data provided by the Idaho State Board of Education (2024), social workers face challenges and barriers regarding how a student with developmental disabilities may not be able to access the therapeutic services required through an IEP.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2023), there was an increase of 6.4 million developmentally delayed students served nationwide under the IDEA from 2012-2013 and 7.5 million within the public school system from 2022-2023. However, 12% of students accessing therapeutic services in Idaho are served within the public school system (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023), while some developmental students within the private or charter school are underserved (Idaho State Board of Education, 2024).

This study used current literature to contribute to the gap of perceived barriers and challenges that school social workers may be facing in private and charter school education. The study of nine social workers within Idaho provided findings to improve access issues that may be occurring within these educational systems. Understanding the challenges and barriers will be the initial step to support change or therapeutic services needed for academic success.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

Ecological systems theory (EST), developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), theorized that changes in one system can affect the others. Using this theory, I examined how multiple systems surrounding school social workers shape the barriers and challenges they encounter. Specifically, EST was used to explore Idaho school social workers' perceptions of systemic obstacles and how interactions among the microsystems, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem influences contribute to those challenges. The research problem addressed through this study explored school social workers' perceptions of the existing systemic challenges and barriers within Idaho.

Bronfenbrenner's theory focuses on the individual's human development and how they may contribute to their system. Further, this theory provided a better understanding of education and the challenges or barriers within the educational system.

The EST is based on the students' environments, including the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Each of these systems is defined by their environment for development. Examples of these systems may include an individual's home, school classroom setting, community, place of religion, or extracurricular activities they may engage in (Yann Foo et al., 2022). Moreover, Härkönen (2001) also supported the connection of an individual's systems and how each system supports the development of the individual. The microsystem would include the student's family, neighbors, school, and friends (Härkönen, 2001). According to Yann Foo et al. (2022) and Härkönen, it is one of the most influential systems for child development. Such a microsystem has a shared relationship with the child and the immediate relations connected to them. These relationships impact one another, leading to the second level of the system, known as the mesosystem, which connects the micro and macrosystems. According to Härkönen, these developmental years could potentially influence the result of the developmental process with education and parental involvement. This mesosystem level is one of the more important stages for a child as they enter the educational system, where an extensive system now impacts them more than just the main level of the microsystem.

Härkönen (2001) defined an exosystem as a process for the individual that requires a link between two or more settings, and one of these two categories would need

to be a setting that does not provide a developmental aspect. For example, an environment of a school aligned with a community neighborhood system would impact the individual. However, the school system is where the child would be more inclined to be involved than other ecosystems, such as the parents' workplace or local community event centers, such as daycares or community clubs. Härkönen then identified the broader macrosystem as well, which shapes development through cultural, economic, and societal influences. The macrosystem is an overreaching system that involves resources, lifestyles, and opportunity structures for the individual. It frames how students' progress through their education, including what services are available in public, private or charter school settings. Furthermore, such factors are tied to the student's belief system, values, and ideologies, which interact within the micro, meso, and exosystem of the student's environment. Thus, while the macrosystem provides a wider social context for development, the chronosystem considers changes across time within the individual's lived experiences and the support systems around them.

Härkönen (2021) explained the fifth and final layer, known as the chronosystem, as an overall system not defined by short- or long-term but more attuned to the path of the individual's development. This chronosystem can strongly influence their development, including their support system and rules or values placed upon them during all these stages, but focuses on the importance of understanding the student's lived experiences of their developmental delay and the support systems that have influenced their development.

Utilizing the EST theoretical framework provided real-world systemic issues that explored how one system may affect another for a student accessing a private or charter school within their community. The EST theory identified the different systems between the student's relationship at home and the educational system being researched. However, not only the microsystem or mesosystem, but specifically the exosystem in which the influence of the local government or school educational system is involved in the development of the student. Therefore, I used this theory to seek out the tier systems that impact the student and the school social workers' involvement and determine what barriers or challenges may be a problem within the EST (see Härkönen, 2001).

Values and Ethics

This study's supported the social work field, including the 9th Grand Challenge of Social Work. The Code of Ethics (NASW, 2023) upholds social workers' responsibility to support individuals and society. In addition, the Code of Ethics provides a set of values, principles, and standards that all social workers should maintain. The NASW strives to uphold the dignity and worth of every individual.

Furthermore, the information from the study provided insight to school social workers about the nuances of services that may be offered within the educational system. Addressing underexplored areas aligns with the values and ethics outlined by the NASW (2023), supporting informed practice and contributing meaningful knowledge to the field. Social workers in the educational system can use the information obtained in this study to increase their understanding of what students may or may not obtain and what barriers may impede service provisions.

Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

Utilizing multiple academic databases, accessed through Walden University Library, including SocINDEX, SAGE Journals, Google Scholar, and APA PsycInfo the most current information and relevant articles were identified for this study. In many cases, terms and phrase searches were conducted with key words such as, *school-based services, private schools, charter schools, developmentally delayed student population, school social workers, and therapeutic services in Idaho*. Throughout this search, literature from various sources and academic journals was limited to works published within the past 5 years. Additional information regarding statistics and data included information from the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare and the Idaho State Board of Education. These sites obtained adequate and relevant data regarding Idaho's public, private, and charter schools. I determined that the selected research methods were appropriate because they yielded detailed information and statistics relevant to my research topic.

Individuals With Disabilities Education Act

The IDEA (1997) amended an original public law called the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975). Before 1975, only one in five children accessed the public school system (America Institute of Research, 2023). The IDEA Act was created to address children who have a disability and are not being adequately supported. According to public law, more than half of children with disabilities in the United States still do not receive appropriate educational services. Moreover, due to inadequate

services, families or ancillary providers were often requested to assist outside the school system (IDEA, 1997 case law PL107-110).

In the United States, the largest disability group in the public education system is students with a learning disability (LD), with a current count of 2.3 million students (Schaeffer, 2023). These students access an IEP to monitor their educational progress and are covered under special educational law. Further, students with autism embody 12% of the nation's school students with disabilities. This also has seen an increase from 1.5% in 2000 to 2001 to 12% in 2021 to 2022 (Schaeffer, Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2023), more than seven million disabled students are accessing an IEP. Qualifications for eligibility necessitate the presence of one or more specifications, including autism, learning disability, speech or language deficit, emotional disturbance, traumatic brain injury, visual impairment, hearing impairment, deafness, cognitive delay, or other health impairments (Idaho Special Education Manual, 2023).

No Child Left Behind Act

Written in 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was a primary federal law intended to improve all students' education. This act would assist disabled and non-disabled students in achieving academic success. However, according to the Department of Education (2003), schools were not adequately held accountable, with little guidance on what material or testing assessments were necessary to ensure students met the requirements of the NCLB. The NCLB Act held school systems to a standard that required them to submit yearly progress reports and benchmarks to school districts.

Under this performance standard testing, high expectations were set for all students (disabled and non-disabled) to pass with at least 95%. These standards, with a 95% pass rate, made it difficult for disabled students who were held to the same standard in special education classrooms as mainstream classrooms.

This significant legislation, written into law (NCLB, 2002), was designed to bring all students (disabled and non-disabled) to the exact required criteria. Research in Education Policy and Management (2020) recognized this issue within a few instances. One issue is that teachers were no longer required or allowed to teach their specific subject but were obligated to teach all subjects. When this occurred, students were not provided with the most qualified professionals for the subject matter. As a result, students may experience reduced academic growth. In addition to the NCLB (Public Law 7801-23), an amendment included that teachers no longer be required to obtain a specific educational background. This change allowed individuals with a bachelor's degree to obtain a full state certification. Despite the NCLB, non-public schools allow teachers to provide education without a bachelor's degree or a background in the material provided to students within that educational system (ACSI, 2024). Moreover, the different standards of instructional teaching provided by teachers imply a lack of sufficient training in relevant subjects; it can also indicate that when teaching outside of their qualifications, there may be more textbook usage than those taught within the academic comfort of said teacher's educational background. This is vital as these teachers create lesson plans for disabled and non-disabled students with no differentiation (Research in Education Policy and Management, 2020).

Although the NCLB was designed to bring all students to the same academic level, some students, both with and without disabilities, could not meet the designated benchmarks. As the Research Education Policy and Management (2020) noted, the learning environment under the NCLB became less effective at supporting development within individual subject areas. Nevertheless, students were still provided learning materials and achieved passing scores based on predetermined percentages. Also, according to Research of Education Policy and Management (2020), teachers who instruct within their field are better equipped in the educational setting than those teaching on a subject that is not in their wheelhouse. Additionally, research has shown that fewer arguments between students and teachers occur when the subject taught is within a teacher's experiential specialty. Moreover, according to Hawkins (2024), research from 40 states from 2019 to 2023 showed a lack of positive results from charter and private schools with individual students, resulting in a decline of beneficial results for students with developmental delays. This research sought over 300,000 charter schools and families to research students and individual families enrolled within these educational settings.

Therefore, due to some of the concerns identified by Research in Education Policy and Management (2020), the NCLB was amended to provide options if a student, disabled or non-disabled could not pass the approved curriculum. The public school system was able to alter the achievement requirements with an amendment created through a new act known as Every Student Succeeds. This shift created a new federal law; Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA; NCLB, 2001).

Every Student Succeeds Act

ESSA (2015) amended the NCLB for some controversial provisions of standardized testing that public school systems could not complete. The primary purpose of this amendment was to “provide all children significant opportunity to receive fair, equitable, and high-quality education and close to educational achievement gaps” (ESSA, 2015, p. 8). To achieve this purpose, the ESSA called for an increase in the number of highly qualified teachers to improve the academic success of disabled and non-disabled students.

These standardized tests usually had poor outcomes for the disabled student population (ESSA, 2015). In addition, according to Harr-Robins et al. (2015) and the American Institutes for Research (AIR, 2023), students enrolled within the public school system who had a developmental diagnosis spent more than 80% of their school-based day studying non-disabled students’ criteria with minimal outcomes. Program reviews and evaluations were implemented to help school districts review areas that need improvement. These evaluations provide school districts with information on strengthening their special education program, where to place additional oversight, suggestions to improve research, and how to address developing issues (AIR, 2023).

The purpose of this act (ESSA, 2015) was to positively alter the NCLB and provide more control to individual states than federal control. This amendment to the ESSA (2015) was implemented to uphold the increase in student achievement. However, according to the Idaho Department of Education (2022), there continues to be a decrease in student enrollment in the public education sector.

Idaho Department of Education

According to the Idaho Department of Education (2022), the current count of students with a developmental disability represents 11.6% of students enrolled within the public and charter school system. However, some students enrolled in private, or charter schools cannot access therapeutic services. The U.S. Individuals Disabilities Education Act (1997) amended an original public law called the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975). This act was created due to children with disabilities not having their needs fully met. As reported by public law, more than half of children with disabilities in the United States did not receive appropriate education services (U.S. Disabilities Education Act). Due to inadequate services, families or providers were often requested to assist outside the school system (IDEA, 1997). Therefore, according to the U.S. Department of Education (2023) and Idaho Code 08.02.03.109.02, no state policies govern testing or textbook use within private schools, including those for the developmentally delayed population. Nevertheless, within the Idaho Special Educational Manual (2023), a private school that utilizes a private provider to engage in unique educational therapy, known as behavioral intervention or developmental therapy, must adhere to specific requirements. This is due to private schools' inability to provide special education (Idaho Special Education Manual, 2023).

Medicaid School-Based Services and Local Education Agencies

Medicaid school-based services for Idaho are governed by the Idaho Medicaid manual (2024). These Medicaid services are only allotted to children with disabilities or medical necessities enrolled by a school district and charter schools (Idaho Department of

Health and Welfare, 2023; IDEA, 1997). The treatment team prescribes these services based on the services the student needs through their IEP to uphold their educational needs. These services required by the school system include behavioral intervention, behavior consultation, crisis intervention, habilitative skill building, personal care services, psychotherapy, and community-based rehabilitation services (Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, 2023).

Medicaid school-based services were created from the Federal Medicare Catastrophic Coverage Act (1988), in which public schools and charter schools can bill Medicaid for services offered to students with an approved IEP. However, according to Research in Education Policy and Management (2020), the shortage of special education and educational professionals is growing, and school districts are restricted from hiring within their district to fill the need, increasing reliance on local education agencies (LEAs) to fill the gap. These LEAs must comply with IDEA and school-based services (Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, 2023). Van Huston Academy (2024) reported that private schools may not be obligated to ensure that an IEP is followed for the disabled student. Some factors include how the private school is funded or specific circumstances for that student. Even if the student is enrolled in a public, private, or charter school, each entity must provide a least restrictive environment (LRE) for every disabled or non-disabled student (Idaho Special Education Manual, 2023).

According to the AIR (2023), school districts rely heavily on LEAs to assist with working with disabled students in special and mainstream classrooms. The utilization of LEAs was due to a lack of professionals hired, and professionals could not meet the

needs of the disabled students needing intervention (AIR, 2023). Each of these LEAs must meet the state's requirements, and an LEA within Idaho must be approved by Medicaid and follow IDAPA Rules (16.03.09.850-857) along with providing qualified staff that maintain their certifications. In addition, if a public or charter school utilizes an LEA, both schools (apart from private schools) must complete a background check. The LEA is required to use a Background Check Unit (BCU).

Oversight and Accountability

In contrast, the public and charter school entity is required to use the Idaho Bureau of Criminal Identification, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and a statewide sex offender registry (Idaho Code 33-130, Title 28.20.33(7)(b)). Moreover, both the LEA and the public or charter school are responsible for ensuring the developmentally delayed student is eligible for services to be received, including Medicaid approval, enrollment in an Idaho public school or charter school, a qualifying developmental diagnosis, and parent consent for Medicaid billing. The LEA is allowed to work with their child once approved by BCU and school administration (Idaho Special Education Manual, 2023). However, according to the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare (2023), a private school does not require these stipulations. There is more flexibility, including obtaining a contract to work with an LEA. These LEAs are selected by a private, public, or charter school more frequently as there continues to be a shortage of qualified teachers to assist the disabled or non-disabled population (Ruble et al., 2023).

Increasing Access to Care for the Idaho Department of Education

According to Idaho Administrative Hearing (Idaho Department of Education, (2021), (SDE Nos. H-210-2-08b), a due process involving guardians and parents of a minor versus the Monticello Montessori Charter School District 474 provided a lawsuit from the petitioners, stating that the educational benefits that should be provided to a student with a developmental delay required by the IDEA were not delivered. However, according to the memorandum (SDE Nos. H-21-02-08b), the respondent denied the claims. Within this hearing, the two claims presented are denial of free and appropriate education (FAPE) and lack of evaluation of a student needing an IEP. In conclusion, the charter school violated the IDEA requirements for this enrollment. (Idaho Department of Education, 2022).

In addition, and according to Idaho Administrative Hearing (Idaho Department of Education, 2022), (SDE No. H-22-05-27a), a due process involving a legal guardian and parent of a developmentally delayed student versus the Blackfoot School District 55 provided a lawsuit that lacked resolution through mediation for a student being denied FAPE. This was due to the school district's failure to evaluate the student's disability. However, the conclusion of H-22-05-27a provided that the petitioner failed to provide the burden of proof against the claimant (Idaho Department of Education, 2022).

Therefore, other due processes occur through the Idaho Department of Education (2025), and options for guardians or parents to seek mediation. If mediation is unsuccessful, a fair hearing is required through a legal due process, completed through a formal process through the school district (State of Idaho Department of Education,

2025). Within these mediation or legal, fair hearings, a school social worker is requested as the professional assisting the student throughout their involvement to uphold the student's therapeutic needs (Idaho Department of Education).

School Special Education Teachers and Social Workers

According to Ruble et al. (2023) and Billingsley & Bettini (2019), there has continued to be a shortage of qualified special educational teachers and social work professionals nationwide, specifically within rural areas. Alderman (2024) identified that more than half of the school districts, or 80% of states, have a shortage of qualified special education teachers. Moreover, explicitly researching Idaho, some reasons for these shortages include burnout, organizational structure, and students' unmet needs (Newby, 2024). To add to this, shifting enrollment patterns are reshaping where and how these needs are addressed.

Trends show that public schools are annually losing around 275,000 students nationwide, and Texas and Florida provided the most significant growth, with around 40% of students attending new charter schools. However, 38 states recorded increasing numbers for charter and private schools, and only two states saw public district-wide growth in student enrollment (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2024). These enrollment trends are placing additional strain on educational systems that are already experiencing shortages in qualified teachers and social workers. This underscores the importance of examining how charter and private schools can address the needs of their developmentally delayed population.

According to National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2024), research is needed to reveal how charter schools will continue to grow and serve newly added students throughout the United States, especially in rural areas. The Idaho State Department of Education (2024) showed an increase from 2019 to 2023 of 6.34% of students leaving the public school system and enrolling in a charter school. However, according to Idaho Educational School Districts (2024), the public school system is struggling to meet special education needs. If this trend persists, public, private, and charter schools must continue to provide school social workers to be an integral link within the school system to help students' academic success (NASW, 2024). To understand the importance of these roles, it is helpful to consider the benefits and limitations of school based therapeutic services currently offered to students with developmental disabilities.

Benefits of School-Based Therapeutic Services

Developmentally delayed students enrolled in public schools are offered various services, including an IEP or medically necessary services for the student and their educational needs (Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, 2024). However, according to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2024), these same services are not required or consistently offered to the developmentally delayed population due to state and federally funded Medicaid programs. Such a contrast illustrates how access to therapeutic services is inequitable across school systems. Identifying these differences also provides a basis for considering the federal mandates that govern services provision, discussed in the next section.

While researching school-based services offered throughout public education within the United States, it is evident that federal mandates (IDEA, 1997) oversee and ensure that public schools offer the services required federally and medically. According to Zink and Anderson (2022), these school-based services include school psychologists, therapists, social workers, and paraprofessionals in high demand to assist students' success. However, there is also a shortage of these positions (Ruble et al., 2023). An outcome of such a shortage is the unmanageable caseloads for the professionals who remain in the system.

Another significant barrier to providing services for students with developmental disabilities is the caseload individual therapist handle. Brown and Knight (2021) reported providing school therapists to oversee the current 250:1 ratio was an overbearing caseload, and the results of their research showed that there is a need for increased therapeutic involvement to oversee smaller student ratios. For educational services in public, private, or charter schools, having a less overbearing ratio will help students achieve academic success for the developmentally delayed population (Brown & Knight, 2021). However, to address the concerns in the number of caseloads, there is also a need to consider the financial resources available to schools. This directly impacts the school's ability to hire and retain qualified professionals.

Idaho Special Educational Funding

According to the Idaho Special Educational Manual (2023), public schools are structured to receive funding for students with disabilities, which private and charter schools often lack, making it harder for them to offer equivalent services. According to

Idaho State Board of Education (2024), all school districts spent approximately \$317 million on special education for the 2021-2022 school year. However, the calculations and costs did not cover all the special education needs within the public and charter school districts, including a lack of resources to hire paraprofessionals and the continuation of finding qualified special education teachers (Idaho State Board of Education).

According to Idaho Special Education (2024) and Pew Research (2024), a deficit of 66.5 million leaves public school education short of funds. According to the director of West Ada School District (2024), the gap for funding is widening, and students who are diagnosed with a disability remain underserved. A similar report from the Office of Support and Services for the Twin Falls School District (2024) indicated that the number one barrier to service issues nationwide is a lack of resources and funding. During the 2020-2021 school year, the West Ada School District reported that 40% of public schools had special education vacancies and found it hard to address the demands of educating the special education department.

Summary

This qualitative study bridges the gap in knowledge and practice, exploring school social work within the private and charter school systems within special education service as it pertains throughout Idaho's school system. In Section 1, I used the EST to compare many levels of the individual, including microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Using the EST, the capstone explored the challenges and barriers that school social workers recognized within the private or charter school

system. There exists a gap for students with disabilities who are enrolled in private, or charter schools compared to the public school system in receiving therapeutic services. While public education is mandated to provide therapeutic services per state and federal codes with the United States Department of Education (2023) and Idaho Code 08.02.03.109.02 (2024), private or charter schools are potentially underserved within their respective districts.

There is one research question this work ventured to answer: What are the views of school social workers regarding barriers and challenges for students with developmental disability who attend a charter or private school in Idaho? This question was answered against the backdrop of EST to fill the gap between school social workers and the barriers and challenges they may have while serving the developmentally delayed population in the private or charter school educational system.

Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

Introduction

Social workers operating within Idaho's private or charter schools face various barriers and challenges in working with developmentally delayed students. According to data from Pew Research (2024), Idaho's public-school systems are experiencing an increase in student transfers instead of families opting to transfer to private, charter or a homeschool settings instead of public education system (Pew Research, 2024). Among these transfers, approximately 12% are identified as having developmental delays. The impact of these students leads to challenges for private and charter schools being able to address the developmental delayed students' needs with therapeutic services (Idaho State of Board Education, 2024). In turn, this study explored the larger ecological system barriers school social workers face when working with developmentally delayed populations within private or charter school districts throughout Idaho (Idaho State of Board Education).

Within the following section, an overview of the research design and methodology will be formulated. This section begins by explaining the nature of the study and how its purpose aligns with the selected methodological approach. The methodology portion outlines the data collection method, participants, instrumentation, and existing data. Next, data analysis subsection describes how the data collected will be analyzed to ensure the accuracy and trustworthiness of the findings. Ethical considerations were provided which include safeguards to protect the rights and confidentiality of the participants. Procedures expanded upon the techniques used to

protect this study's participants. Finally, the summary section will condense the information previously mentioned.

Research Design

Through a qualitative study of social workers', this research was designed to compare services available in Idaho's public school system with that of private and charter schools. Such design was intended to examine the social workers' perceptions of barriers and challenges affecting the provision of therapeutic services. The research study aimed to understand how systemic limitations, resource availability, and policy constraints influence services being delivered to students with developmental delays in a non-public educational setting. To address this research problem, the following research question was proposed: What are the views of school social workers regarding barriers and challenges for students with developmental disabilities who attend a charter or private school in Idaho?

I sought out barriers and challenges relevant to school social workers that may be needed for the developmentally delayed population within a private or charter school system. This research question is relevant to the study's purpose of helping school social workers understand barriers and challenges preventing them from providing needed therapeutic services for students in private or charter schools within Idaho. Although there is a vast amount of research regarding public school social workers lack access to school-based therapeutic services, research is limited within charter or private schools (Billingsley et al., 2019; Schaeffer, 2024). Considering the small amount of research regarding the charter or public-school settings for the developmentally delayed

population in Idaho, research sought out what barriers existed for the school social workers. Providing this research question to social workers will allow the conversation to seek out the gap in research to be filled.

In consideration of the study's design, this qualitative study utilized a basic/generic research design that aligns with the research question. The generic qualitative research design discussed how individuals interpret their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), data collection through an interview platform using the Zoom platform is helpful for the research being sought. To initiate my research, I sought out the private or charter school administration of social workers who work with students with developmental disabilities. Once the administration identified the social workers, I emailed them to request an interview for my proposed study, along with informed consent information and a description of the risk and benefits of participating in the research. With this, a request was made to the school administration which allowed me to provide a flyer seeking out social workers who wanted to be involved with the research.

This generic qualitative research design addressed the purpose of my study by accessing social workers' experiences in working with developmentally delayed students through purpose sampling. The study collected data through these interviews to explore school social workers' difficulties in serving students with developmental delays. A qualitative research method was selected for this research project, providing alignment due to the ability to capture in-depth narratives to gather data for the research question to school social workers (Creswell, 2007). Thus, data collected from these interviews

addressed my study's research question by identifying the barriers and challenges of school social workers within Idaho's private or charter school districts.

Research question developed for this study fulfilled the purpose by exploring the perceptions of school social workers' barriers and challenges for developmentally disabled students through these interviews. School social workers were interviewed using questions designed to identify barriers or challenges related to therapeutic services being available and unavailable to students in private or charter school. These therapeutic services offered throughout a public school are required. In contrast, these same standards may not be required by the state of Idaho Special Education Manual (2023) and Idaho State Regulations (2024), Idaho Code 33-119.

Methodology

Data Collection Methods

This qualitative study utilized a purpose sampling to explore school social workers' perceptions of barriers and challenges of serving developmentally delayed students, particularly regarding therapeutic services that are not provided in private or charter schools settings. Participants were purposively selected for their direct experience as a school social worker working with this specific population. By engaging with school social workers, the study aimed to uncover perspectives on service gaps, systemic limitations and potential strategies while using purposive sampling method (Etikan et al., 2016).

Using purposive sampling in this study allowed me to select participants with both specific knowledge and experience relevant to the research question. According to

Etikan et al. (2016), purposive sampling is often chosen because the researcher can select more knowledgeable participants with specific experiences within the research. This approach ensures the data collected are meaningful due to their expertise working with the selected population. By focusing on school social workers, who work directly with this population, it became possible to obtain in-depth insights into the barriers and challenges associated with accessing therapeutic services in the private or charter educational settings (Etikan et al., 2016).

Recruitment

An examination of how school social workers perceive their access to therapeutic services in charter and private schools is at the core of this study. These services may not be offered in such cases due to state and federal funding requirements (Idaho Special Education Manual, 2023; Idaho State Regulations, 2024). This qualitative study considered how these limitations affect school social workers' ability to provide adequate support to developmentally delayed students, particularly within Idaho's charter and private school systems. Therefore, the recruitment process that follows outlined how participants were identified and invited to share their experiences.

After locating a school from the Idaho Education School Provider list, I sent a flyer and an email to the school administrator to seek out school social workers who want to participate in the research study. Participating schools were located from an Idaho Education Provider list that the Idaho State of Board Education supplies (Idaho State of Board Education, 2024). From this list, an email was sent to school administration throughout Idaho seeking volunteers who want to participate in this research. Along with

this, the recruitment process included a flyer which I provided to the private or charter school administrator for disbursement. This flyer submitted to the school administrator provided my email and contact information if further questions or concerns arose. In addition, if a social worker participated voluntarily, the participant was provided the research information in the flyer. Once participants were identified, I conducted semistructured interviews with each participant via the Zoom platform.

Social workers were requested to partake in an interview conducted via Zoom with the highest level of protection to ensure confidentiality and maintain the interview's integrity. Data were collected by adhering to a structured interview protocol aligned with the study's purpose and research questions (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Interviews were recorded, with participant consent, and stored securely. All identifying information was removed during transcription to protect participants and maintain ethical standards.

Each participant was sought out from a separate charter or private school in Idaho, selected from the Idaho Educational Provider list. This provided a way to represent a variety of schools and diverse perspectives from social workers who have experience working with developmentally delayed students (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Idaho State of Board Education, 2024). Participants were purposefully selected based on their direct service with this population to ensure relevant and insightful contributions to the research requested. Selecting social workers in this manner increased the likelihood of the study to capture rich and relevant insight, giving a solid foundation to the eligible criteria.

As an eligibility criterion for this study, school social workers needed to hold a bachelor's degree in social work, work within the private or charter school district in

Idaho, and work with students with a developmentally delayed diagnosis. Nine participants were selected from school social workers throughout Idaho who met the eligible criteria for this study. The sample size of nine provided saturation where no new information was needed to the research (Hennink, & Kaiser, 2022).

Instrumentation

Semistructured interviews with open-ended questions (see Appendix) were conducted through a Zoom platform. I asked participants about their experience as a school social worker within a private or charter school to explore the barriers or challenges serving the developmentally delayed population. The interview format provided an opportunity for the participants to elaborate on limitations for accessing therapeutic services and policy related obstacles for their ability to support this student population.

The semistructured interview questions identified where the professional works and if they have worked at other school districts throughout Idaho. In addition, further questions explored the participants' perceptions of barriers or challenges in providing services to developmentally delayed students. Examples of these questions are as follows:

- “What is your current role at the school, and tell me about your involvement with students who have been diagnosed with a developmental delay?”
- “What therapeutic services are offered through the school where you are employed?”

Then, the questions explored the barriers and challenges that developmentally delayed students may be missing within their educational system through a private or charter

school. According to Härkönen (2001), EST provides five systems that influence human development: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The interview process concluded with questions and information for the participants regarding access to the study and data once it is concluded.

Finally, using the Zoom platform, I made a recording of each of interview. Zoom is easily accessible to participants and does not require a subscription. This platform allowed each participant and me access to a video and audio recording of the interviews. Therefore, utilizing the Zoom platform allowed me to engage fully in the interview, as the recording was able to be accessed later for transcription and analysis.

Data Analysis

Data points were retrieved through purpose sampling to explore school social workers' barriers while working with students with developmental delay within the private or charter educational systems. Data were analyzed by using a thematic analysis process allowing a thematic analysis process for specific data organization, immersive engagement with data, and writing and representation of data collected (see Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The following approach guided this analysis: a systemic review of existing research, use rigorous methods to analyze, gather relevant research, and critically synthesize relevant studies that adhere to the stated research question for saturation used for policymaking with evidence-based practice.

Phase 1 of data analysis involved transcribing the Zoom interviews to gather an understanding of the data retrieved from the social workers. In the second phase, I correlated the barriers and challenges in the data to provide saturation (Hennink &

Kaiser, 2022). After completion of the interviews and the correlation of the data, I grouped these into potential themes. The proceeding phase entailed a review of any correlation and defining each theme clearly to produce the research.

Lastly, I used the defined themes in the data to analyze the exploration of school social workers' barriers or challenges they face while employed within a private or public-school education. This process continued until the sample size achieves saturation, in which the information from the participants did not provide any new information (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). With saturation being met, there was no need to seek out additional private or public schools for additional recruitment (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Trustworthiness for the Qualitative Research

I upheld the trustworthiness while completing this qualitative research project. According to Stahl (2020), trustworthiness provides four areas that must be included: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This is important because it pertains to accurate data with the social worker's perceptions of barriers and challenges in serving the developmentally delayed population (Burkholder et al., 2020; Cope, 2014; Stahl et al., 2020).

Credibility

The credibility process, as described by Ahmed (2024), was upheld while seeking out participants for this research project. It was important to have a trusting relationship where the participant could discuss their honest and non-biased opinions through the research process (Ahmed, 2024). This was important because the professional has accurate experiences and perspectives with developmental delayed students for the

researchers. Along with this, I was cognizant of biases throughout the research process to ensure that scheduled dates and times with the school social workers are received and set times for interviews were established. Moreover, I ensured that the participants knew this was a volunteer option and that I would uphold the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process outlined by Walden University (Ahmed, 2024; Cope, 2014; Stahl et al., 2020).

Transferability

The transferability of the research was supported by providing a detailed and transparent explanation of the study's design, context, and findings to ensure clarity for the participants and other potential readers with the research conducted (Ahem, 2024). Thus, I provided detailed descriptions of the sampling criteria to defend the transferability of the data. By offering transparency in both the research and process of this study, this upheld a foundation for future research that is like the educational or social work environment (Ahem, 2024, Cope, 2014).

Dependability

Dependability ensured that the collected data is consistent with the research results and that the findings are consistent with similar research projects over time (Stahl et al., 2020). As the researcher, I provided precise details on my research and the process of each stage during the research project. In addition, I informed the participants about the importance of the research process and the research data being collected, along with the recordings provided by the participants for research (Ahmed, 2024; Cope, 2014).

Confirmability

I provided confirmability for upholding the data reported by the participants while being aware of my biases that were not provided. Through my research of private and charter schools, I sought out insight from school social workers on barriers and challenges while serving the developmentally delayed population for my research study. This insight from social workers provided additional research needed from a perspective within Idaho's private or charter schools (Stahl et al., 2020). When research was conducted, I sought out feedback from my committee members and keep a reflective journal to assist with personal biases (Ahmed, 2024; Cope, 2014).

Ethical Procedures

This study will be disseminated to school social work professionals serving private and charter schools in Idaho. I adhered to all IRB protocols and procedures established by Walden University (2024). Additionally, the NASW (2021) Code of Ethics guided the ethical framework of this study to ensure that professional responsibilities were upheld (NASW, 2021, Section 1.05; Stahl et al., 2020).

When collecting data from participants, I sought to examine the barriers and challenges that school social workers conveyed while working within private or charter schools in Idaho. Moreover, the participants selected for this research project were provided with a verbal and written understanding of how the research study would be conducted, storage procedure for information gathered, and how the study's conclusion would be accessed. I provided this information to each participant through informed

consent, along with the risks and benefits both verbally and in written form. Participants were also advised that this study was voluntary (see Ahmed, 2024; Stahl et al., 2020).

Therefore, any data or information gathered throughout the research project remained confidential, only used for research purposes, and stored within a password-protected file. All participants' identities are coded to keep the confidentiality of the participants within the research project (Stahl et al., 2020). Finally, the participants were informed that all information and data collected will be kept for a minimum of 5 years according to the regulations of Walden University. After 5 years, the data will be destroyed and inaccessible per Walden University (2024) protocol.

I ensured that the findings upheld the credibility, transferability and dependability of the data collected to uphold future replicability of research conducted. This process, according to Cope (2014), is to uphold the best quality while conducting research for this qualitative educational research study to seek saturation that all research has been conducted until nothing new is evident to the researcher (Cope, 2014; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Stahl et al., 2020). Maintaining such standards ensures the study's findings are both rigorous and reproducible.

Summary

Section 2 outlined the research methodology, including the research design, data collection methods, data analysis procedures, and ethical procedures. This qualitative study utilized purposeful sampling to examine the barriers and challenges experienced by nine school social workers working within Idaho's private or charter schools. Data collected from the interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a thematic analysis

approach. Throughout this study, measures were implemented to ensure trustworthiness, transferability, and dependability while adhering to the NASW code of ethics (20212). Informed consent and risks and benefits are additionally confirmed according to the regulations of Walden University (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Stahl et al., 2020; Walden University, 2024).

Section 3: Presentation of the Findings

Introduction

Through this generic qualitative study, I explored social workers' views on challenges or barriers to therapeutic services for students with developmental delays enrolled in a charter or private school. The following research question guided this study: What are the views of school social workers regarding barriers and challenges for students with developmental disability who attend a charter or private school in Idaho?

This study used semistructured interviews to seek out the perceptions of nine school social workers regarding barriers and challenges to services that may not be offered through private or charter schools in Idaho. Participants in this study were recruited using purpose sampling, based on meeting the eligibility criterion. The eligible criteria for this study included participants who had a minimum of a bachelor's degree in social work and who worked with students having a developmental delay in a private or charter school in Idaho.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data Collection Process

Data collection started as soon as I obtained IRB approval (12-04-25-1177141). Participants were recruited through an Idaho school administrator who is also employed as a school social worker. A recruitment flyer was emailed to the school administration that provided the study's criteria for the sample size of school social workers interested in the study. A total of nine school social workers responded via email and provided consent to participate in the study. Participants took part in interviews over a 6-week period. Each

interview was transcribed immediately after completion, with analysis occurring simultaneously throughout the transcription process.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, which includes phases for identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes. Initially, I checked the transcripts against the audio recordings for accuracy. Once the transcriptions were completed, the data were compiled and assigned identifying codes (see Table 2). The coding process involved reviewing the transcribed data, combining themes and patterns, and grouping them into codes to support the research question.

Each code was uniquely labeled to accurately represent the themes and patterns of the data received. An example of this would be STUDDPL, meaning that students were provided an IEP. In addition, another code, VATECHAR, would indicate whether a student was enrolled in a charter school.

Sample Size

The sample size for this research study was composed of nine school social workers who met the established eligibility criteria. Inclusion requirements specified that participants hold a minimum of a bachelor's degree in social work and be employed in a private or charter school within Idaho that provides school-based services. Participant eligibility was verified through a series of screening questions administered before the interview was conducted. Table 1 presents screening and demographic information for each participant collected during the screening phase.

Table 1*Screening and Demographic*

| Participant | Screening questions (yes or no) | Participant gender and education | Participant setting |
|-------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------|
| A-1 | yes | female/LMSW | private school |
| B-2 | yes | male/MSW | private school |
| C-3 | yes | female/LMSW | charter school |
| D-4 | yes | female/LMSW | private school |
| E-5 | yes | female/LMSW | charter school |
| F-6 | yes | female/LMSW | charter school |
| G-7 | yes | female/LMSW | private school |
| H-8 | yes | male/LMSW | charter school |
| I-9 | yes | female/LMSW | charter school |

Once codes relevant to the research question were identified, the analysis phase began. This process involved organizing codes into subthemes and broader themes by grouping conceptually similar patterns within the data. As described by Braun and Clarke (2006), this stage requires the systematic clustering of related codes into subthemes, which are refined into clearly defined themes that address the study's research question.

This stage of the analysis commenced with the systematic organization of initial codes into analytically meaningful categories based on conceptual similarity. The resulting subthemes included the lack of therapeutic services, students' individualized treatment plans, therapeutic services provided within the educational system, and treatment team involvement. Consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis framework, these subthemes were subsequently examined and synthesized into broader, data-driven themes. This process involved a rigorous review of the codes associated with each theme to identify coherent, recurring patterns that substantiated the final thematic structure. The analysis yielded several overarching

themes, including private or charter school settings, stakeholder perceptions, and systemic barriers and challenges within the educational system. An example of a finalized theme, along with its corresponding subthemes and representative codes derived from the data, is presented in Table 2 and Table 3.

The final phase of the analysis process involved defining and refining themes based on patterns and relationships identified within the data. These patterns and relationships were used to inform the study's findings and address the research question.

Table 2

Codes and Meanings

| Code | Meaning |
|----------|--|
| STUDDPL | Individual Educational Plan |
| STUDALT | Alternative Student Plan |
| VATECHAR | The student was enrolled in a private school. |
| CHARVATE | The student was enrolled in a charter school. |
| NOSER | Therapeutic services are not offered within their educational setting. |
| SERY | Therapeutic services are offered within their educational setting. |

Table 3

Examples of Codes

| Codes | Interview question | Participant response | Subthemes |
|--|--|---|-----------------------------|
| VATECHAR C-3, H-8 | What therapeutic services are offered through the school where you are employed? | Treatment team, academic support. | Individual educational plan |
| CHARVATE A-1, B-2, D-4, E-5, F-6, G-7, H-8, I-9 | What therapeutic services are offered through the school where you are employed? | Academic support, administration involvement, and family involvement. | Alternative student plan |

Subtheme: Educational Setting Provides an Individual Educational Plan

The first subtheme that supports this theme is “does the charter or private school you work at, provide an IEP?” This subtheme reflects school social workers’ perceptions of whether student-centered plans are used to address therapeutic service needs for students with developmental delays. For example, Participant A-1 stated, “IEPs are not provided, but an accommodation plan for the student is.” A-1 further explained that this accommodation plan is developed collaboratively, involving both school administration and family members. Similar practices were described by Participant B-2, who noted that CHARVATE provided a PSIP (parent-student improvement plan). This type of plan will accommodate as much as the educational setting can, but it is not designed to assist a developmentally delayed or behavioral student fully. Moreover, A-1, B-2, F-6, and I-9 consistently noted that, although school administration is willing to serve students with developmentally delayed, the CHARVATE is not fully equipped to support them. In contrast, participants E-5 and H-8 reported that an STUDDPL was provided; however, neither participant was directly involved in developing the plan that supported the student. Specifically, Participant E-5 stated, “She has an IEP, and they go over it with me, and is developed at the start of school, and I am not involved with the IEP.”

Subtheme: School-Based Services Offered Within the Charter School Educational Setting

Subtheme 2 addresses the question “what therapeutic services are offered through the school where you are employed.” This subtheme captures school social workers’ understanding of the therapeutic services that developmentally delayed students may

receive within the CHARVATE. For example, Participants H-8 and C-3 noted that therapeutic school-based services were offered under the labels habilitative supports and behavioral intervention. The CHARVATE provided both services to students who required them to support academic success. In addition, Participant H-8 explained that they were, “typically not involved with the individual educational plan, but all therapeutic services were delivered through the special education program.”

For CHARVATE participants specifically, services include habilitative supports and behavioral interventions with academic support. However, both the CHARVATE and VATECHAR typically use ancillary services from outside providers, such as speech therapy, developmental therapy, occupational therapy, and physical therapy. Participants C-3 and H-8 both noted that services are not all provided within the CHARVATE; instead, the administration utilizes outside providers to deliver needed school-based therapies.

Subtheme: School-Based Services Not Offered Within the Private or Charter School Educational Setting

The third subtheme centers on the question, “if services are not offered, can you explain what services these students receive?” This subtheme captures schools’ social workers’ understanding of what students may not be receiving through the CHARVATE OR VATECHAR for NOSERV, the student may need to access. For example, all participants (A-1 through I-9) reported that ancillary services are typically needed and are often requested by administration, treatment teams, or parents. These services, as noted by all participants, include speech therapy, physical therapy, and occupational therapy.

However, I-9 and B-2 noted that therapeutic services such as developmental therapy and psychotherapy can be provided on a limited or inconsistent basis but are not offered as ongoing services.

This final subtheme, when considered alongside the preceding subthemes, reinforces the study's central focus on school social worker's perspectives concerning the barriers and challenges faced by students with developmental disabilities in Idaho's charter and private school settings. Participants' responses also included recommendations for serving the developmental-delayed population, as well as identified barriers that inform the current research.

Summary

Section 3 presents the study's findings, including the data analysis procedures used to develop initial codes, subthemes, and generate initial codes, subthemes, and broader themes. The analytic process was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework, which facilitated the systematic identification of initial codes and their organization into subthemes and themes aligned with the study's research question. The resulting themes offer insight into school social workers' perceptions of barriers and challenges related to accessing school-based therapeutic services in private and charter schools settings. Specifically, the themes highlight issues concerning service availability, systemic barriers, and the role of community-based contractual supports.

Section 4 presents an interpretation of these findings within the context of the existing literature and Bronfenbrenner's EST.

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

Introduction

This study examined the research question: “What are the views of school social workers regarding barriers and challenges for students with developmental disabilities who attend charter or private schools in Idaho?” The themes developed from this study reflect school social workers’ perceptions of barriers and challenges associated with serving students in private and charter school settings across Idaho. These themes and subthemes highlight issues related to school-based services and supports for students with developmental delay diagnoses.

Section 4 presents an interpretation of the study’s findings based on the themes identified during data analysis. The findings are examined in relation to the research question and discussed within the context of existing literature and Bronfenbrenner’s EST. This section also addresses implications for professional ethics, provides recommendations for social work practice, identifies study limitations, and explores implications for social change. A summary of the section concludes the chapter.

Key Findings

The themes identified in the data addressed the study’s research question: What are school social workers’ views on the barriers and challenges faced by students with developmental disabilities who attend a charter or private school in Idaho? Throughout this analysis, the primary theme identified was school social workers’ perceptions of school-based services available to students with developmental delays. This theme was supported by factors such as administrative involvement, treatment teams, IEPs, 504

behavioral plans, and the need for ancillary services. These factors reflect the barriers and challenges that influence the effectiveness of therapeutic school-based services within private and charter school settings.

Although participants described meaningful differences between IEPs and alternative graduation plans, social workers were not always involved in the development of educational plans for students with developmental delays. Each participant reported that a student plan was in place, but not all plans were formal IEPs or individualized treatment plans. Participants were clear that the plans were designed to be as individualized as possible within the school's available resources. When therapeutic services were required but unavailable within the school setting, participants reported that ancillary services were requested to support student needs.

Application to Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice

The NASW (2024) Code of Ethics' core value, the dignity and worth of the person, is significant to this study. According to the NASW Code of Ethics, the primary focus of the social work profession is to enhance individuals' well-being and meet the needs of all people. Specifically, the research in this study demonstrates the importance of therapeutic school-based services for students with developmental disabilities, regardless of whether private or charter school settings provide them. However, while interviewing school social workers, I found that some barriers and challenges prevent them from offering therapeutic services to address the developmental delayed students' needs (see also Moore et al., 2022).

Aligning with the NASW core value of service this study addresses the social problem of limited access to therapeutic supports for students with developmental disabilities in private and charter school settings. Participants shared their perceptions of the barriers and challenges they encounter while attempting to support this population, including limitations in funding, service availability, and systemic collaboration. By documenting these experiences, the study highlights the need for continued advocacy and professional commitment to ensuring that students with developmental delays receive appropriate and equitable services. These findings reinforce the ethical responsibility of school social workers to uphold the profession's commitment to service when navigating complex educational systems.

The themes of this study reflect school social workers' perceptions of the challenges and barriers encountered when working with students with developmental delays. Participants discussed the services that private or charter schools can offer to the developmental disability population. Where students can maintain enrollment, participants indicated that school administration, working with families, develops individualized student treatment plans to address student needs. Alternatively, when students are unable to remain enrolled or when services cannot be provided within the school setting, participants reported that ancillary services such as developmental, occupational, physical, or speech therapy are typically sought outside the educational system.

This study also highlights the core value of competence, which emphasizes the ongoing development and refinement of professional expertise within defined areas of

practice (NASW, 2024). Prior research has highlighted the need for further research into the barriers that hinder school social workers from effectively fulfilling their roles to provide therapeutic services (Moore et al., 2022). This study contributes to the advancement of professional competence by generating findings that enhance the knowledge base of school social workers in Idaho, with particular attention to systemic barriers that impede their ability to fulfill their role within the private or charter school system.

Thus, this study supports the NASW Code of Ethics by addressing the social problem of barriers and challenges encountered by school social workers in delivering therapeutic services within private and charter school settings. By responding to calls for further research on the factors that limit access to services in these contexts, this study contributes to the advancement of professional expertise (Moore et al., 2022). Furthermore, this research enhances understanding of these challenges through an ecological systems perspective, aligning with NASW's values of service and competence as outlined by the NASW (2024).

Recommendations for Social Work Practice

Research was conducted in response to declining public school enrollment and the corresponding growth of private and charter schools serving developmentally disabled students. Within these settings, social workers, who work with the developmentally delayed student, were asked to share their experiences. In turn, participants were asked to provide recommendations for overcoming the barriers and challenges found in this study.

Several approaches are recommended to address the challenges and barriers identified by the participants in the research. These recommendations included developing a completed student educational plan that includes the whole treatment team and outlines individualized strategies for students receiving therapeutic services. During a treatment team meeting, family and ancillary providers should be present. This provides a holistic approach to working with the developmentally delayed student. Along with this, such a format for treatment meetings helps reduce duplication as each professional or therapeutic service would collaborate with others. Additionally, researchers agreed that improving collaboration between treatment team members and ancillary services enhances school social workers' ability to address the needs of developmentally delayed students (Duong et al., 2021; Shultz, 2020).

Another recommendation is for private or charter schools to enter into contractual agreements with ancillary service providers to support students with developmental delays. These partnerships could assist with meeting students' educational and therapeutic needs while supporting academic success and continued enrollment in the school chosen by the family. Participants indicated that although not all private and charter schools are designed to serve this population, schools often attempt to provide support to the extent possible. When student needs exceed a school's capacity, ancillary service contracts may help address gaps in support and reduce the need for alternative placements.

A final recommendation highlights the importance of advocacy, training, and professional support to strengthen the role of school social workers. Participants noted

that funding remains a key issue particularly for private schools, in assisting the developmentally delayed population. In Idaho, the Parental Choice Tax Credit (2025), provides an avenue to assist families in funding private schools. Established through House Bill 93, this bill offers up to \$5,000.00 per eligible student with a qualifying disability. Once eligibility has been determined, these funds may be used by parents whose child attends a non-public school for curriculum, textbooks, transportation, and supplemental staff support (Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, 2025). However, Idaho private education cost remains high. The Idaho State Board of Education (2024) reports that the average price of private education per student in elementary school is \$8,961.00, and in high school is \$9,105.00. Future research is recommended to further examine declining public school enrollment and the growth of private and charter schools, particularly for developmentally delayed and dually diagnosed students who may remain underserved.

These recommendations align with Bronfenbrenner's EST addressed barriers and challenges experienced by school social workers across the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems that influence the educational experiences of students with developmental delays. As outlined by Bronfenbrenner, this theory interconnects with environmental layers that influence the student's development. With this context, school social workers experienced staffing shortages, challenges with treatment team collaboration and difficulties accessing ancillary services beyond private or charter schools (see also Härkönen, 2001).

Summary

This qualitative study examines school social workers' perspectives on barriers and challenges related to providing therapeutic services for students with developmental delays enrolled in private or charter schools. Using semistructured interviews, the study captured practitioners' experiences navigating service access within non-public educational settings. The findings highlight how challenges to service provision are shaped by interactions across multiple ecological systems, including school environments, family involvement, community resources, and broader policy structures. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of systemic barriers affecting school social work practices in private and charter school contexts.

As noted previously, Idaho includes 168 private schools serving 22,195 students and 805 public schools serving 317,583 students. Data from the Idaho State Board of Education (2024) indicate that approximately 9% of students enrolled across several counties are identified as having a developmental delay. These figures highlight the significance of ensuring equitable access to therapeutic services across both public and non-public educational settings.

Findings from participating school social workers identify that private and charter schools likely require additional assistance to provide effective therapeutic services to students with developmental delays. Participants identified systemic barriers across multiple ecological levels that limit available resources and reduce their ability to broker necessary services (Härkönen, 2001). These challenges underscore the complexity of service delivery within private and charter school environments.

Collectively, the recommendations of this study inform future research and reinforce the ethical responsibility of school social workers to uphold the NASW Code of Ethics, particularly the commitment to respecting the dignity and worth of every person (NASW, 2021). Addressing systemic barriers through collaboration, advocacy, and continued research remains essential to supporting developmentally delayed students within Idaho's evolving educational landscape.

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Appendix: Interview Questions:

1. What is your current role at the school and tell me about your involvement with students diagnosed with a developmental delay.
2. What therapeutic services are offered through the school where you are employed?
3. If services are offered, can you explain what services these students receive?
4. What individual educational plans are offered to the students you work with? If so, are you part of this planning team?
5. If a student cannot access therapeutic services, what are the barriers or challenges for students receiving services?
6. What successes have you seen with the developmentally delayed students at your school?
7. What support or training have you received to assist this population at your school?
8. What type of services do these students receive outside of their school setting?
9. Is there anything you would like to ask or add to this discussion that may be relevant to this research project?